



DRACONIAN'S ORIGINAL QUEEN

*DRACONIAN WARRIORS
BOOK SEVENTEEN*

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DRACONIAN'S ORIGINAL
QUEEN

A SCIENCE FICTION ROMANCE

DRACONIAN WARRIORS #17

MIRANDA MARTIN

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PIECING TOGETHER THE PAST

Relic

Over the last few lunars I have inspected every room in this ship, but none more closely than this chamber, for it holds the body of the only known ancient fire-haired queen in existence. She has been in stasis for I know not how long, and the gods only know if she will survive being removed from her stasis chamber.

I kneel and run my hand over a burnished metal wall engraving on one of the walls. It depicts a fire-haired queen with a sword on her back and energy weapons in both hands. Though her expression is determined, the pistols she carries look oversized in her small human hands. Oval bursts of energy come from the barrel of her pistols, instead of the streams our modern-day laser guns emit.

I retract my claws and run my fingers reverently over the image of this ancient being we have come to worship as a goddess. She is one of many who fought for our freedom during ancient times. This female is a heady mix of myth, legend and unmatched beauty. She and her kind are the only reason our people survived being captured and turned into test subjects by our ancient overlords.

Twisting my head around, my horns shift back slightly as I gaze across the room at the ancient queen slumbering in her stasis unit. She looks very similar to the image represented in the relief beneath my fingers, as though the entirety of this massive chamber was built to house her beloved form. If not a final resting place, it was designed to give her a reprieve from the endless fighting of her time and protection from her enemies.

The chamber doors unexpectedly slide open without my approval and that can only mean one thing. Queen Caroline has arrived. She is the human queen of Onello and no one may bar her entrance. I come quickly to my feet and turn to greet her. As always, Commander Mathadar, her bonded mate, is at her side.

I watch our beloved queen sweep into the room, her elaborate gown swooshing around her ankles and her blonde hair arranged in an intricate style to accentuate her crown. The human queen who founded the second Draconian home world is all smiles and in high spirits today.

“Greetings, Relic. It’s good to finally meet you. Thank you for taking this assignment and for being our point of contact between the Onello and Commander Drakon and Queen Betsie. I know prying this vessel out of their hands took a great deal of negotiation.”

“I think wishing to retain this vessel was more a matter of pride for the commander. It was personally gifted to him by our dragon brethren as a mark of respect. Naturally, neither Drakon nor his new human mate were happy at being forced to give up their most prized possession.”

Queen Caroline let out a heavy sigh. “The high council decided that awakening this woman from stasis only to find

herself in an unfamiliar environment would do nothing to help orient her after such a prolonged sleep.”

“I believe this is the information that softened Queen Betsie to your plight,” I state politely.

Queen Caroline takes a step closer to the stasis unit and looks over the female inside. “I also believe that simply because this ship was abandoned on a world inhabited by dragons does not make it theirs to gift. As long as one of the original crew still lives, the ship technically belongs to her.”

“This is a point well taken and what finally got Drakon to reconsider his stance. He is an honorable male, after all.”

Mathadar adds wryly, “The House of Drakon made out well in the trade. He ended up with the most valuable ship in our fleet.”

“Betsie was giddy with excitement. Drakon grudgingly admitted having a newer ship would enable him to better protect his new queen and their new hatchlings.”

Queen Caroline’s excited voice sounded off. “That’s what humans call a win-win situation. I’m glad they turned out to be happy with the trade.”

“Yes, I am as pleased as any by this outcome,” I say. “Being chosen to command this ship is the greatest honor of my lifetime. Nothing excites an old blood warrior more than having a queen to protect. I am ready for whatever quest this queen wishes of me.”

Mathadar responds, “She is much more than a mere queen. The female resting here is a living goddess.”

I dip my head in agreement as Queen Caroline’s gaze returns to the warrior queen. A short silence spins out between the

three of us as we all marvel at finding one of these ancient beings preserved in a stasis unit after all this time.

Mathadar's wing comes out to slip around Queen Caroline's shoulders and she snuggles closer to his side. "My queen and I were hoping you could walk us through what your science team discovered from studying this chamber. It's difficult to separate what is ornamental from what is functional."

I gesture to the engraved panel nearest the door. "We believe the engravings were meant to pass on what they considered important information to future generations, were a way of glorifying their struggles in an epic war, or they were added after her internment by the Draconian warriors tasked with her care. One member of our science team believes they were added long after as an intrinsic part of their goddess worship."

Queen Caroline leans in for a closer inspection and barely touches the raised relief. "That's fascinating. On Earth our ancient ancestors used to carve the tombs of our dead in a similar fashion."

"This panel shows scenes running lutar to antar." I quickly correct myself. "I mean, left to right. The scene depicts human queens in chains. There appear to be a large number of them and as you can see their hair has been overlaid with a burnished metal. We believe it is meant to draw attention to the color, for they were rumored to have fiery red hair."

"It looks more like copper to me," she responds. "And look how intricate their hair is. I can make out every single strand. It feels like your ancient brethren's preoccupation with their hair represents more than just preferring redheads."

"If so, Queen Caroline, I cannot fathom what that might be."

I gesture to another level of the panel. “As you can see, this frame was created to demonstrate the gigantic size of the craft they were carried away in. You can see a fairly accurate representation of Earth in the background. The aliens abducting them appear to be a species not yet catalogued into any of the databases.”

Mathadar gestured to the frame. “Do you think they’re hunched over the ship’s control in this frame or just hunchbacked beings in general?”

“They appear to be hairless beings with six-fingered hands who are simply shaped that way,” I say.

Moving on with the guided inspection I continue, “As you can see in the next panel, there are various representations of the aliens working on reptilian species. There are small dragons running around their laboratory, as though they were being kept as pets.”

“Yes,” Queen Caroline murmurs. “These scenes look like a mash up between the space age and something from medieval times.”

I smile at her astute description of the style used to create the panels. “Our scientists believe these reptilian creatures were our ancient ancestors. They say these small beings are why out of all the genetic manipulations our overlords attempted, our physiology merged seamlessly with dragon DNA.”

Queen Caroline examines the frame closely. “I saw this frame in the images you sent in your last report, Commander Relic. It’s truly fascinating. I spent many hours gazing upon the images you sent and trying to piece together a coherent picture of how your people came to be.”

I nod, “As have I, Your Highness.”

I direct her attention to yet another series of tiles. “In this set of images, fully grown Draconian males are being removed from vats of some sort, as though the original progenitors of each were clones. As you can see, the human queens appear to be serving as slaves. Everything continues to be extremely stylized.”

She murmurs, “It must have been created by a highly skilled artisan.”

“Our science team believes it was simply programmed into the computer and created by bots to exacting detail.”

I guide them around the room pointing out all the germane points of interest.

“We believe our alien overlords claimed an unoccupied planet to settle. It appears they claimed what we now know to be Dracon Prime in Exion space. It is impossible to tell the size of the world being depicted because nothing is to scale in these engravings. We do recognize the planet as a circumbinary world with three moons, and Dracon Prime is the only world known to orbit two suns that move flawlessly together as a binary pair.”

“Well that makes sense,” Queen Caroline chimes in. “Queen Dawn is now sitting on the throne of Dracon Prime and recently reported ancient alien artifacts were recently recovered on that world. It will take years of studying them before they can say for sure they were from the original overlords.”

I continue the tale of our ancient ancestors as it is laid out in these holy tablets. “As you can see, the human females grow stronger and slightly more robust. They are tasked with feeding us and ensuring we are hydrated. Together we learn how to obtain a neural download of the alien database.”

Queen Caroline comments, “Knowledge is power. It looks like all hell broke loose after that.”

“Yes, this is the point in time where the situation becomes chaotic. Fighting breaks out when our Draconian ancestors and the human queens unite against their alien overlords. The fighting is fierce and when it becomes clear the aliens have lost control of both populations, they turn loose the androids and vicious beasts they created to do their fighting.”

I usher them down the long wall. “Along these panels you will see a great number of frames. In each frame a queen falls in battle, one by one until they are no more. It looks like the final queen gave her life in a suicide mission to blow up the energy source of their massive slave ship.” Glancing up to look from the stunned queen to her mate, I state quietly, “They gave their lives so we might gain our freedom.”

She points to one of the last panels. “This is the one that caught my interest. Draconian warriors are piling the bodies of their alien abductors into a large pyre and burning them.”

“This was the end of the war. Our scientists believe it strange that there are no panels depicting our ancient brethren burying their queens. They believe this would have been part of their goddess worship.”

Queen Caroline murmurs, “That is strange,” before gesturing to the last panel. “According to this historical record, there should be no fire-haired queen still alive.” Glancing over her shoulder to the queen in stasis, she finishes, “Yet here one lies. How can that be?”

I quickly answer, “We do not yet know an answer to that contradiction. Perhaps when we wake her in ten cycles, she will be able to answer that question.”

This intelligent queen muses out loud, “What I can’t figure out is why they put her in stasis dressed like a warrior rather than a queen.”

I give my opinion to that perplexing question. “Perhaps she prided herself on being a warrior who fought for her freedom and that of my people. I have always heard it said that human queens have an indomitable spirit.”

Mathadar speaks in a low, respectful tone. “They are the thing evil fears most of all, for human queens are intelligent, tenacious, cunning creatures, as beautiful as they are dangerous.”

Our queen walks over to get a better look at her fire-haired counterpart. “Does your dragon speak, my takadon?”

Mathadar’s wings close into a tight formation behind his back. “My inner dragon slumbers, for he cares not about fire-haired queens. He cares only for the queen of his heart.” Stepping up behind her, he closes his wings around her slight form.

She asks, “How about you, Relic? You are old blood. Does your dragon ride closer to the surface, particularly after your accident?”

She refers to the day several ships were exposed to the effects of an ill-used weapon of war. For the old bloods like me, it overly stimulated our inner dragon. In my case it tore down the barrier in my mind that had separated my inner dragon and I for my entire life.

I step back and slowly allow my scales to shift into battle mode. Only, I do not stop there. I relax into the shift until my secondary dragon form emerges. It’s larger and more primitive than my normal forms. It takes every ounce of courage I have to fully unleash my inner dragon in the presence of our queen.

He is a wily creature, untrained in courtly manners. When we speak, my voice is deeper and darker. I am stunned at what he has to say.

“The scratching on the side of her box says her name is Electra and she is a goddess worthy of our respect and worship.” He leans over, staring at her face as if he can read her mind. “She longs for her ancient dead protector. There is never-ending sorrow consuming her mind and heart.”

When he eases back, I feel my scales returning to normal.

Queen Caroline is peeking out from under her mate’s wing. “I don’t suppose your inner dragon or your science team can answer the one great mystery that’s had us scratching our head for the last two lunars.”

I straighten up. “You wish to know why she was placed in stasis in the first place?”

Mathadar reminds me, “At first our team thought she’d been injured or was sick and placed in stasis until some future point in time when there might be proper treatment available.”

I respond, “More in-depth scans reveal she is not medically compromised in any way. To be honest, we do not know. It is perhaps another mystery that might be solved upon speaking with her.”

“Any idea how long she has been in stasis?”

Although the answer seems fantastical, even to my own mind, I answer Mathadar with the best information at our disposal. “Further study indicates the inner stasis unit is at least two and a half thousand solar revolutions old. The exterior casing is estimated to be almost two thousand solar revolutions old and was added as a second failsafe in case the original unit failed.”

“This makes sense. Draconian warriors have always built redundancies into our systems. It stands to reason they would do the same in order to protect a living piece of our history.”

Mathadar’s objectification of this goddess offends me. Since Queen Caroline has elevated him to the rank of king, I am not at liberty to give him the rebuke he so richly deserves. Therefore, I remain silent.

I am relieved when the royal couple that founded this colony leave, taking their many unanswered questions with them. They are new blood, risen to glory by cunning and good deeds. To them, this queen is a curiosity, a puzzle to be solved. To me, she is so much more. The blood coursing through her veins is over two thousand years old. She is one of the original queens who fought for our freedom. If not for Queen Electra and her ilk, Draconians would likely still be slaves. We owe her a debt that can never be fully repaid.

I lean over the stasis unit and gaze down at the most beautiful queen imaginable. She’s larger than any human queen I’ve seen before but not by much. Black pants made from the tanned hide of an animal cling to her legs. Her shirt is form fitting like our uniforms and is covered by plated armor that comes down, covering her queenly treasures. Her sword and scabbard are laid on top her body, with her hands wrapping around the hilt. Her utility belt has many strange attachments, including two energy weapons.

This is the queen I will dedicate myself to protecting. It will be my honor to stand guard, always nearby and at the ready to protect her person... to die for her if needs be. I am truly the most fortunate of warriors to serve one of the original fire-haired queens.

COMING FULL CIRCLE

Electra

The fog slowly lifts from my brain, as once again I am called to battle. Excitement pulsates through every nerve in my body. I can't wait to discover what heartless adversary awaits me. I live to fight, and protecting our world is my greatest pleasure. I will gather the other red queens and it will be like old times when we defeated the Garoth. We will laugh, drink and make merry after a glorious battle. My human will smile at me and praise my prowess in battle.

As my foggy mind gropes my way back to consciousness, I realize my thoughts are not my own. The psychic link with my dragon is active and he is dreaming of war. I work to separate my thoughts from his. My dragon might be my best friend and closest ally but that does not mean we are of the same mind about finding joy on the battlefield. He loves carnage. Biting into a nice juicy enemy and tasting their blood speaks to his dragon instincts.

I have been in one inglorious battle after another and never grew a liking for blood sport. Unlike my dragon, I fight for a cause and not the pleasure of stalking my kill. Though we are like minds about gathering with the others for fellowship and

drinking, I fight only when I must to save Draconian lives and secure Dracon Prime.

Images rise in my mind of seeing my Draconian friends subjugated and abused. The Garoth thought humans to be a weak species because we are tender hearted, had no scales to protect our soft forms and no claws or sharp teeth to rend the flesh from our enemies. Dark glee fills my soul at how shocked they were that armor could be designed to provide more protection than scales and our hands could wield weapons of death. Nothing could have prepared them for how cunning and ruthless we were for the protection of those we loved.

My mind drifts to my many victories until I realize this awakening is different. I can sense my dragon growing ever drowsier, even as I become more alert. It feels like his spirit is fading from the world of the living. I am alarmed, for our waking is always timed to happen simultaneously. We determined long ago that he does not respond well to seeing me in stasis and I am too demanding of the healers as his stasis grinds through its waking protocols.

The moment I suck in my first breath, my fists come up to beat against the glass separating me from the outside world. I want out, now, protocols be damned. I see an elder healer reach out one clawed hand to press the exit button along the side of my unit. I make a mental note to have an exit release put on the inside of my stasis unit. It seems ridiculous that I didn't think of that before now.

When my stasis unit finally opens, I bolt up, gasping for breath. One shaky hand comes out to grip the edge of my luxurious resting place as my body adjusts to breathing air

again. Since most of the protocols were complete, I acclimate quickly.

A Draconian healer rubs my back. “Calm yourself, my queen. You are safe aboard your own vessel and protected by thousands of Draconian warriors.”

“Of course I am,” I sputter. “Where else would I be?”

He blinks at me and then blinks again. Though his expression is carefully arranged into the blank expression all warriors wear, I can see by the look in his eyes he is shocked.

“I don’t have time for this,” I mumble.

Hauling in a deep breath, I awkwardly climb out of the stasis unit. My legs are stiff as I bolt across the room to check on my dragon.

I yell over my shoulder, “I want Meric. Bring him to me.”

This is when I realize the room is filled with strange faces I don’t recognize. Why are there strangers on my ship?

A brutal, primitive-looking warrior is the only one with his wits about him. He rushes to my side and asks, “Which from the House of Meric do you wish to see?”

“There is but one,” I snarl. “Bring me my protector. Do it now.”

He turns to one of the other warriors. “Bring the House of Meric.”

I barely notice the collective whispers that sound off in the room. A female voice speaks, “You heard Relic. Fetch all of them, now.” Most everyone runs from the room.

Too busy to find out who is giving orders on my ship, I slap my hand against the wall unit that houses my dragon’s stasis

unit. The wall slides back but sticks before opening all the way. I pull valiantly at it, to no avail. The primitive-looking warrior steps close and shoves the door the rest of the way open.

My heart jumps into my chest when I realize Slayor's unit is malfunctioning. There is a dense murky fog filling the containment unit, like the filters haven't been cleaned in a thousand years.

I leap into action, pull out the keyboard and break through the protocols that were put in place long ago to slowly awaken us from stasis.

When the huge glass partition slides up into the ceiling, a wave of nauseatingly stale air hits me, causing my stomach to churn. I hit the exhaust fan, yank my mask up from the neckline of my armored breastplate and enter before the fog has cleared.

The warrior they called Relic stays right by my side, like a protector.

I run my hand down Slayor's scales. I can feel that the beat of his hearts is erratic. I stalk over and jerk an oxygen mask from his med station, activate the medical scanner and hit the particle cleanser for good measure.

Then I gently lift his head, using use one knee to balance it while I carefully fit the mask over his ridiculously large snout. After stroking his head, I lower it back down to lean against his massive paw. Worry still eats away at my resolve to stay calm as I lean my ear against his ribcage. The medical scanner gives us both a once over at the same time. When I hear the beat of his hearts becoming stronger, I let out a sigh of relief.

Suddenly, one paw comes up to swat away the oxygen mask and Slayor's head flicks back to stare at me.

"Why do you always give me human air to breathe? It is not to my liking."

I cup his chin under my hands and rub my nose against his snout. "It isn't human air. It's oxygen."

He shakes me off, comes to his feet and preens a bit.

"This oxygen is for humans and other weak creatures with holes in their bellies. I am a primal dragon warrior. Therefore, I have no need for such."

Ignoring his jibe about navels, I point at the readouts on his health monitor.

"The machine says you need this weak human air as much as I do."

He shakes out his long tail.

"Lies, lies, all lies," he crows. Then he takes two steps forward and passes out.

I grab the oxygen mask and fit it back onto his face. I won't tell him I had to cram his tongue back into his mouth first. He'd be humiliated by that, so I carefully partition that information off into the secured part of my brain, so he can't access it. I fuss over Slayor for what seems like hours, adjusting his oxygen levels and rescanning his system to make certain the medical unit is not malfunctioning.

I get a soft cloth from one of the drawers and climb over him, polishing every single scale until it gleams. When I am certain I can do no more to see to his health and comfort, I settle down and try to link with him again. The psychic link doesn't work because his unconscious mind slumbers once more. I decide to

let him rest and recuperate while I tend to whatever disaster has prompted my people to wake me this time.

I turn to find a roomful of Draconian males with long light-colored hair. They stand tall, their unique Draconian heritage on full display. My hands come up to cover my heart because they look so much like my best friend and battle buddy that it brings tears to my eyes. Most have a human queen and little ones at their side. What is this madness?

The moment I step out of Slayor's medical alcove to investigate, they all drop to one knee.

"The House of Meric, as you requested," the one they called Relic states quietly. After a momentary pause, he pulls an electronic tablet from his hip and begins to scroll through the information it contains. "Only a handful survived the rule of Vithacan parasites but since the war ended, the House of Meric has flourished. They are now nearly one hundred members strong. Thirty-one are present today. Most of the others live on their own ships or now reside on Dracon Prime which is located far from where we are located."

His ramblings make no sense to me. My ship should be in protective orbit around Dracon Prime. Why is it not?

I lift my chin and state carefully, "I need my protector. Where is Meric?"

Unable to process why there are so many Draconian males that carry the unique genetic marker of the male who has been my friend for many years, I walk out and move among them looking for the one person I do not find.

Finally, one warrior steps forward. "I carry the namesake of my forefather, Meric. What do you wish of me?"

He has his own fire-haired queen standing by his side. She looks proud and strong as I once did at Meric's side. Though we were fighting partners and not mates, I always wished that one day we would become more.

This male said he bears his ancestor's name. This is a roundabout way of communicating to me that I have overslept and my Meric succumbed to the advances of another queen. Did they leave me in stasis to be rid of me? I am important to my people. I cannot believe they would discard me thus.

They all stand staring at me with what I can only describe as morbid fascination. I cannot begin to imagine what is going through their minds. As for myself, I can hardly believe my reticent friend has been so prolific while I slept away endless years in stasis.

Fighting back a flood of emotions, I turn and stalk to the back of the room. My trembling hands pull out a control panel and establish a link to the ship's database. I immediately turn on my heel placing my back to the unit. The sound of static fills the air as my long copper colored hair lifts and each follicle finds a tiny custom-made data port.

I close my eyes and moments later the neural download begins. Information flows over my brain in a gentle wave. An extensive virtual search of the ship verifies my fighting partner is nowhere to be found. I relax into the experience, absorbing millions of bits of data. And in an instant, I know everything. The history of Draconian civilization spanning several thousand years seeps into my brain.

I fall to my knees as the data port lets go of my hair. Flooded with emotion, I weep inside for my Draconian brethren held under the claw of their infected queens for generations, for the large numbers of hatchlings reaped in their shell and for the

massive amount of abuse they sustained over the course of their lifetimes.

My people should have awakened me. Instead, my Draconian comrades spirited my ship away when their queens first became vicious. Though they did not realize their queens were infected, they knew my life was in danger because they were territorial.

When that seeps in, I take a deep breath and weep all over again because I have come full circle to my proper time and place in history. Earth is a hollowed-out shell of its former self. Males are nearly extinct. The now starving population of Earth survives in crowded multi-level bio-domes, preying on each other for survival.

Memories of scurrying around in one of the domes rise in my mind. I was small when my parents died, leaving me to fend for myself. All I can remember of that time is being cold, hungry and forever trying to steal enough food to fill my aching belly. That was my life before I was abducted.

One Draconian warrior breaks from the pack. It's the one who carries on Meric's name. He kneels to look me in the face. "Tell us what you need to get past this moment of loss, and the clade of Meric will get it for you. We are nearly a hundred strong and I will call them all to us if needs be."

I see tiny claws peeking around each side of his neck. It takes me but a moment to realize it is one of his hatchlings. My head tilts. For the first time I realize this man looks different from the others in many ways. In addition to Meric's unique genetic trait, which is blond hair, this male's hair has a warm shade that appears to be the ghost of a copper undertone. His eyes also have a whisper of my green in their dark depths. Mine are

a deep, almost emerald green. Though there were many redheads taken, most had brown or blue eyes.

His face also has the trappings of a human heritage. All Draconians have a brow ridge running across both eyes instead of eyebrows. His has an indentation in the middle, giving the illusion of human eyebrows. Then there is a certain paleness with pink undertones to his face, neck and inner arms that are not present in the others I see. The rest of his body is a deep green, much like the warriors from other lines.

When my mouth opens, words spill out. “I believe my genetics were spliced with Meric’s to create your line. Our overlords took many samples and often we did not know they had been used until we bumped into a creature with our attributes. Will you perform a genetic scan with me?”

“Of course, my queen,” he responds reverently.

I stand on shaky legs and turn back to the console. After fumbling around for a bit, I find the correct console from the several dozen hidden away in the wall and we each contribute genetic material. It takes the medical scanner less than a minute to make a genetic match.

Hauling in a deep breath, I turn to him. “I am pleased to have kin in this time period. Will you tell me of my clade?”

Meric’s queen moves forward and lifts the child from behind his folded wings. “Let us introduce ourselves properly.” She gives a meaningful glance around the room. “You are important to our people. Allow us to care for you in your time of need.”

I turn, lift my head and gaze out at multitude of faces awaiting a speech perhaps. A group of Draconian males rush into the room and quickly set up tables and chairs. Before I can object,

there is an assortment of seating, and the tables are heaving with food.

When I turn to look around the room, I discover they have even covered my stasis pod with a dark cloth. I feel like I am existing out of time or experiencing slow motion while everyone else moves at normal speed.

Slayor's life signs are all green lined but I still select the table closest to his medical unit.

Relic murmurs, "I intuited that you would not wish to be parted from your dragon friend while you acquaint yourself with your clade, so we brought the nourishment to you."

Gazing up into his primitive face, I nod. Dragging food into my internment chamber is a strange decision on their part, so it stands to reason an intelligent being would offer an explanation.

As warriors clamor about seeing to our meal, I force myself to once again become the queen my people need. "That was the correct assumption. I do not wish to leave until I am certain Slayor is fully recovered. Will you dine with me?"

He dips his head submissively. "I am your assigned protector for now. Where you go, I follow."

Draconians use the word protector, but I think of them as battle buddies in my head. And now it appears that I have a Meric replacement. Few understand the bond that forms between a queen and her protector. It is one born of facing death, overcoming invincible foes and living rough together as we move from one battle to the next. Does this new turn of events mean I should bury all the good memories I have of Meric and open myself to yet a new protector? Something

about that feels wrong, for in my mind I lost Meric but a moment ago.

I gaze at the stunning warrior and am reminded of all the things I like about Draconians. If there were an ounce of happiness left in my soul, I would smile at him and make nice. Instead, I say, “You might be my protector, but I am the protector of our people.”

When no understanding registers on his face, I realize these people do not understand who they have awoken this day. Since information is power, I square my shoulders, lift my chin and articulate my stance clearly for all to hear.

“I am the last remaining guardian of Dracon Prime. The one with the final say about protecting our people. Any who oppose my efforts to quell our enemies will not live to see another day.”

The room goes silent. Relic opens his mouth to speak, but apparently thinks better of it and seals his lips. I see his eyes light up, probably at the mention of enemies and death, for Draconian warriors love battle almost as much as dragons.

We settle down but eating is the furthest thing from my mind. My body has been in suspended animation, meaning all my body functions were stopped on a cellular level two and a half thousand years ago. I am exactly as hungry, thirsty and tired as I was on the day they interned me. It is also why my muscles have not atrophied.

Try as hard as I might, I cannot remember that day. I put but little food on my plate and push it around. Placing it on my plate obligates me to eat it, but I put that off in favor of observing the other women in the room. There are blondes, brunettes and redheads and they come in all sizes and all the normal human hues.

One appears to be holding court in the far corner of the room. She has long blonde hair and is wearing a gown and crown. She glances anxiously at me, but I don't care who she thinks she is. I will hear her story soon enough and determine if we are to be allies or enemies.

I turn my attention to Meric and his immediately family. I am pleased that he has an elder warrior with a mate and an adult son who flanks one side of a fair-haired female his own age. On the other side is yet another warrior I do not know.

“I believe introductions are in order. My name is Electra. I instigated the rebellion against our Garothian overlords over two and a half thousand years ago.”

Meric dips his head respectfully, making me wonder if Draconian mannerisms have changed all that much in two and a half thousand years.

“Queen Electra, I present to you my mate. Queen Stacy is a healer. My eldest son, Timric, has followed in her footsteps as has his best friend, Phan. They are both healers as well. Queen Kendra chose them both for mating.”

He goes on to introduce other his children Nipi and Kipi, who look to be around ten or twelve years old, as well as Tabor, who was named after his best friend. The smallest hatchling has a human name, Cory. Meric explained that his queen bestowed that name upon their last little warrior. They have yet more hatchlings in their quarters, but he insists they were too unruly to bring them out on such an auspicious occasion. He even introduces his father, Rheric. They're all adorable and it's clear Meric is quite pleased with his lot in life.

“You have a lovely family. Congratulations on finding the favor of a queen.”

I turn to his queen and my curiosity gets the better of me. “Why are you in this sector of space? Are you a genodite? I thought only those redheads were capable of being gifted with fire?”

She scrunches up her nose into a pensive expression. “I’m not entirely certain what all that means. We thought ‘fire-haired queen’ was a euphemism that explained Draconian males’ fascination with redheads.”

I freeze, take a deep breath, and allow my long hair to energize. It begins to crackle with electricity once more and move. The little one in Meric’s lap reaches out a hand and I allow a long lock to reach out and wrap around his small wrist. His face lights up and he scrambles closer. When he pulls his hand away, a few dim sparks fly. He titters and reaches for my hair over and over again. I dare not touch the little spawn, even though I believe him to be one of my descendants. I have no wish to offend his parents.

When he finally thumps his ass down onto the table and gazes up at me with awe, I explain. “It is a genetic upgrade our alien overlords gave us early on so they could fill our heads with all the information a slave would need in order to do their bidding.”

Her gaze lifted from my eyes to my hair. “I gathered as much from watching you access data from the ship’s mainframe earlier. Were the implants painful to receive?”

A chill ran up my spine as I remember the many hours of painful surgery and burning sensation the first time the system was activated.

“When performed by the Garoth, genetic upgrades were always painful beyond imagining. This one more than most, because they ran a filament through each hair strand,

embedded a nanobot into each hair follicle and added an organic root that attached to our brain. The design was ingenious because when we absorb information it automatically gets imbedded into the correct location in our brain.”

Her face contorted into an expression of compassion. “Healers should ensure their patient feels no pain during invasive medical procedures.”

My embittered voice shoots back, “Our alien overlords were not healers. They were breakers of both human and Draconian bodies and minds. They cared not if we felt pain. We were nothing more than test subjects upon which to perform experiments. They were geneticists, evil ones who were fascinated with using technological innovations to further mold their hapless victims into better slaves.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” she responded quietly.

“It matters not, I made them rue the day they decided to gift us with their technology. We used the neural system they installed to download their entire database. It enabled us to fly their shuttles, use their weapons and learn how to repair and upgrade their tech. They were attempting to apply the neural modification to Meric when I rescued him, and we destroyed their primary lab.”

Talking about it seems like recounting what happened recently when my dear friend has been gone for two and a half thousand years. My heart hurts to know I will never see him again.

It hurts more to know there is a small red-headed girl with haunted green eyes on Earth right now scrounging for food. I wish that I could save her but doing so would change too

much. Therefore, I must leave her to suffer. Making this impossible choice destroys a small piece of my soul.

Meric's mate asks quietly, "How is it you speak modern day English so well? I know you didn't learn it from linking with the database because the warrior who came to get us said you came out of the stasis unit speaking it. Shouldn't you speak some variation of old English?"

I lean back in my chair and cross my arms over my stomach. "That is information I cannot yet share. Let me just say things are never what they seem, our lives are forever intertwined, and our enemies are always closer than they seem. I cannot afford to share information that might cost the lives of millions of beings, not at this critical juncture in time."

Her mouth drops open, and the room goes silent yet again, alerting me that every ear in the room is eavesdropping on our conversation.

I hear my dragon speak. "You could have just said no to answering that question, my long winded and cryptic friend."

I jump from my seat and rush to his medical alcove. He has already knocked his oxygen mask off again, but his vitals are reading as normal, so I don't suppose it matters.

"Slayor, how are you feeling?"

"Perfect. Now, who do we kill?"

Relic is once again by my side. He dragon speaks to Slayor, "We are currently at peace. Therefore, no one needs killing."

Slayor thumps the large warrior in the chest with his tail, causing him to stagger back a step. "Nonsense, there is always an enemy hiding about that needs killing." Slayor slinks around me and makes for the door. "I'll just go sniff him out."

In a valiant effort to distract Slayor, Relic speaks, “Or we could go to the training room and burn off some energy.”

My mouth falls open when the warrior shifts into a rougher version of himself. Though he doesn't have an actual snout, he becomes more dragon like and thumps Slayor back with his own tail, which has bulked up and now has hand-sized sharp bone-like protrusions spiking along the top.

I gasp, “What in the fresh hell is this?”

“A genetic adaptation, compliments of an accident in space when a black hole opened close to my ship,” he replies wryly. “It is a long story and perhaps best saved for another day,” he says with a nod towards the multitude of guests now occupying my chamber.

Fascinated, I look at this warrior with new eyes. He's a clever male who isn't afraid to speak his mind. So far everyone has tiptoed around me like I'm mentally deficit due to my extended stay in stasis.

I turn and speak to the crowd of people directly, “I thank you for flocking to my side during my time of need. I look forward to getting to know each of you better in the coming days.”

Of course, I don't really mean the words coming out of my mouth. I will certainly be too busy scoping out danger to visit with so many. Searching the room, I catch Meric's eye.

“Walk with me, Meric. I have questions and wish to hear your thoughts about something that is bearing on my mind.”

He glances down at his mate, who nods enthusiastically.

I stroll through the large double doors leading from my chamber with my dragon at my side. I keep one hand on him, for he is the pernicious sort who can never quite be trusted not to bite someone's head off if they look tasty enough.

Something about walking my own ship and the feeling of Slayor's scales beneath my hand anchors me in the moment and I begin to feel like my old self once more.

AN IMPOSSIBLE QUEST

Relic

*I*t has been many day cycles since Queen Electra woke. This ancient fire-haired queen is always busy. She has showed us compartments on this ship that we didn't know existed and pulled out exotic weapons, the likes of which I have never seen. She has transformed this vessel into a fully operational battle-ready warship in a matter of three lunars. Indeed, she has changed much aboard our vessel.

As is Draconian tradition, six warriors stand guard with their backs against the wall around her sleep chamber each down cycle, or what the humans call night. Since I am her protector, I usually stand guard along with them or sit at the computer interface and scan surrounding space for potential threats, before grabbing a few hours of sleep. It is a good thing my kind requires very little in the way of rest and regeneration.

Queen Electra has chosen to surround herself with the unmated males of her clade. There are now twenty of them in charge of different departments, each chosen according to their skills and experience. Although none can know a queen's mind, the fact that she left the mated males behind leads me to believe there will be danger ahead and she has no intention of

leaving females grieving the loss of their mate or little ones mourning the death of their sires.

I was promptly replaced as commander of this ship by one of her clade. Now I have the honor of being her personal bodyguard who is also responsible for entertaining her dragon, lest he rampage through the ship biting everyone's heads off. Slayor is not as large as a normal dragon. He is about twice my size and loves to wrestle with me when I shift into my secondary battle form. I am pleased he has claimed me as his friend, especially since being his enemy would be a dangerous spot for me to settle into.

This is not the mission I signed on for, but Queen Caroline insists that we should give this queen a wide berth to make decisions for herself as she acclimates to existing in modern times. Since Queen Electra did not approach her or ask permission before leaving orbit around Onello, Queen Caroline sent a message conveying her best wishes and assurances that if she ever had need of assistance all of Onello would answer the call. The interaction has been painfully awkward for everyone but the warrior queen, who I believe sees herself as in charge of all things Draconian.

Even now she moves around her ancient chamber interfacing with the ship's computer, reviewing various scans from remote areas and reports by the Draconian fleet. She seems focused on remote areas of space, even as our ship races towards Earth.

When her hair slips from the ship's neural interface, I approach. "Are you well, Queen Electra? Do you require assistance?"

She stares at me for so long I think she is not going to answer. Just as I am about to step back, she nods. "I have need of a

partner on a high priority mission. Absolutely no one can know of this mission.”

“Are you certain you would not prefer a warrior from your own clade?” The part that goes unsaid is that she has tossed aside every other capable warrior on this ship in favor of elevating members of her clade.

“Warriors from the House of Meric must never be privy to the deeds we do today. Though we will be breaking several galactic laws of this time period, many lives depend upon our success and our lips remaining sealed.”

I reluctantly dip my head. “Queens command and warriors obey.” It is the rubric by which Draconian males live their lives.

She glares at me with her hands on her hips. “I need more than simple blind submission on this quest, Relic. What we do today and in the coming weeks will have a ripple effect on all that comes after for generations in the past, and the future as well.”

Taking a step closer, she stares into my eyes. “I took you out of circulation on the ship’s roster because I have more important duties in mind for you. Your intellect, skills and unique physical adaptations are impressive. I need you at my back.”

Shock roils through my body that she speaks so highly of me when mere moments before I thought she discounted my abilities as a warrior.

“I want you think about my request carefully. If you don’t think you can stay the course under intense pressure, extreme levels of danger and impossible odds of success, then I need you to tell me now.”

Truth be told, I don't need to think about her request. Not even for a minute. Thrilling heroics are my specialty. Intrigue and danger are the fuel that feeds my soul and that of my inner dragon as well. Defeat is never an option.

I give her a feral grin. "I'm an old blood whose dragon craves a worthy challenge. Therefore, I say yes to your request, Queen Electra."

A look of satisfaction lights up her face. "We must be extremely careful. This first step is the most critical."

She reaches over and activates a security shield around the two of us so none can see us or hear our conversation.

Excitement strums in my gut. "What do you wish of me, my queen?"

Squaring her shoulders, she discloses something personal. "The reason I speak flawless English is because I was raised in one of the bio-domes on the North American continent. I will be plucked from New Georgia in three days by the Garoth, at the age of twelve."

Her words worry me, for all Draconians understand the dangers of interfering with timelines. "Do you wish to destroy the Garoth vessel entirely or simply ensure you are not among the humans they abduct?"

"Neither. If I were to do either of those things, the rebellion I instigated on Dracon Prime might not happen at all or might not be successful. We can't risk that. I believe if the Garoth had gotten a foothold in Exion space, nothing would have stopped them from an outward expansion."

I caution her, "Temporal mechanics are tricky, my queen. Interference in your own timeline could have far reaching and unintended consequences."

She lifts her chin. “I am well aware of that fact, Relic. What I need you to understand is that in the belly of that alien ship, I lost all hope and as a result I almost lost my life. A few words of wisdom would have gotten me through those dark hours, given me direction I needed in life and enabled me to do a better job of keeping the others safe as I grew into adulthood.”

My heart stutters in my chest. “You mean to talk to your younger self?”

“Yes,” she states empathically. “I know this seems counterintuitive according to everything we know about time travel, but I mean to bring my younger self here and impart to her the wisdom she will need to stay strong in the face of extreme abuse and helplessness.”

I reluctantly acquiesce, “If you are certain this is necessary, I will do what I can to support this goal.”

She launches into the next shocking part of her plan. “We have a particle device capable of a transferring biological life form intact from one location to another.”

My wings close into a tight knot at my back and my tail moves slowly closer to wrap around my leg. What she speaks is madness. “No species has yet perfected particle technology enough to transport a person safely from one location to another,” I remind her.

Her eyes narrow on me, but I continue speaking to ensure she knows the folly of this plan. “Living matter transported by particle scattering and reconstitution will experience a cascade failure of their cells on a sub-atomic level within weeks of the transfer. Your younger self would not survive the trip to Dracon Prime, much less be in any condition to instigate a rebellion, my queen. You will die a slow and painful death from the effects of the device. It is the reason particle

technology is outlawed by galactic decree in this sector of space. Let me go down to the surface. I will be stealthy and bring the child back by shuttle.”

“No, that’s too risky.” She steps closer and explains patiently, “The Garoth are an advanced species. I’ve already been subjected to their particle technology on many occasions over the years. It is how they abducted us and transferred slaves from one location to another. The device we have on this ship was taken from a Garoth vessel.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to calm my anger. “This is why you chose me. Any warrior of the House of Meric would have not only forbidden you to use a particle transport device but they would have insisted upon preserving the life of your younger self, though it costs them our ancestor’s freedom.”

She nods, unable to argue that point. “The Meric line is protective of their primary queen. You’re intelligent enough to see that my plan has merit and detached enough from me to see the big picture. There’s more at stake here than saving my younger self.”

I curse all the gods I know under my breath. Although I know she is right, the burden we are about to put on this immature queen’s shoulders is immense. Little spawn should be protected, not intentionally sent into the heart of darkness.

Still, Queen Electra knows more about the struggles of our ancestors than any other person alive. If she believes this will ease the little one’s way once abducted, then I must trust her wisdom. Queens are born to lead, I remind myself. They see things that escape the understanding of simple warriors like myself.

My wings slump in defeat. “Do you wish me to locate her through scans, using your DNA?”

Relief softens the hard lines of her face. “Yes. I’m familiar with the particle transport device. When you find her, I will transport her to this room.”

I pull my electric tablet from my belt. “I will enlarge this security shield to contain the entire room and then get started on the scans.”

“Thank you, Relic.”

We both settle into our appointed tasks. Something in my chest thaws knowing that this fire-haired queen is trusting me with all her secrets this day. She asked me to be her partner, not her protector. Does that mean she sees us as equal? I want to snort a laugh, but I dare not. This female is a goddess, and I am an old blood warrior. I am anything but her equal.

After pulling up her DNA in the database, I target the only bio-dome in the place called New Georgia. It does not take long to find the little human spawn. Though Queen Electra stated she was twelve years old, her life signs place her in a much younger age group. It takes but a moment to discover the reason is nutritional neglect. My thick, rough brow ridge drops into a frown.

“I have acquired our target, my queen. I am sending you the coordinates.”

“Go ahead,” she murmurs. After a short silence she states, “I’ve got a lock on her.”

Within a micron a small, dirty female queen materializes in front of us. I am astonished that her long fire-colored hair is soiled to the point of looking dull and lifeless. Though I must admit she does resemble Queen Electra in the face.

Before the child can begin to panic, Queen Electra kneels in front of her.

The girl automatically steps back. “I... am I... in trouble?”

“No, of course not,” my new queen assures her.

I rush to get her a hydration pouch and some food bars and place them on the one remaining table that is left in the room. Conflicted by what we are doing, I give them the dignity of privacy by placing another security screen around them.

Turing the situation over in my mind, I see the potential gain but many more possible drawbacks. I pace for what seems like forever. I remember Drakon telling me this ship was capable of time travel as well as space travel, but he could not decipher how the time travel apparatus worked. So far, our science team has just been arguing with one another regarding the operation of the device. I was not entirely certain about it being a time travel machine when they were discussing it. Now that I know this queen was taken back in time and leaped forward again using a stasis unit, I am inclined to believe anything is possible.

After what seems like forever, the security barrier falls. The child has been cleansed, medi-scanned and likely healed of any medical problems. I can tell because the medical alcove is a complete mess.

I run a scan because the little one appears larger. I discover that Queen Electra has not biologically enhanced her. My queen has not only fabricated thick sturdy clothing for her, but she has also layered the child in clothing. I watch her zip up a bag full of additional clothing as she gives her younger self instructions.

“You need to wear all the layers you can stand because you’ll be in the belly of that Garoth ship for a long time. The cages they put you in will be really cold. I gave you a list of names of the kids they’ll grab. You have three days to track them all down and prepare them. We were removed from an area of the bio-dome that was sandwiched between two levels. Adults think of it as a crawl space. Even though the distance between the floor and ceiling is only about four feet, it’s a huge area in terms of square feet. Take everyone on the list to that area the evening before and have them suit up, just like I showed you. You stay together and wait.

“The inoculations and vitamin supplements that I administered will keep you healthy, even under extreme deprivation for the next few years. I’m putting enough in your backpack to inoculate the others as well.”

I watch her stack several cases of nutrition bars into a huge canvas bag. “These food bars are dense, and I want you all to eat as many as you can over the next few days. Once the Garoth grab you, food will be scarce. When they start to feed you, you won’t want to eat what they provide. Force it down along with any liquid they give you. You will need the nutrition and hydration.”

“Yes ma’am, I’ll do exactly that. I’m used to eating things that don’t taste particularly good.”

My new queen kneels in front of her younger self. “Remember, knowledge is power, Electra. That means you keep your lips sealed each step of the way until the time is right. Your job is to look out for the other girls and keep them emotionally and physically strong. They’ll be looking for a leader and that person is going to be you.”

The little girl looks up at her. “And if I do this, I’ll grow up to be like you?”

“I *am* the grown-up you. If you follow my instructions, it will just make getting from point A to point B easier for you. Does that make sense?”

“Yes,” the little one answered. As if reciting by rote memory, she stated, “I’m smart, capable and the leader my people need.”

“You’re destined to be a hero who saves millions of lives. The girls that get abducted and shoved into the belly of that alien ship will become your closest friends. When they take you from Earth, it will be years before they land on a planet. While you’re in their hold, roll with the punches. The Garoth won’t go out of their way to abuse you. Until they land on the planet, they just consider you cargo. If you do what they say and keep your heads down, they’ll just feed you, clean you and ignore you mostly.”

“I remember you said all that changes when we land and they start slaving us.”

“Yes. That will be the most difficult time period and it goes on for about ten years. The dragon warriors will eventually join forces with you when the time is right. When that happens, the war will last for years. You have to destroy every last Garothian, no matter the costs. But you can’t jump the gun either. Launch your attack only when you are certain you have the best chance of victory. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Miss Electra. It feels strange to meet my grown-up self.” Glancing away, she states quietly, “I didn’t think I would live long enough to grow up.”

Queen Electra blinks back tears. “You’ll not only grow up, but you’ll also have a fabulously happy life. This is my promise to you.”

The little girl takes a deep breath and adjusts her backpack. “Okay, I’ll do it.”

“I have one more very important thing to share with you.”

Queen Electra bends her head forward and brings the girl’s hand up to rub against her scalp.

“Look closely at my scalp. I want to familiarize you with your greatest weapon in this epic battle against good and evil.”

The child picked through her hair with both hands. “Your scalp has tiny bumps.”

My queen nodded. “When you are nearing adulthood, the Garoth will begin experimenting with neural relays. They’ll imbed tiny nanobots into your hair follicles and put thin filaments through each strand of hair.”

The girl looks uncertain, but our queen presses on.

“I won’t lie to you. The process is extremely painful but once it’s done, the pain goes away entirely. The Garoth want an easy way to program information into your brain to make you a better slave, only you hate being at their beck and call.” She taps her head.

“Don’t be afraid of the upgrade, because it is what enables you and the others to turn the tables on your oppressors by absorbing all the information in the Garoth database. The best part is whatever information you absorb automatically gets imbedded in the correct location in our brain, which means you don’t have to dig around, trying to remember things. Information pops up exactly when you need it. It’s the easiest learning you will ever experience in your lifetime. It will make

up for missing out on formal schooling and higher education as well. Once you have the upload, you'll know how to repair or sabotage every system on the Garoth vessel, fly their shuttles and operate all their weapons. It'll be like a dream come true."

Queen Electra comes to her feet and performs a visual demonstration of downloading something from the database through her hair follicles. The little one gazes up at her in awe.

"This is a lot to remember. Do you think you can handle it?"

"I got it," she says breathlessly. "Don't be scared. Every time they knock me down, get right back up again. Help the others cope. Don't talk about the future. Follow the order of events. And don't fight the genetic upgrade. I can do this."

Queen Electra kneels again and puts her hand on the girl's shoulders. "I know you can do it because I already did. You're going to have an easier time of it because you'll be healthier when they take you and you'll know what to expect."

"Anything else I should know?"

"Yes. You will meet dragons. They're loyal to their friends and vicious to their enemies. Be sure you end up on their good side."

"Wow, real dragons," the youngling intones with an edge of awe to her voice. "This is going to be pretty great."

My queen interjects, "It's going to be the toughest job you ever love. It will test your strength, patience, resolve and intelligence in ways you can't imagine. Each time you are victorious, you come one step closer to being the person you were meant to be."

"I will do my very best," the little one promises.

Queen Electra seems pained, but she hides it well. “Now, it’s your turn. Do you have questions for me?”

“Is this real or a dream?”

My queen smiles. “It’s real. I’m living proof of that. When you fall asleep tonight and wake up with your head on that backpack full of supplies, you’ll realize this really happened. It’s in the middle of the night in your dome, so we’re returning you to that crawl space we found you in. As I remember it was cozy. You just have to remember that beam running through the middle of the ceiling.”

The little one makes a face. “I’ve bumped my head on that too many times.”

“Anything else before we send you back?”

The girl is pensive for a long moment and then asks, “What does it feel like to be a hero?”

The grown queen beams down at her one last time. “It feels gratifying, like I’m making a positive difference in the ’verse. All the bad times melt away when I’m fighting for a good cause.”

“If you can do this, so can I,” the young child states with determination.

“Alright, let’s get you back home so you can get on with your very exciting life.”

Right before my queen activates the particle transporter, she states, “Sometimes your life will be filled with darkness but as long you and the others stay connected to each other emotionally, there is nothing you can’t accomplish.”

In the blink of an eye, the child is gone. I don’t know why but my emotions rise hard and fast as I stare at the tears running

down my queen's face.

KEEPING IT MOVING FORWARD

Electra

I've watched her on the scanners doing everything we talked about. She found the others, brought them to her secret space, fed them, inoculated them and they were all bundled up. I even beamed in a few kits of medical supplies. I don't know if the Garoth will bother to notice or confiscate the kits, as I put them inside soft toys. If the girls manage to keep them, all the better. Each has a tiny first aid booklet. I've done everything that I dare to increase their survival rate.

We wait behind the rings of Saturn for the Garoth ship to approach Earth. Just like I told my younger self, it takes three days. Their ship arrives in stealth mode. Neither Earth nor the assorted aliens visiting have the technology to detect the Garoth vessel. We see it though. The huge dark form reminds me of a black hole moving against the starlit sky. Now, I see it as nothing more than a necessary evil.

I pace in my chamber, aware that my younger self is in the process of being taken by some of the most ruthless aliens in the entire universe. Everything I told her was true, however it wasn't the whole truth. I imparted only the information that would enable her to jump from one impossibly difficult

situation to another. She will be better prepared than I was. That must be enough for now.

I fret over the choices I made today. Although all the upcoming crisis situations she will face are indelibly inked onto my brain, it worries me that her knowing what to expect will subtly change the future. Tinkering with our timeline is the purview of gods, not mortals like me. Still, if things go sideways, I'm not adverse to jumping back in time to render assistance, if I can figure out how the quantum drive works. One way or another I am all in at this point.

When Relic whispers in my ear, I freeze in place, relieved that the alternate timeline I just created by meddling with the past has not erased him. "The Garothian vessel has engaged its quantum device, my queen. They are gone."

I close my eyes and pray this divergent path is very close to the one I survived. This is a huge gamble, a way to save millions among the billions that will unnecessarily perish.

I turn to look at my bridge crew, and some of the faces have changed. Grabbing my tablet, I begin scrolling through our crew roster. We have seven more in number but are missing five warriors. I swallow thickly as a chill creeps up my spine. I don't know if the missing crew are dead or alive and happily living out their lives in some other location.

I stalk back to my chamber and Relic follows me. I speak the moment the door snicks shut behinds us, "Take us into Earth's orbit and instruct my clade to accept all who wish to leave."

He responds carefully, "Our ship can carry up to ten thousand."

I drop down onto a chair and put my head in my hands. "Pack them into our ship, Relic. My ship is the largest in the fleet.

We can easily take five or ten times that many.”

He stammers, “Are you certain, my queen? We would be packing them together tightly.”

I disclose something I’ve been keeping secret, one of the many things. My voice is somber, “Earth’s time is short, Relic. We must make haste.”

When a long pause spins out between us, I lift my head to stare at him.

“I want a hundred thousand women on this ship within the next two cycles. Don’t worry about their ages, health or if they have children. Bring any orphans you encounter as well and place them in our nursery. We’re fully stocked with supplies, and they won’t be with us long.”

“My queen, the logistics of taking in so many will preclude us from caring for them properly.”

I break it down like I should have in the first place. “I don’t care, Relic. The people of Earth don’t have time on their side anymore. We now face extinction. Only those who leave will survive.”

He freezes in place, his expression horrified. “You are certain of this, my queen?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“Then all will be as you wish, my queen,” Relic murmurs.

I feel bad for my faithful protector. Draconian males are very much what you see is what you get. They’re usually upfront, honest and loyal. Relic has done every single thing I’ve asked, which should be proof of his loyalty, if ever there was a doubt in my mind. Yet, I keep secrets from him, important ones.

When the door to my chambers shuts behind him, a deep voice sounds off in my head, “You are meddling in things you cannot possibly comprehend. Keep it up, and all may be lost.”

I hit the lock on Slayor’s private resting alcove and watch as the door slides up. My dragon loves to sleep better than any person I’ve ever met.

Smoothing my hand down his side, I ask, “How long have you been awake?”

He tosses his head, “Long enough to suss out all your best-laid plans.”

“I know what I’m doing,” I say soothingly. “Why are you doubting me?”

His head juts back to look me in the face. “I’m doubting you because you’re doubting yourself. I know your thoughts as well as I know my own.”

“This is the problem with being psy-bonded to a dragon,” I tease him. “There’s never any privacy.”

He chuckles, “You’d be very lonely without me in your head, my queen.”

“Do you think I’m doing the right thing?”

“Yes and no,” he answers cryptically.

“Yes, to preparing yourself to better handle the abduction. No, to withholding information about the pending destruction of your home world.”

“I’ve been working on a plan for that. I can’t just begin a mass panic.”

“You only have a few lunars, my queen. I see the multitude of thoughts swirling around in your mind. You have plans within

plans, some devious and others benign, but you must know that not even you can save them all.”

“We’ll just see about that,” I say stubbornly.

Changing the subject so fast it startles me, he asks, “Do you not miss your old protector? It has been months and you rarely speak of Meric anymore.”

I wrap my arms around Slayor. “I still miss him. It grieves me that we had so little time together. I often dream of what might have been if we had more time to establish a bond.”

“Meric was flawed when it came to sharing his heart. I believe he gave what he could. Wishing for what might never have been is a fool’s quest and keeps you from bonding with someone who might be a better match.”

I don’t even try to deny his words because I know them to be true. My best friend might never have pulled his fractured psyche together enough to form a true mating bond with me. He had many opportunities and never rose to the occasion. In fact, he grew more distant the longer we were together.

I stammer, “Still, I am proud to have known him. I believe the universe is a better place for having the Meric line in it.”

“You think of the clade that bears his namesake as your own,” he responds. It’s not a question, but a statement. Since we share a psychic bond, there is no need to deny when he knows most all my internal ramblings.

“I do.” I can hear a note of warmth and pride in my own voice in that reply.

Slayor stretches himself and then responds, “I am pleased that they accept you as kin. Having a clade will make acclimating to this time period less traumatic for you.”

It's true. I don't feel so isolated and alone with the clade of Meric around me. It appears that I am not the only one who notices the human characteristics they inherited from me.

Slayor's voice turns cunning, "You have an abundance of males to choose from aboard this vessel and even more on Onello. There is no need for you to forgo the pleasures of mating."

My head snaps around to look at him.

He adds slyly, "Your new protector is all that you could ever hope for in a potential mate."

My heart hurts to think of bonding with a male when all the other women who fought by my side are dead. It seems wrong somehow. "Now is not the time, Slayor. Many lives depend upon us keeping our shoulder to the grindstone. We can afford no distractions."

"There will always be dangers in the 'verse that need to be dealt with. You make the mistake of thinking all the wrongs are your responsibility to right and that you are invincible. Just because the males aboard this ship have set up an altar in their common room and worship you like a goddess, does not make you one."

I am unnerved by my cantankerous friend's take on how I am perceived aboard this ship and by the larger Draconian community.

My reply is meant to sound lighthearted and humorous, but it comes out as peevish instead. "Perhaps they are right to worship me. It could be that goddesses are made, not born. I have given my blood to cleanse Draconian soil of the Garoth. That is no small deed."

Saylor rolls over and yawns. “Nor was it accomplished by you alone, my queen.”

“I know that. I’m merely the lucky one who survived. It’s the reason I had the other women immortalized in our wall of glory.” I might not sound like it, but we both know I’m irritated that Saylor of all people would say something like that to me.

He sighs, “I do not say this to steal your glory, only to remind you that you are yet mortal. They all died in battle. You might as well, if you are not careful. You have an advantage they did not in that you can continue your line.”

I’d like to be mad that he felt the need to remind me of my own mortality but he’s right. I do tend to spend too much time focused on the safety of our people. It’s not that I forget that I can and will die someday, I just never think that day is today. This fallacy of thinking often lures me into taking more risks upon myself than is advisable.

All those who have died in the battles I’ve led rise in my mind. Until now I thought our lives constantly being in danger was necessary to win a war against the mighty Garoth. Now I can’t help but wonder if my propensity to jump at any advantage no matter the inherent risk was my greatest folly. How many would still be alive if only I had chosen a less risky path at every junction?

Jolene’s smiling face flashes through my mind, her long orange hair blowing in the wind while slung over a Garothian’s hunched shoulder. She was three and thought being abducted was a spooky game we were playing. They came for us at the end of October when those in the bio-domes were struggling to keep our culture alive by celebrating holidays like Halloween.

Jolene was the youngest amongst us and the first to die. I remember watching her waste away in the belly of the Garoth ship. I felt so helpless. Even the rest of us sharing our food didn't help. Maybe the nutritional supplements, antibiotics and fortified food bars I gave my younger self will be enough to save her this time around.

I especially miss Christiana. She was the yin to my yang, the light to my darkness and the one to pull me back from the brink many times when I thought throwing my life away for the greater good was the answer to a complicated problem. I remember her most in the heat of battle, wearing full armor with wisps of her strawberry-blonde hair flying free of the tight knot at the back of her head as she fought.

Tears well up as I remember her best friend, Ember. They were like two peas in a pod. Memory after memory of me luring one of our enemies' monsters away and them sliding up on either side from behind to box them in. No matter how large the creature was, we managed to kill it. These beasts the Garoth created were no match for us. The only way to get to our enemies was through the snarling animals protecting them, and get to them we did.

I get lost for a moment remembering all the women who fought by my side. They were each uniquely gifted and brave in their own way. We were also all broken in one way or another. It didn't matter though because together we were the kind of fierce that fought back an endless horde of monsters and battle bots.

Remembering the face of each monster we fought, I think maybe our no holds barred fighting style was necessary after all. We'd tried trapping them but that never seemed to work.

This was the problem about the past, it never stayed in the past and left me questioning every decision I ever made.

Slayer lowers his voice, again speaking to my self-doubts. “You soil your brain with doubt, my queen, when no one can know what is necessary to secure victory without the ability to divine the future.”

I fight back the memories. There are far too many and too tragic to enumerate. My emotions are a jumbled mess, and I must find a way through if I am to save the peoples of Earth.

Once again, my dragon friend points the way for me. “Many think victory is defeating an invincible adversary in the name of all that is good and righteous in the ’verse, but true victory is not losing yourself to bitterness over the sacrifices that must be made along the way.”

I stammer, “Thank you, Slayer. I appreciate the insight.” Wiping at my eyes with back of my hands, I ask awkwardly, “What got us on this subject anyways?”

“We were discussing your need to open yourself to the possibility of having a mate in your life.”

I give him a small, sad smile. “I have a mate in my life. He’s large, scaly and green with a propensity to sermonize to me at times.”

“Friends are wonderful, but every being needs a strong mate and a family to love. You are no different.”

“I will make time for a family once I am certain all is as it should be. We will both carve out time to seek mates and our children will frolic in the sunshine together safe and happy from the dangers you and I now face.”

His voice turns cold. “You are a human. I am an aberration, created in a lab. There are no mates for the likes of me left in

the 'verse.”

I open my mouth to respond but he closes the psychic link between us and rolls over to sleep yet again. Slayor only does that when he's hurting and doesn't want his emotions to spill over onto me. It seems I picked at a scab I didn't know was there. He is right that all the other dragons we know about are the size of houses when they're fully grown. Slayor is child sized by comparison, which would make mating impossible.

I head over to my primary computer interface and begin actively trying to figure out what has changed as a result of me intersecting with my younger self.

CHANGE OF SCENERY

Relic

*W*e are nearing Onello. It has been close to six lunar months since I was assigned to be Queen Electra's protector and four since she woke. Though her demeanor is aloof and detached, her bearing is that of a true queen of old. I see all the emotions churning just below the surface. And I see how restless her sleep is. Even now she tosses and turns, having yet another nightmare.

I jerk my chin at the other warriors ringing the room. I know she would not wish them to witness her distress. This queen of mine does not like to be vulnerable at all, much less within view of her clan brethren.

They reluctantly file out while I approach her sleeping platform. Sitting on the edge of the platform I reach out, place my hand on her shoulder, and gently shake her. Recent history has taught me this is the way humans prefer to be awakened when demons haunt their dreams.

She jerks awake and bolts up to a sitting position, breathing heavily. I keep my hand on her shoulder. "Calm yourself, my queen. You were having another troubled rest."

“Was I talking in my sleep?”

I swallow the lump in my throat. I can almost smell the stench of battle upon this fire-haired queen. Her eyes are wild and adrenaline courses through her body. I dip my head slightly. “Yes. You were in the thick of battle, yelling for your warriors to fall back.”

“I was dreaming of the Battle of Serpents. In the late stages of the war, the Garoth created creatures with dozens of poisonous snakes growing from their bodies. They leapt out from their host to bite us. Their poison was fast acting and lethal.”

She draws her knees up to her chest and continues. “At one point I realized the hosts were cutting the serpents from their bodies. The moment they were free, they swarmed us. We fought hard but there were too many of them. Our weapons were designed to kill larger and stronger enemies. We needed proper weapons for the task.”

“It sounds like retreating was your only option considering the circumstances.”

“We eventually realized they were similar to water moccasins on Earth, in that their natural habitat was water. Instead of going head to head with them, we decided to poison their well.”

Her hands come up to press against her eyes. “I don’t know why I can’t stop thinking about the war.”

When she looks up at me, I gesture around the room. “You have created this shrine to memorialize that hard-won war and all that you have lost in the process. How can you put the past behind you when you submerge yourself in it every micron of the day and night?”

She turns to gaze around her room, looking more lost than I have ever seen her. “But this is my personal space.”

Daring to disagree with this queen of queens, I respond quietly, “I’m certain in the beginning it was nondescript. Unless I miss my guess, the longer you occupied it the more memorabilia you gathered. Since you are a warrior queen preoccupied with saving our people, endless war consumed your life. It is logical that most of your personal effects were war related.”

She blinks several times, clearly surprised. “I suppose that’s true. In the beginning it was comforting. Now, not so much.”

Sliding from her sleeping platform, I reach out my hand to her. “Come, let me take you someplace else for the night.”

Without the slightest hesitation, she slides her hand into mine. “Where will we go?”

Without glancing back at her, I respond, “Somewhere that’s not here, my queen.”

I am precariously close to deceiving a queen this night, for I have every intention of taking her to my quarters. They are among the most luxurious on this ship, which makes them one of the few spaces fit for a queen on this now crowded ship.

Walking hand in hand with my pensive queen feels more right than anything I have known in my lifetime. Everything I know about her tells me she is not easily led, yet she allows me to guide her down the corridor to my suite, which is but a few steps from her own. Perhaps she allows me to lead so easily because she is still drowsy. Nothing else makes sense.

Though there are no warriors within visual range, my brethren aboard this ship will, no doubt, be aware that we have left her sanctuary. This will be greatly concerning for them, but I can’t

see them intervening between this highly revered queen and her protector. They know I have only her best interests in mind.

By the time the door shuts behind us, Queen Electra is wearing a frown. "I do not think this is going to help."

"My quarters are not to your liking?"

Her head jerks up and she looks around for the first time. "You live here?"

Dipping my head, I reply humbly, "Yes. This is currently my only place of residence."

When her eyes land on my massive collection of geodes and precious gemstones, I clarify, "Wherever an old blood warrior keeps his hoard is considered his home."

She closes the distance between the entrance and the wall of shelving running down the side of the main room. Normally, alarm bells would sound off in my mind if someone approached my prized hoard items. My scales shift into my fighting form as I realize something dark and primitive has risen in my soul. I wish this queen that I admire so much to feast her eyes on my treasures, touch them and luxuriate in them as I do.

She glances over her shoulder and wry amusement tugs at her normally severe expression. "Feeling a bit primal, are we?"

"Yeesss," I hiss. It takes only a moment for me to realize that I am shifting yet again into my secondary fighting form. I can tell my dragon is straining to get out because my tail slams against the wall, leaving a dent. My wings grow heavy as my muscle-bound form strains to keep from releasing them in a breathtaking display of dominance, meant to lure her into seeing me as a breeding partner.

As long as her eyes are upon me, I feel seen. It makes my blood boil with need. My dragon wishes to mate with this lovely queen. Some small rational part of my brain tells me this high-status queen is not for the likes of me but my dragon cares not about reason or logic. He is greedy and wishes to run his nose along the long pale column of her neck.

Thankfully, she returns her attention to my hoard items, and I am able to muscle my inner dragon back a bit.

“You collect gemstones?”

Her innocent question lures me closer. “Yes. All old blood warriors hoard items and guard them jealously. I am no different.”

She runs one hand over a large bloodstone. “Slayor hoards as well. All the small dragons our Garothian overlords kept had a tendency to do it as well. It frustrated the hell out of our oppressors.”

Curious, I asked, “What did they hoard?”

She quickly glances at me and moves on to examine a string of rough multicolored gemstones.

“They mostly hoarded food because it was in short supply. Besides that, they each coveted different things. Some liked shiny objects, others loved precious metals while some few scavenged for tech.” She shrugged, “You know how dragons are.”

My wings twitched, “Yes. I well know the ways of the dragon.”

She turned with the string of gemstones in her hands and looks up at me. “Sorry about that. Of course, you understand the heart of a dragon since you are one.”

“I will assume you approve of our dragon heritage, since you surround yourself with our kind and fought for our freedom in days gone by.”

Her eyes light up. “I love dragons in general and Draconians by extension because your DNA was mixed with that of dragons. You, yourself, are particularly appealing because of your old blood heritage.”

I lift my chin, unsure if I believe she finds me more attractive because of my primitive bloodline. “My dragon rides closer to the surface, as is the case with all old blood warriors.”

“Are there no old blood queens?”

“In all the history of our kind, from the days you fought for our people until the last few solar years, there were no old blood queens. Draconian queens only accepted breeders into their harems. Breeders were thought to be the only males capable of breeding female offspring. Since Queen Caroline brought us from Exion space to the Naxis, old blood warriors were bred in higher numbers, and for the first time they created queens. I hear tell that there are now a handful of newly hatched old blood queens.”

“So, it’s possible. During ancient times, when your people were first created, there were no breeders or old blood warriors. They were all simply battle-ready warriors with green scales.”

“We believe old bloods are a genetic anomaly. A throwback, if you will. We are what happens when a Draconian male is hatched with a strong inner dragon.”

She takes a step closer and asks, “Is that how breeders were created? Their dragons are weaker?”

“No,” I growl. “Breeders are the result of our queens spending over two thousand solar revolutions selectively breeding a certain subset of our males with alien species they considered superior. They wished to look more humanoid and less reptilian.”

I practically spat out the last sentence. Being so close to this queen and not being able to touch her is confusing and frustrating. My inner dragon is still wide awake and very interested in the one thing I am denying us both.

Her hand comes up as if to touch me, but she hesitates and finally drops her hand back down to her side. Her expression is conflicted before shutting down entirely.

I glance away, feeling this for the rejection it is. If I ever harbored dreams of capturing her notice, I now know what a futile effort that would be. She clearly does not like what she sees when she looks upon my primitive form. Disappointed, I take a step back and gesture towards the back of the room with one wing.

“Will you rest now, my queen?”

She nods, not daring to look into my eyes. “Yes, of course. That’s why we came, right?”

I dip my head, acknowledging that it was indeed the reason we sought the solace of my quarters. “This way, then.”

When she steps through the door to my personal sleeping space, she gasps before stepping ahead to turn in a full circle to look around the room. I stand tall and proud that she is impressed by my efforts.

I look at my space with fresh eyes and try to imagine what she is thinking. I created my space to mimic the queen chambers that are slowly being modified or purged from Draconian

vessels. The walls are lined with yet more hoard items, the most delicate and beautiful I could find. A large bed dominates the space, with layers of opulent coverings and a multitude of the soft square objects coveted by our human queens. I can hear the tinkling of recirculating water from the cleansing lagoon in the far corner.

“I’ve never seen anything this luxurious in my entire life.” Turning shocked eyes on me she asks, “Do old bloods love wealth and privilege as well as their hoard items?”

“I doubt any warrior cares for such things, be he an old blood or not.” I gesture around the room with one wing. “This is intended for the queen who selects me as her mate. Human queens are usually gentle and frail, thus they need soft places to sleep. Queens deserve luxury and I intend to see that mine wants for nothing.”

I smooth one hand down my uniform. “Do you wish to sleep now?”

Her expression turns almost gleeful. “Yes, please.” Turning, she makes her way to the bed, stopping long enough to pull off her foot coverings, the things humans call socks. She normally wears these to bed but since she likely soiled them walking from her chamber to my quarters, she discards them to ensure her new sleeping space stays clean.

When she dives into the bed wearing only her long unders, I realize how dull the grey fabric is against my colorful bedding. She lays back and stretches her arms above her head in a movement that is so seductive, it makes my cock harden. I watch her roll over and prop herself up on one arm.

She chews her bottom lip and looks me over in a way that seems curious and proprietary enough to revive my dreams of capturing her notice once again. I know that our own queens

expected males to present bare for their inspection, so I decide to see if my naked form helps her decide one way or the other if she wants me for breeding.

My hands come up to pull the magnetic seam of my uniform apart. Since my scales are thicker than most, I do not require unders on my top half. She pushes herself up to a sitting position and leans one arm casually on her knee. Her eyes drink in all that I reveal and the expression on her face is unrecognizable. Next, I kick off my boots and remove my utility belt slowly, for I have no wish to alarm her opinion of me. She bites her bottom lip when I tear open the front of my pants and let them slide to the floor.

Being no one's fool, I dare not disrobe further. I'm certain it would be considered rude and maybe even interpreted as demanding intimacy if I were to show my cock while she is still covered.

I lower my voice, "Do you approve of what you see, my queen?"

It's a brazen question, I know. And I dare this because having this queen on my sleeping platform is a once in a lifetime opportunity. I wish her to see me as a potential mate and am willing to do all within my power to make that happen.

My question snaps her out of whatever daze the sight of my body had lured her into. She immediately shuffles to the side. "My brain is not fully switched on right now and we're moving way too fast." She pats the sleeping platform beside where she is sitting. "Let's get some sleep. We can figure out whatever this is between us another day."

I stroll forward as I try to keep delight from showing on my face. The queen of my heart just stated we are moving too fast towards intimacy. That means she wishes to move forwards

with me but wishes to take her time. Perhaps she wishes to know me better. This thought leaves me feeling a multitude of different emotions, everything from feelings of the heart to lusty interest to awe at being considered by such a remarkable queen.

Draconian sleeping platforms have an indentation in the middle. It is the place that houses our tail. Without it sleep would be uncomfortable. Since my bed was designed to accommodate whatever queen chose me, the indentation is off to the side. I lay down on my back and stare at the ceiling.

Since neither of us talks, the situation begins to feel awkward. I begin to think of honest compliments but there are so many to choose from that I can hardly decide from among them. When I open my mouth to speak, I realize she is snoring so softly that I can barely hear, even with my enhanced old blood senses.

I relax and smile that she is comfortable enough with me to fall asleep so easily. One would have thought she would issue warnings about staying on my side of the sleeping platform. It is clear that she trusts our kind because of her past history.

I have longed for a queen of my own and knew that if that were to happen for an old blood warrior like me, I would have to strive to distinguish myself, work harder to lure a queen and provide more luxurious accommodations than other warriors. Old bloods have always had to work harder, longer and settle for less than our comelier brethren. We are not considered a feast for the eyes.

I saw this queen and grew to want her more with each passing day, but never thought for an instant that she might give me a chance to woo her. I know most human queens prefer a one-to-

one bond, but I would be well pleased to be the first chosen for Queen Electra's harem.

The minute I think this, my inner dragon whispers from the back of my mind. *What if we were her only mate?*

The more I think upon this idea of it just being the two of us snuggled together on my massive sleeping platform, the more my covetous dragon heart wishes for it.

It is in this moment my glorious queen rolls over in her sleep and presses herself against my side. Her soft, warm form is everything to me. Her potent womanly scent fills my nostrils, and it floods my senses. My mating scent releases before I can stop it and my cock strains the seam of my unders. I have never had the scent of a queen so close or felt one against my scales this way.

I am not foolish enough to think that just because I want her, she will be mine. Nor am I bereft of the knowledge of right and wrong. Therefore, I am aware the choice of whether to take one male or many is for the queen to make. Queens command and warriors obey, after all.

The more I turn the situation over in my mind, the clearer it becomes that I only have one true course of action, which is to prove myself to be the best from among all her potential suitors. I will be more attentive, anticipate her every need and provide the luxury a queen of her status deserves. I will put my hardened body between her fair form and danger at every turn. Perhaps it will be enough to garner her favor.

I grab my com device and wrap one massive wing around my precious queen. She feels so good under my wing. Speaking softly so as not to wake her, I arrange for food to be delivered around the time our day cycle begins.

Tomorrow we are scheduled to arrive at Onello. I want my queen to be well rested and nourished when she meets with Queen Caroline. Though I know not what they plan to discuss, I know it is something of great importance.

FORTUNE FAVORS THE BOLD

Electra

I wake draped across the hottest warrior on the ship, who also happens to be my very own protector. My cheek is pressed to his massive chest. I lift my head and look down his gorgeous body, noticing the painfully large bulge in his unders. When I tilt my head up to look into his eyes, he's laid back on one arm with an extremely pleased expression on his face.

“Good morning, my queen. Did you sleep well?”

I scramble off the top of him, only to realize I had one leg slung carelessly over his. I rake one hand through my hair and yawn. “Yes. It was the best sleep of my life.”

He responds almost shyly, “I am pleased that you enjoy my bed.”

He's using the human word for sleeping platform, probably as some social nicety that I can't quite grasp. I sit up straight even though what I want to do is roll over and go back to sleep. “I'm not sure if it was your bed, the luxurious bed linens or the company, but I slept like the dead.”

He rolls to his feet and stands by the bed looking down at me. “I like to think it was the warrior you insisted upon pressing your body against, but I suppose it could be all three.”

I can't help but smile. “Sorry to intrude upon your personal space. At least you have a sense of humor about it.”

His head tilts to the side and his expression shutters. “You did not intrude. I invited you.” Stepping back, he gestures to the corner of the room. “If you would like to bathe, I have a tub. If not, there is a cleansing unit behind the door to your right.”

“The tub is sorely tempting but I'm afraid if I get in, I won't want to get out again.”

“In that case, I will use the tub and retrieve fresh clothing from your chambers.”

I shake my head. “Not necessary. I'll just shove my unders into the refresher and get dressed in my room. It will save you the trouble.”

His face falls and I feel off kilter all of the sudden with him.

I rush to smooth over any hurt feelings because he's doing his best to be a good host. “Thanks for the offer. Humans have a saying that it's the thought that counts.”

“You are welcome. You will find a wide assortment of female clothing in the wall unit beside the cleanser. If you see anything at all that you like, it would please me for you to claim it.”

I give him a quick smile and head for the cleaning room, thinking we must be the two most socially awkward people on this ship. I step into his cleanser and wait for the mist to envelop me before grabbing cleansing foam and lathering up my body and hair. This beats my particle cleansing unit when

it comes to relaxing. I take my time and try to organize my thoughts.

I slept with a male, one on one. I'd never even done that in times of war. I slept exclusively with the other women, with warriors standing guard around the room with their backs to the wall, like they are prone to do. Occasionally, we'd all sleep on a shuttle together, but not lying together like I did with Relic last night.

It was shocking how easy simply saying yes was when he offered me an alternative sleeping area. After spending a night in a real suite, I'm reluctant to go back to my tomb. Now that he's pointed out that it's a memorial to the war that we fought against the Garoth, I can't unsee it in my own mind. I can not only see the difference, but I can also feel it as well.

When the drying cycle finishes, I step out only to realize I forgot to stuff the unders that I use for pajamas into the cleansing unit. I had intended to clean them in order to have something clean to wear to my quarters so I could get dressed for the day.

I reluctantly open the compartment beside the cleansing unit and marvel at how large and stuffed with clothing it is. Relic is clearly a chronic overachiever. I can tell because he's squirreled away gowns in every conceivable style. There are delicate ones that look like lacy pink confections, blood red gowns made of velvet, and beautiful silk ones in jewel tones. I'd dearly love to try them all on just for the fun of it. However, I have zero time and energy to dedicate to self-indulgent whims of the moment.

My hand catches onto something that feels like leather, and I pull the garment out. It is a gown in name only. The bustier appears to be made of smooth, butter soft black leather. The

rest of the dress is made of a thick black fabric that feels luxurious to the touch. When I hold it up to my body, I realize it reaches almost to the floor but has slits that run up all four sides, presumably for easy movement. Rolled inside are a pair of pants made from the same leather as the bustier. I realize when I shake them out that a tiny pair of panties falls out, hitting a pair of dark colored boots resting on the floor, just inside the compartment.

I smile that Relic is so thorough when it comes to pleasing his prospective queen. I haven't worn panties in over two thousand years. Granted, I spent most of it in stasis, but in my mind it still counts.

I make short work of getting dressed and turn back and forth to look at the outfit in the reflective metal of the wall. It looks like something a late twentieth century action star might have worn, and I like it. The boots are flat and stretch comfortably around my calves.

When I search around for a brush, I find nothing. Sitting on the counter is a large case. When I open the lid, I realize it is designed to house sets of gemstone jewelry. They are organized into page-like containers that display each set laid out flat. As I flip through the container, I realize there must be at least five or six different sets, in different colors. Still no brush.

When I go to put it back, I notice another case has magically appeared in the same exact spot where this one sat. Curious, I lift it up and watch in fascination as another case pops up. Opening the cabinet below I see he has four more loaded into the chute of some kind of spring-loaded contraption. I can't get my head around the fact that this man is so focused upon

finding a mate that he's engaged in this kind of obsessive next level preparation.

I flick open the new case and find that it is filled with container after container of black cabochon cut gemstones that have red webbing running through them. One set in particular catches my eye. It's sleek and not fussy like some of the other pieces. I pull the clear front panel off and take out the necklace. It's heavy and cold in my hand.

When I snap it around my neck, it's only to see how it looks. I can't actually wear it because it doesn't belong to me. It belongs to the woman destined to share Relic's bed, his future mate. My mind wanders for a moment as I try to imagine what kind of women might choose Relic.

Something unexpected and ugly twists in my gut when I think of another woman wearing these jewels that fit my tastes so well and were chosen with care by my protector. I'm shocked when I realize that hot writhing mess twisting and twining in my stomach is good old fashioned jealousy.

My hand slaps down onto the container again and I pull out the other pieces. On goes two bracelets that feel more like wrist shields. I slip an absurd number of rings onto the fingers of both hands and decide to forgo the earrings altogether. When I go to put the case right again, I see a long belt studded with the same gemstone. My shaking hands open that case. Once I see that it's a belt designed to hitch about someone's waist, leaving each end dangling almost down to the knees, I become greedy and snatch that out as well.

This is the outfit I was always meant to wear, and Relic did tell me he'd be pleased for me to claim what I like. I quickly set the room back to rights and run my fingers through my now dry hair before going out into the main sitting room.

Relic is fussing with food on the table, rearranging dishes I suppose to their best advantage. He turns when he sees me shuffling forward and stops in his tracks. His eyes slide all the way down my body and back up again before his shocked expression morphs into one of genuine delight.

“It pleases me to finally see you in clothing equal to your beauty, my queen.”

He gestures to one of the floating chairs and I lurch forward to sit because I am famished. Glancing up at his smiling face as we cross paths, I quip, “You’re a bad influence on me, old blood. I’ve plundered all the lovely sundries you’ve hoarded for your future mate and taken the best for myself this day.” I’ve spent so much time around Draconians that I sometimes slip into speaking like them.

He chuckles and pours me the juice I normally take with my morning meal. “So, you’ve turned pirate, have you? It is pirates who plunder, after all.”

I watch in fascination as he pulls up a seat right beside me, instead of sitting across from me as is customary. He nudges food onto my plate and brings a piece of dolma to my lips.

Recognizing this as one of the ways Draconian males lure their mates, I ask, “What, pray tell, are you doing? We’re supposed to be taking things slow.”

His face lights up. “I am. However, I have a hungry queen that needs feeding. It’s difficult to know I am under consideration and not wish to put forth my best effort at wooing you.”

I nibble a bit of the dolma he’s still holding near my lips. “You’re obsessed with luring a mate. It makes me wonder if just any mate will do.”

His expression crumples and his hand drops. I didn't mean to take the wind out of his sails, so I grab his hand and bring the dolma back up so I can take another bite. Only, I make the bite extra aggressive. As intended, he smiles. Relic has never seen me be playful because I don't normally allow myself any real levity.

"I was infatuated with you before you woke, for you were beautiful and brave. It was spending time with you and becoming your partner in crime that made me dream of being chosen by you."

I swallow the dolma before responding, "If the war against the Garothians taught me anything, it's that you have to break all the rules if you want to win."

Understanding flickers in his eyes a moment before he leans forward and kisses me. This is so wildly out of character for a Draconian male that I can't process what's happening until he pulls back.

The expression on my face must clue him in that a kiss was the last thing I expected to happen in this situation.

When my fingers come up to touch my still tingling lips he looks mortified. "Ah, I see you were merely explaining why rule breaking is acceptable to you, not encouraging me to break the rules to demonstrate my interest in becoming your mate."

At a loss for words, I grab the front of his uniform and pull him back down for another kiss. This time, I'm all in. When he ghosts his lips over mine, I kiss him right back, slipping one hand up his chest and around the back of his neck.

Relic takes full advantage of the situation by slipping his tongue into my mouth to rub against mine. This kiss is the

most amazing thing that's ever happened in my world and I don't want it to ever end. I don't know how long our tongues tangle but when he pulls back, we're both breathless and can't keep our hands off each other. His fingers drift over my freshly kissed lips and my hand caresses his cheek. He turns to place a kiss on my palm, and I melt inside.

I realize at some point the door has been chiming. Suddenly, it slides open, three members of my clade stroll into the room, and they take up their normal places along the walls. I raise one eyebrow at Relic, and he shrugs. "You are never to be without guards. That was my first order upon being given command of this vessel."

I pick up a bit of fruit and bring it to his lips. "I don't think we need guards when it's just the two of us."

He allows me to feed him and sighs. "Perhaps not, but as I am no longer in command of this ship, you will need to issue that order yourself."

When we've fed each other our fill, I announce, "I'd like privacy to discuss something of utmost importance with my protector."

The guards reluctantly leave us, and I know all the way down to my bones that they are holed up right outside my door.

When we are alone, Relic asks, "Is this conversation going to be related to the meeting you have scheduled with Queen Caroline?"

I nod and slide my hands down his chest. "Yes, it is. However, I feel you should know what's going to happen first."

"I am honored, my queen."

Getting right to the point I state, "Earth will become totally uninhabitable in six months. There are several million people

still living there that will need to be evacuated.”

Relic jolts forward in his seat. “I remember you saying that Earth was out of time, and have spent a considerable amount of time pondering what you meant by that.”

“When we were first taken, several of the younger children cried to go home. Some even had parents. One of our feeders told us that Earth was now a smoldering rock with no life forms crawling on the surface. Naturally, no one believed him.”

Swallowing thickly, I continue, “He showed us a deep space image of Earth. It was black and had streaks of red splotched across the surface. I can still remember the wailing of dozens of voices when they realized everyone we had ever known was dead.”

“Are you certain the footage wasn’t fabricated to trick children into believing they could never return home?”

I feel like I’m going to throw up, but I push out the rest of my story. “Once the rebellion started, I searched the Garothian database and verified it was true. One hundred and ninety-seven days after we were abducted, every volcano on Earth erupted at the same time. Even as a child, I’d heard stories of tectonic instability around the world. Of course, the Garothians had no idea why it happened, as they just captured images of it on their long-range scanners. They normally wouldn’t have still been within viewing range, but they were raiding other planets along the way for biological samples of predatory animals. They loved to mix alien DNA with that of lower life forms to see what popped out of the vat.”

His brows crease into an expression of deep skepticism. “Such a thing does not seem scientifically possible.”

“I can promise you that it will happen. During my timeline millions of people died. Now that I have protected the Draconian timeline from contamination, those people don’t have to die.”

He responds worriedly, “I wish to save them as well. Yet, I must caution you. Every time you use your knowledge of the future to change events in the past you gamble that your change will be beneficial rather than disastrous.”

I kneel in front of him and take his hands. “Do you have any idea how tempting it was to try to stow away on that Garothian vessel and try to ensure the Vithacans never got a foothold on Dracon Prime? Think of all the little ones they reaped in the shell. I wanted to do that so badly, it hurt.”

His expression turns alarmed, “Doing such would have saved lives but none who now have families would have met their mates. Their hatchlings would never have been born. Our warriors would not have had the knowledge to eradicate the Vithacan parasites from Earth and dozens of other worlds. It would have cost billions of lives to save the millions that were lost.”

I grip his hands tighter. “That’s exactly why I protected the Draconian timeline. I’m not going about this like a mad scientist bent on experimenting with space time. I’m simply trying to ensure better outcomes and save lives if and when I can.”

“Where you lead, I will follow, my queen. However, we must be vigilant and always error on the side of caution when meddling in the lives of so many people.”

Coming to my feet, I sit beside him again. “I intend to ask Queen Caroline to marshal all the resources at our disposal to evacuate the last remaining inhabitants of Earth.”

“What if she will not believe your words?”

A chill creeps up my spine as I admit one of my darkest secrets. “I downloaded the entire Garothian database, including the information on Earth’s destruction. I’ve got it on a data crystal, stored under triple locks for safety. No one can know about that wealth of information.”

His eyes went big. “Of course not. If it were to fall into the wrong hands the potential for abuse would be unimaginable.”

My shoulders relaxed. “The bottom line is, I’m in charge of protecting Draconians wherever they might be in the universe. That is my sworn duty and one I take seriously. Just because I am the last standing guardian of Dracon Prime does not mean that I will forsake my own people in their time of need.”

He dips his head respectfully, “Of course not, my queen. Your wish is my command.”

Normally, when Draconians say that it irks me. I didn’t fight a brutal war and lose every single person I loved just for them to become servants to humans instead. However, when Relic murmurs those words, it seems more like a vow to give himself to my cause instead of simply submitting for the sake of being humble.

A ship-wide announcement blares over the coms. “We are now in orbit around Onello. Crew who are not on active duty are permitted to head down to the planet.”

Relic’s head twists around to look at me again. “You chose your commander well, my queen.”

My hands come up to rest on his chest and I gaze into his eyes. “Nalic is a fine warrior. I chose every male on this ship for a reason. They are all skilled, honorable males that can be trusted in the heat of battle.”

I slid my hands up to rest lightly on each side of his neck. “But the worthiest warrior of all, I kept at my side. You’re clever in ways the others aren’t and can shift into not one but two battle forms. You’re breathtaking, no matter which form you take.”

A gentle smile tugs at his mouth. “This feels like a moment for stealing kisses from my hard-working queen.”

I give him a quick kiss on the lips. “Later. Now, we have a meeting to get to.”

Instead of being peeved, he seems pleased.

FORCING THE ISSUE

Relic

Walking into Queen Caroline's royal chamber with Slayor in tow, I can't help but feel as though we have been in battle mode all this time. Queen Electra's personal space is made of burnished metal, with carved reliefs of battles long past. It is utilitarian, sparsely furnished and designed to drive home the serious nature of ruling over others.

Queen Caroline's chamber is light, airy and has a dozen floor-to-ceiling windows that allow the sun to shine through. The upper arch of each window is made of cut crystals that fracture the sunlight streaming through, creating a dancing bubble of light against the dark tile floor.

These two queens are nothing alike. Where my queen is taciturn and serious, Queen Caroline is bright, cheerful, and chatty. If my life were on the line, I'd chose my own queen over this lighthearted one a thousand times over.

This is not to say that Queen Caroline is not to be revered. She is the one who saved our people from the Vithacan parasites and created a safe haven for us when we had none. She will always remain dear to our hearts, but I have to wonder if my queen would not serve us better in times of war.

Even when she is sitting at the large round table with the high council of Onello, Queen Electra stands out as somber. I can tell the others try her patience with their chatter, for her eyes find mine and I can see her frustration rising. She is introduced to them one by one. When she meets the two young Draconian queens who have come of age and now sit on the council, my queen's eyes light up for the first time with true joy.

Slayor stalks around the table, trying to look menacing but the queens are too enamored with meeting a real dragon to be afraid. To be honest, he is not of a size of his ancestors, and he is roaming freely in their meeting room.

Instead of being avoidant, they smooth their hands over his scales, scratch him behind the ear and try to feed him morsels of food as though he were a pet. After a while, they appear to have him eating out of their hands.

Still, knowing Slayor the way I do, I can't help but worry that this is some trick of his to lure them into a false sense of security before eating them. Therefore, I keep a close watch on him, even as I guard my queen. I know from sparring with him just how lethal he can be. It is strange to me how much he sleeps. It feels as though if there is no enemy to kill, sparring to be had or food worth eating, he sees no point in staying awake. My queen insists that if there is open air for him to fly around, he will stay up for endless cycles. I would have to see that to believe it.

When the introductions are out of the way, my queen immediately rises to her feet. The others are taken aback when she takes control of the meeting, politely but firmly.

"I asked to meet with you here today to issue a call to duty for every Draconian vessel in this sector of space."

Jerking her chin in my direction, I walk over to a com panel and insert a copy of the footage captured by the Garoth all those solars ago. She will reveal this information only if it becomes necessary to gain their cooperation.

“In exactly one hundred and seventy-six days Earth will be unsuitable for any form of life. There are millions still living in the bio-domes that need rescue. My ship can carry a little over a hundred thousand refugees and make the trip one way in fourteen days. I’ve calculated the strength of your fleet and if we jump into action immediately and work continuously, we can rescue them all before the planet becomes a black cinder orbiting the sun.”

I expect Queen Caroline to be the one to speak up, but it is Borak’s mate who speaks. “My name is Julia Watson. I used to command Earth’s military. What you are saying is not out of the realm of possibility, but the leaders of Earth are going to need more than just your word to abandon our world.”

“I have footage by my Garothian abductors that shows what is about to happen.”

My queen hits play on her com device and we watch the destruction of Earth. It is time-lapsed footage that spans a period of months. First there is a huge solar flare and then another shortly thereafter that destroys the Earth’s ozone layer. Then what looks like splotches of bright orange that can only be multiple volcanic eruptions. Eventually the color fades into blackness with only streams of lava flowing over the surface of the planet.

My queen speaks again. “It’s unlikely that the solar flares caused tectonic instability, but I believe there are reports by Earth Gov of an increase in earthquakes over the last few

years. Maybe it was the double punch of the solar flares and something going on below the surface.”

Everyone is too shocked to react, so my queen takes advantage of the void to press her point. “I know Onello cannot accommodate so many refugees, but I have been in contact with other worlds in your Intergalactic Council of Planets. Most of the member worlds report they can accept refugees, but they are still calculating how many. I intend to make Onello a staging area where we drop off refugees and member worlds pick them up.”

Mathadar speaks up, “The queens of Earth must be given a choice in where they go.”

Before he can finish speaking, my queen cuts him off. “With all due respect, no, they don’t. I’m not letting anything get in the way of saving as many lives as possible. There will be no time for bowing, scraping, and catering to the whims of millions of different women. The priority is getting them off that damn dying world, providing minimal care and then getting them somewhere safe. After everyone is settled off world, we can worry about moving them around.”

Another one of the queens rises, and by looking at her uniform I know exactly who she is. “I’m General Hope and I am the one in charge of Onello’s fleet. You can’t give orders to the fleet without our approval.”

My queen folds her arms over her chest, her eyes flashing in defiance. “We are definitely not doing whatever this is,” she says, waving a hand before her. “If I have to go through you to save the remaining population of Earth, I will.”

Queen Caroline’s exasperated voice sounds off, “What in the world does that even mean?”

My queen stands firm. “It means that I am the authority on all things Draconian. When I issue orders to the fleet, I guarantee you they will obey. I told you the moment you woke me that I am the guardian of our people and that I would kill anyone who stood against me when lives were at stake.”

It is Mathadar who says what we are all thinking. “Queen Electra is saying she will invoke the right of conquest and kill any queen who gets in her way.”

Every being in this room knows no one can stand against my queen in battle and hope to survive. A chorus of angry female voices fill the room. The warriors stand stoically by, waiting for the queens to resolve their differences so we can embark on the mission to save the queens of Earth.

When it becomes clear that the queens are not going to calm down on their own and my own queen is growing ever more irritated with their unnecessary chaos, I step forward to salvage what I can from this miscommunication.

“What my queen means to say is she is a goddess among queens. Naturally, her authority is divine. No warrior would disobey a direct order from her. Queen Electra’s words may seem harsh, but she is desperate to save the vulnerable queens of Earth. We respectfully request your unconditional assistance in this matter.”

The harsh tone of Mathadar’s takes me by surprise. “You now think yourself fit to speak for a living goddess, old blood?”

Meric moves forward. “It sounded to me like he was merely rephrasing her request in a way that might be better understood by this group. It’s a shame such a distinguished warrior is forced to reiterate her words in terms that stroke our collective egos in order to save the lives vulnerable queens.”

Queen Stacy comes to her mate's side to speak her piece. "Meric is right. We are in the wrong to put our pride and ego above saving our people. Relic and Electra are on point regarding this issue. No Draconian alive will go against their own goddess, and we're foolish if we think even for a second that they would. Queen Electra is a venerated longstanding member of their society. Compared to her, we're all newcomers."

Queen Julia raises her stern voice in support. "I agree. Being a military person myself, I can attest to how annoying it is when bureaucrats interfere with what should be a simple military exercise." Looking from one queen to another, she adds wryly, "Though I admit I never thought I'd be one of those bureaucrats."

Queen Caroline reluctantly acquiesces, "I offer our fleet in service of your noble cause. Those of us remaining on the planet will work together to create a proper staging area."

My queen nods, clearly relieved. "My intention is to take only a skeleton crew on each run to Earth. It will enable us to carry more women and give you more hands to build the staging area."

Hope finally jumps on board. "I'll work with you on a scaled down crew for the fleet."

Queen Stacy grips Meric's arm tighter. "Meric and I will work on ensuring medical facilities are expanded to provide proper medical screenings and emergent care." This makes sense since she is a healer.

Queen Julia, our one time general of Earth's military, steps up as well. "Unless I am needed elsewhere, I will work with other member worlds on numbers and timelines for accepting

queens, because let's face it, most of the ones left behind are women." Queen Julia is, as always, correct.

And we all know her words to be true, so there is no push back from anyone. I step back against the wall and watch as the queens work together to see to their own. I have never been prouder of my new queen or the new world we are creating here in Exion space. I can tell the other males standing guard over their own queens feel the same way.

DANGER AROUND EVERY CORNER

Electra

*W*e're on our third trip back to Earth. Unfortunately, word has gotten out about the evacuation, and it has pulled every two-bit hustler in the solar system out of the woodwork. We've had a total of seven Draconian vessels attacked in the last couple of months. One sustained heavy damage before reinforcements arrived. Today Relic and I are on the bridge dealing with yet another threat.

Nalic reports from the security station, "We have three Karaix raiders approaching from the rear. They're closing in fast and will have us surrounded in three microns."

I learned about their people in the neural download. They're a vicious feline species with no real home world. They were refused inclusion into the Intergalactic Council of Planets because of their history of preying on innocent cargo and transport vessels. A woman by the name of Betsie Brown gave a comprehensive report of her abduction by the Karaix when she was rescued by a Draconian trader. Her treatment at their hands had been barbaric. There was no way in hell I was allowing them to steal the hundred and fifty thousand women and children aboard my ship.

Relic speaks to our navigational officer, “Evasive maneuvers, Braxon.”

He turns to Captain Nalic, who had vacated the command chair for us. “Captain, transfer ninety percent of our shielding to the rear of the ship.”

I speak to our communications officer, “Try to raise them on the com, Echo.”

The entire bridge listens to the noises our com unit makes as it reaches out to the three enemy vessels. Finally, Echo reports, “They’re not accepting our hails, my queen.”

I harden my heart to these interlopers. “Keep trying, Echo. I want to speak to their leader.”

Shooting Nalix a hard look, I command, “Pull out our plasma cannons. The second they get within firing range aim for the ship in the middle.”

The leader of any multi-ship formation was highly likely to use the other ships to flank his own. Therefore, targeting the lead ship might shake them out enough for them to break off pursuit long enough for us to regroup.

Relic murmured, “It is unfortunate that the Karaix are the only species capable of matching our speed.”

I can tell by the deep, dark tone of his voice that he’s in his secondary battle form. My shiny new boyfriend isn’t wrong about that, but this ship has a few surprises up her sleeve that might just get us through this situation.

I turn to look at his rugged face. His stark features, bulky frame and huge horns make him look like carnage on a leash. He’s been flat out refusing to wear a shirt the last few weeks. I suspect it’s because I can’t keep my eyes off him when he’s bare chested. I must be totally warped because in addition to

the miles and miles of muscles on display, his elongated fangs and claws trip all the right switches for me. I cross my legs, realizing that my panties are drenched. I was never this physically turned on by Meric.

Relic's nostrils flare, and a lopsided smile slides onto his face. "It is hard to focus on the battle when you scent of arousal, my queen."

I'm equal parts mortified that he let those words slip out of his mouth with a smokey exhale and thrilled that he can tell when I'm aroused by him. He's right about this not being the time though.

I clear my throat and announce, "They may be able to keep up with our speed but I've never seen a ship yet that could handle the force of our plasma cannons."

Nalic speaks, his voice tense, "The Karaix are coming into range. Target acquired."

I come to my feet. "Drop shields and fire weapons."

The view screen lights up with the plasma blast. A micron later, Nalic reports, "Target has been eliminated, my queen."

A piece of my soul is crushed at the thought of killing a ship full of people. No matter that it was necessary to preserve our own lives, it still feels wrong. I swallow thickly. "Are the other two ships still in pursuit?"

"Yes, they have accelerated, and they will be within weapons range in two microns."

I drop back down into my seat, determined to do what is necessary to protect my crew and the women fleeing Earth. "Fire at will the moment they're in range."

Suddenly, Relic's warm hand covers mine. I look down at the arm of my command chair and see his hand flex around mine.

My eyes lift to his and I find the kind of understanding born of love, respect and admiration. These are tough times, and he knows command decisions are never easy or guilt free, but showing weakness in front of the crew is inappropriate because it sparks doubt in their mind about the course we are forced to take. I turn my hand in his and we lock fingers. It fortifies me for what is to come.

This old blood warrior at my side is becoming so dear to me, an indispensable part of my life. Together we watch the screen. When the two remaining enemy vessels come into firing range they speed off in opposite directions, utilizing a twirling maneuver that makes them difficult to target.

Nalic complains, "I can't get a lock on either ship."

Echo speaks up, "I'm getting a response to my hails. They're asking us to stop firing at them."

Relic murmurs, "It could be a trick, my queen."

"Hold your fire, Nalic." Glancing back to Echo, I command, "Open a com channel, put it on the main viewing screen."

The upper torso of an alien with feline features shimmers into view. He's wearing normal clothing instead of a uniform. He has such strong cat-like features that it takes me by surprise. Betsie Brown had described them as creatures that looked like they had lion or lynx DNA. This one looks like a house cat in humanoid form. His face is a little flatter than a cat's, but his eyes, nose and whiskers are clear indicators of his feline heritage. His fur even has stripes like a mackerel grey tabby.

I speak first as an effort to control the negotiation. "My name is Queen Electra and I speak for all Draconians. Why are you

pursuing our vessel today?”

The cat alien’s fur slicks back, much like a house cat when they are being submissive. “My name is Menoix and I am the captain of this vessel. We wish to negotiate for brides.”

I rise from my seat, irritated by his attempt at deception. “Draconians have encountered your kind before. You are not a breed compatible with humans. Therefore, the word bride was a poor choice of words on your part.”

He rubs the side of one hand over his head, and his ear flicks. It seems like a self-soothing gesture of some kind. “Our home world had several breeds. We are not all genetically the same, or even similar. Our breed was subjugated and forced into servitude by the larger and more aggressive breeds. Since our sun went supernova and destroyed our planet, we have managed to gain our freedom. In order to remain free of servitude, we negotiate for what we need, rather than attack.”

“If your intentions were pure, why did you not respond to our attempts to initiate communication?”

“The leader of our armada was convinced you would not negotiate with our kind. His intention was to surround your ship and then intimidate you into allowing us access to the females. Many of us feared he would escalate the conflict to the point of attacking your vessel. I objected to his tactics but was overruled.”

Before I can respond, he admits, “You destroyed his vessel, so I thought I might attempt formal communication.”

I have to admit that Menoix seems honest. There are no nervous ticks, slyness or indications he is lying to me. This is a complication we don’t need right now but as long as he’s presenting no threat, having a couple of ships accompanying

us with a vested interest in helping protect our vessel seems like too much of an advantage to pass up.

I ask curiously, “Why didn’t your leader think we would speak with him directly?”

His large eyes have vertical slits and are green, like mine. He blinks and his shoulders sag as if his next admission is defeating. “I’m afraid the conduct of our large breed brethren has tainted our reputation in this sector of space. People fear us, refuse to trade with us and will sometimes attack our vessels without provocation.”

“The Draconians do not sell or trade in females,” Relic states flatly.

Menoix’s ears go flat against his head. “This we already know. We have little in the way of credits and trade items, but we would make kind and loyal partners for females without a home world.” He gestures between me and himself. “This lack of a home world is something we have in common with human women.”

“I see.” As I mull over their request, Menoix continues speaking.

“We wish only to meet and interact with females who might be interested in our kind. I have heard it said that human females are partial to felines. We have seen many holo vids of them interacting with felines on your home world and wish the opportunity to present ourselves as potential mates.”

I make a snap decision that I hope I do not live to regret. “We will accept five males from each ship. You must submit yourselves to inspection by our healers. If we determine you are biologically compatible, you will be allowed to meet with whatever women wish to see you. I also wish to speak with

you at length about your people, so we can better understand your culture and what kind of future these women can expect with your people. Do you agree to my terms?”

A bright smile lights up his face and his whiskers twitch in a way that suggests happiness. “Yes, we accept your generous terms, and I look forward to meeting you in person, Queen Electra.”

The second the screen goes blank, Relic asks, “Are you certain this is a wise decision, my queen?”

“No, I’m not, but his kind are a dangerous pain in the ass in this sector of space. I want to gather intel and Menoix seems to be in a mood to share information. Since they are willing to travel with us, we aren’t losing time by engaging with them.”

Relic states, “You see this as a long-term benefit to our kind, safety wise?”

I dip my head in agreement, like Draconians are wont to do. “There are several benefits. One being two extra ships to help protect our cargo. I doubt Menoix would turn on us if there is any hope of establishing a treaty with us. It could not only lead to brides but trade and even protection from our fleet. He has too much riding on this to turn on us.”

Relic smiles at me. “And we have no right to deny females the right to inspect males who wish to mate with them.”

“I had never considered that piece,” I admit ruefully.

Which serves as a gentle reminder of how differently our perspectives are when it comes to women.

FELINES AND HUMAN QUEENS

Relic

*M*y queen and I decide to speak with Menoix over dinner in our dining hall while our healers inspect the other felines' physiology. He arrived on time with nine other males. They were all grey but of various sizes. Some had stripes. A few of them were plain grey. They were each distinctive in their own way, with different facial features and hair tufts. Their clothing varied wildly, almost as though it was chosen to communicate personality traits. Several were wearing armor of different types, with ornamental weapons strapped all over their bodies. Two were dressed in hats with large brims and one carried a whip on his belt. The rest wore brightly colored silk clothing, dull grey to match their fur and one carried an old fashion sketch pad and had a box on his belt for carrying drawing implements. They were a curious mix, but agreeable with our onboarding process.

Menoix arrived wearing a grey silk jumpsuit that matched his fur and reminded me of our unders. His greeting was cordial, polite even. We took the newcomers on a short tour of our vessel and then separated Menoix from the group. Thus far, his behavior has been within normal parameters. The healers lead

the rest of his group away and we continue to the dining hall. Our ships always have floating tables laden with food in the back of the room and we serve ourselves. Since this is the way with most space-faring folk, our guest follows along behind us, selecting the foods he finds most appealing.

My queen and I have our own table, set up in the front of the room and slightly away from the other tables. It gives us an opportunity to speak privately while we dine. Menoix joins us after filling his plate with mostly protein and a few pieces of fruit.

I speak first, “I hope you found some foods that were to your liking.”

“It would impossible not to find something to delight my palate. I have never seen so many different types of meat presented at one meal.”

My queen responds politely, “I asked the cooks to provide a protein heavy dinner because I was under the assumption that felines were almost pure carnivores. Was I mistaken in that assumption?”

He grins as though he is absolutely delighted to speak with her. “Absolutely not. We require large amounts of fresh meat to maintain our health. Unlike lower feline life forms, our kind enjoy a myriad of extras such as berries, root vegetables and gourds. We prefer our meat and roots all cooked, of course.”

Queen Electra gestures to his beverage, which appears to be a simple hydration fluid. “I noticed you chose a non-alcoholic beverage and no dessert.”

Menoix responds pleasantly, “We are one of the few species that do not tolerate spirits. Although we have taste receptors for sour, bitter, salty, fat and savory we are the only mammals

I am aware of that lack taste receptors for sweetness. Therefore, we rarely indulge in desserts and such.”

She says, “Well, human women love sweets, particularly chocolate.”

I chime in, “And sim-caff. Never run out of sim-caff.”

He takes out a pad and makes notes of our words. His elongated claws gently tap against the screen. He stows the small electronic tablet back on his belt and looks from one to the other of us. “I thank you for that information. Would it be possible to establish trade negotiations with your people?”

I speak up, “Draconians only establish treaties with species who respect their queens.”

Menoix responds carefully. “Although our people have no formal hierarchy that travels along bloodlines, we consider all breeding females and females of breeding age to be queens. We defer strongly to our elders, particularly elder females. Each of our ships has an elder council that we seek out for advice. However, we co-exist peacefully, mostly as equals.”

My queen interjects smoothly, “My protector means to say we only trade with other species that treat their women with respect. Since you just said everyone is considered equal among your people, we assume that means human women as well, no matter if she is fertile or not.”

His tone becomes more serious, “Since we currently have extremely few women, and do not cast judgement upon females because of fertility issues, I would say we would treat any who decide to bond with us with an extremely high level of respect. Among our kind females have the right to select another male if the one she is with does not meet her

expectations. Needless to say, we are careful with our relationships for that reason, among others.”

Queen Electra lays down her eating utensil and takes a sip of her beverage before continuing the conversation. “Do you mind if I ask why there are so few females among your kind?”

Menoix freezes in his seat and his tail whips back and forth in what seems like an angry outlet of energy. “On our home world there has always been five different feline species. We were the only sentient life on a lush planet, rich with wild game.”

“Please, tell me more about your people, Menoix. It’s true humans are fascinated by felines. I can see us becoming strong allies.”

Our guest perks up. “The Karaix were the largest and most aggressive of the five species. They loved to make war and could interpret even a simple greeting as an insult worth fighting over. Because of their size and strength they almost never lost a fight. They often ripped their opponent to pieces before the eyes of their loved ones. They were hated, avoided and the other species were often forced into unsteady alliances in an effort to protect ourselves from their never-ending aggression.”

He is visibly upset and stops to take a deep breath before continuing. “There was another feline species, the Jaguri, with slick brown fur that kept to the rivers of our home world. The Jaguri ate mostly fish. The Marlugi claimed the high ground, lurked in the trees and only came down to hunt. There were also the Coonri, who were extremely ornamental, had tufts of hair on the tips of their ears and thought themselves more well-bred and mannerly than the rest of us.”

My queen speaks up, “You came from an amazingly diverse home world.”

Menoix smiles at her compliment and continues, “And lastly there was my species. We had different subcategories of colored fur. Some were pure black, others were the color of sunshine or white as the snow and some few had stripes, like me.”

He preens a bit as he adds, “We Agorians have longer hair than most of the other species. The Coonri always hated our long silky hair, for it was the one attribute they most wished for and a trait that never emerged in their long evolution.” His chest puffs with pride as he speaks.

I ask, “Did all the different species survive the devastation of your home world?”

He brushes the side of his head with the back of his hand, like he did during our video communication of the bridge. It confirms to my mind that this is a self-soothing gesture, particularly when he speaks. “We lost the Jaguri and the Marlugi. The Coonri fought with them and took most of their ships to escape just before the sun went supernova. We didn’t know until it was too late to save them. I often wonder what would have happened if we had known. Would my ancestors have left behind some of our own to make room for them?”

“That would have been an impossible decision for any being to make,” my queen states soothingly.

“I have seen an occasional Coonri and of course the Karaix, but nary a glimpse of the other two species. It is a shame because they were strong and worthy of life.”

My clever queen circles back around the original question. “So, most of your females were lost during the destruction of

your world?”

Menoix shakes his head, and his tail begins to whip back and forth again. “Right after our world ended the Karaix attacked the other species repeatedly until they either escaped to another sector of space with their lines intact or the Karaix were in possession of all their females.”

There is a thoughtful pause before he continues speaking, “Since that time, we have searched for brides compatible for breeding. Let us say they are few and far between. We have reviewed the information you released about human physiology. Although I cannot speak for the other species from my home world, I believe my species, the Agorians, are genetically compatible with humans. We are hopeful human females will find us to their liking.”

I ask pointedly, “Have you secured a new home world? How do you plan to keep your new human brides safe?”

He freezes again, in what I am beginning to believe might be a startle response of some sort.

“We have never been welcomed on another home world. Therefore, we continue to be a space-faring species, at least for now.”

My queen’s head tilts to the side. “If you were offered full citizenship by a member world, what do you have to offer?”

Clearly taking her suggestion seriously, Menoix responds carefully, “We are stronger than we look, good fighters and we work well in groups. We have a natural propensity to finish any job we start, are tenacious and are extremely detail oriented. Among the two ships flanking you today, we have healers, engineers and hunters the like of which you have

never seen. We could easily provide enough wild game to support a whole colony if we were given the chance.”

Queen Electra offers, “If our personal alliance proves to be productive, I would be happy to recommend your people to member worlds for settlement. Could your people be self-sustaining if given a small continent of your own?”

“Absolutely. If the weather is temperate and there is water and wild game, we can easily take care of our own.”

I comment casually, intent on eliciting more information from him. “You seem very certain of yourself.”

He sits up straighter and goes a little more in depth about their capabilities. “We have been self-sufficient for many generations in space. We’ve made do by stopping on the most austere, unclaimed planets and scavenging for food, water, and other resources.”

I let my curiosity get the better of me and ask, “Why have you not claimed such a planet for your own if you can survive in such harsh environments?”

He frowns. “Just because we can hunt and extract resources from these planets does not mean we can survive the harsh conditions on a long-term basis. Also, some of these planets are in regions of space frequented by pirates and raiders. I daresay, we’d not last long on our own in such places.”

I listen while my queen chats amiably with Menoix. Sometime later his crew makes their way into the dining room. They no sooner get their plates and sit down than they are swarmed by the human females. Truth be told, I saw them eyeing Menoix while he spoke with my queen but did not know what to make of their curiosity.

The women surround each male and begin bombarding them with questions. These queens are sly. They start with an innocuous line of questioning that grows ever more personal until they are requesting information about mating compatibility. Before long the women are smoothing the newcomers fur and running their fingers along their whiskers.

If the females had not asked about mating, I might suspect from their behavior they had merely transferred their affection for their tiny feline Earth companions onto the Agorians.

It is strange to me that where the humans were guarded and almost fearful of my kind, the Agorians get the most enthusiastic welcome imaginable. I am surprised that the two feline warriors who are loaded down with weapons are swarmed by small, delicate human queens. Even though they carry an air of danger and are more rugged than the others, our queens care not about the potential danger or generalized scruffiness. They care only about learning more about their species. These queens are brazen in their admiration for the furry beings. The felines seem delighted by this turn of events.

Though my queen is guarded, I can tell she is also pleased by how well received the Agorians are by her female counterparts. It seems as though we have made a valuable ally this day and ones who might be interested in assisting us in transporting refugees from Earth.

Menoix not only notices, but he also keeps sneaking glances over his shoulder at all the fawning attention his crew is getting.

Finally, my queen decides she has learned enough for one day. "Perhaps you would like to mix and mingle with these women as well, Menoix. I'm certain you have answers to all their questions."

A TASTE OF LOVE

Electra

*W*e leave the Agorians to Captain Nalic and take a much-deserved respite. My mind wanders for a moment, and I find myself worried about why my dragon has been sleeping so much lately. I'd like to think Slayor has been intentionally ignoring me because he doesn't want to be a distraction or take time away from my human mating rituals, as he calls them. But I worry that something deeper is going on, like he's becoming depressed and despondent. I've never known him to sleep so much. But then again, normally we stay in stasis, wake up long enough to kick some ass and stretch our legs before diving back into stasis. Things have changed dramatically and maybe he's not as resilient as I always thought.

My internal worrying is interrupted when our coms go off. We quickly realize it is the chief healer of our medical unit, reporting there is nearly a one hundred percent reproductive match between the Agorians and humans. With a few minor adjustments such as the removal of the spines on their penis and a mix of hormones that trigger the woman's egg to recognize and accept Agorian sperm, breeding is not only

possible but highly probable. I quickly scroll through the report but Relic beats me to the information I'm looking for.

He murmurs as he reads his three-dimensional holographic report, "Our healers removed the spines on the sex organs of the nine Agorians that were examined today. The males all opted for the procedure, hoping it would make them more desirable for mating to the humans aboard this vessel."

We both know that our technology heals wounds completely, therefore they will be looking to play if they can find a willing partner. I respond quickly, "Alert Nalic not to allow Menoix to have any alone time with any of the women until he's had the procedure."

His eyes lift to mine, and he smirks.

I throw up my hands. "Yes, I'm micro-managing a cat alien's cock. I'm not about to have any strange mishaps because of poor communication."

He looks back down and begins tapping out the message to Nalic, but I can still see a ghost of a smile on his face. Relic has a wonderful sense of humor. I honestly like this male so damn much. Everyone else makes me feel like a legacy. Relic makes me feel like a woman. There is no overstating how important that is for me right now.

We've spent the past weeks stealing kisses, sharing secrets and snuggling. I feel a warmth and closeness with Relic that I've never felt with another person in my entire life. I'm as close to him as I am Slayor, only in a romantic context, rather than one of friendship.

I don't know what is that I'm waiting for but it's past time for us to take things to the next level. I'm comfortable with him but I realize some small part of my mind has been waiting for

the other shoe to drop, for me to discover some deep dark secret that spoils what we have together. It must be some holdover from my past where things had a habit of going to shit in an instant and always when I least expected it.

We enter his quarters and he asks, “Do you wish to use the mister or the tub?”

“Why don’t you take the tub?”

“Your will be done, my queen. Enjoy your misting,” he responds chipperly.

It’s nice that he’s being accommodating but I’ve got no intention of getting into the mister. I roam around, looking at his hoard items while he goes back and gets into the artificial lagoon with a waterfall that he calls a tub. Once I hear the water splashing, I begin pulling off my clothing and walk back to bathe with him.

His eyes light up when he sees me walk up wearing only the tiny human panties that he’s fabricated bunches of for his future mate, who at this point looks like might be me. The clothing-making bots must hate him, or they would if they weren’t bots, because human panties must be a pain to make compared to other articles of clothing.

Relic sits at the far end of the spacious artificial lagoon with his arm spread out along the lip of the tub. He’s all gleaming scales and sharp fangs tonight. In other words, he’s sexy as hell.

An expression of desperate longing jumps onto his face. “What do you do, my queen?”

I stand with my legs apart and hands on my hips. His eyes track from my face to my lips to my naked breasts all the way down my stomach to where the tiny scrap of fabric covers my

pussy. His fangs dent his bottom lip and he swallows thickly as he stares at my long legs.

In answer to this question I state, "I've come to claim what's mine."

His head snaps up to look me in the eyes. "You wish me to be yours for the night, to do with what you will?" He states that breathlessly, like it's a long-standing fantasy of his.

I hook one thumb into the side of my panties and reply, "All you have to do is say yes and then the sky's the limit."

His gaze drops down to my mound and back up to my eyes and his tongue slides out to lick his bottom lip. "If you wish for me, I am yours. Tell me more of these sky limits, for I have no wish to trespass with you this sleep cycle."

I smile at his naivete. "It is just a human saying that means you can do anything you like with me tonight."

His eyes light up. "Would that such a thing were possible. Warriors do not rule over their queens in such a way. Even an old blood like myself knows this."

I can see the longing in his dark eyes. He thinks I'm teasing him. I lock my thumbs around each side of the panties and pull them off. I've never taken pleasure with a male before, but I'm no innocent blushing virgin either. I've fought every creature imaginable and killed countless beings. I've cleverly led my enemies into traps and watched as my Draconian brethren finished them off, and even given the command to blow up whole ships full of those who wished us harm.

What I've never done is displayed myself naked before a male, much less one I wished to make my own. I swallow thickly as I realize this is the direction this is going. Draconian males are like a dog with a bone when they find their one. If I climb on

his cock tonight, he's going to want more. That should scare the hell out of me, but it doesn't faze me.

I'm tired of being alone and can't bring myself to go back to that tomb of a room I once thought was my whole world. Not when Relic is offering to share his luxurious accommodations, his bed, and his life with me. I snatch up all my courage and put one foot in front of the other.

The expression on his face is a combination of awe, admiration, lust and dare I say, love. This man thinks I'm the greatest thing in the 'verse and I'm honestly starting to think he's onto something because he's becoming the most important person in my life as well.

I reach up and gather my hair into my fingers and twist it gently into a knot on the top of my head. It stays whatever way I put it with no messing about because of the thin wires running through each strand.

His eyes lift to watch me fix my hair, just as my eyes drift downwards to look over the massive slabs of pure muscle covering his upper torso. This man is built like a bodybuilder on steroids. I know it's just the way of his kind but seeing him all laid out for me, eager and adoring, ramps up my arousal.

When I stop at the edge of the lagoon, he moves forward slightly and beckons me to him with one hand. "Come sit in my lap, my queen, and tell me again how there are no limits to what I wish to do with you this night."

His voice is deep and decadent. A hint of smoke drifts from his nostrils, a reminder that not only is he part dragon, but his dragon rides closer to the surface than most because of his old blood heritage.

He once explained that old bloods are throwbacks. An anomaly that happened more and more often as their queens bred them to be ever more humanoid, but sometimes their genetics fought back with a vengeance. That's how I know any children I conceive by him will bear little evidence of human heritage. Something about that pleases me and makes me want to have his child so we can both be sheltered under his wing for all times. The mere thought of it makes my heart thump with excitement as hot desire races through my veins.

“You smell sweet, my queen. Good enough to lick for endless microns.”

His words make my nipples harden and my clit pulse with a heartbeat of its own. When he holds out one hand I grasp it, just like I did the first night he brought me to his quarters. He helps me over the edge of the tub and down the steps into the pool. The gentle tinkle of the thin waterfall sounds fill my ears.

The warm water laps at my legs as I step into the pool and ease myself into his lap. I drape one leg over each side of his body and scoot forward until his hard, dripping cock is flush with my pussy lips. He makes a growl deep in the back of his throat that sounds feral and needy.

“Tell me what you wish of me, my queen.”

“You can start by cleaning my body.” I let that command hang in the air for a moment to see how he responds.

His face lights up, “It would be my pleasure, for I have dreamed of touching your precious body.”

I relax into the moment and watch as he gathers foaming soap from one of several dispensers situated around the perimeter of the pool. He rubs his massive hands together and then gently

begins with my neck and works his way down in long smooth strokes. His gentle movements light up every nerve in my body. By the time his hand slides between my legs, I'm practically squirming with pleasure.

I stammer, "You're really good at cleaning queens. Are you sure you're not a breeder?"

He chokes out a laugh. "You make the human jest with me, do you not?" He doesn't wait for me to answer. "I could never be mistaken for such, for breeders were bred to be sleek and colorful. Us old bloods are seen as beasts, and even among our own kind, we are considered an eye sore."

My hands come up to cover his mouth. I can feel his large fangs against my palms. "You will never say such things again. From now on, you will say that old blood warriors are the smartest, strongest and most resilient of all Draconian warriors. Your scales are thicker, and your fangs are longer because you are closer kin to full blood dragons than any other being alive in the 'verse. You'll remind others that you have not one but two battle forms and can scent danger on the wind. Old blood males are perfection, and you most of all."

I can tell by the look on his face that he is eating up my words, just as he should. "Not many see our worth. It pleases me more than I have words to say that you do, my queen."

His hand is still between my legs, so I rub my clit against his fingers and murmur, "I see your worth and long for your touch."

"Then you shall have as much of me as you can stand this night, my queen."

His head dips down and he ghosts his lips over mine. Just before we go full frontal, there is a second where we are

looking into each other's eyes and breathing the same air.

It's the most intimate moment of my life. That's when I realize he can't fully release his mating scent because he's on a fertility blocker so there is only a tiny hint of his mating scent perfuming the air. It's the most decadent, alluring scent I've ever encountered.

I rub my nose up one side of his face and down the other in a semblance of a Draconian kiss and whisper, "You smell amazing."

He gives me an indulgent smile. "If it weren't for the blocker, my mating scent would be potent enough to drive other males from this side of the ship."

I cup his face in my hands. "And let me guess, it would drive all the women wild with desire."

He dipped his head. "Old bloods are virile males with potent mating scents. I believe it is one reason our kind were driven from the city center on Onello and forced to live deep in the mountains."

I rub my thumb across his bottom lip and remind him, "That can't be the only reason. The women on Onello make all the decisions and they'd never deprive themselves of something so delightful."

He pulls me more firmly against his cock and mutters, "Perhaps you are right about that, my queen."

Then his lips smash against mine in a desperate kiss that makes me want to rub against his cock until I come. At some point, I realize he's pressing me closer and grinding his cock against me because he also wants to make me come.

I want to come around his cock with him inside me, but I don't have time to ask because I'm so ramped up that I come with

his rubbing partly because of all the memories of the times he's held me and kissed me over the last few months. It takes me a minute to catch my breath and then I give him another quick kiss.

"I wanted to come again. With you inside me."

He makes a happy little noise and scoops me up, dips me in the water a few times to get the little remaining soap off my shoulders and back, and then holds me in his arms. Literally for the first time in my life, I feel all small and feminine. And I don't hate it.

He stands on a decorative grate on the floor and warm air shoots up to dry our bodies. Of course, the parts that are touching don't get all the way dry, but I don't mind. All I want to do is keep staring up into his dark admiring eyes. When he carries me to his bed, it feels like the first time, although I've been sleeping with him for months and we've cuddled and kissed our asses off.

I'm so primed to experience how he feels inside me that I can hardly wait. He tosses me onto his sleeping platform and climbs over me. "Tell me more about what I may and may not do."

I reach up and wrap my hand around the back of his neck and drag him down for a kiss. "If you're not inside me soon, I might trade you in for a more accommodating warrior."

He chuckles because he's now feeling pretty sure of himself. Relic knows how I feel about him and that none of the other males interest me. "Human queens are small. I must make certain you are ready for my oversized endowment."

I bury my face in his neck as he runs his fingers through my slit. "Your queenly treasures are so soft and delicate. Your

scent makes my mouth water and drives my inner dragon crazy with need.”

Before I can stop him, he kisses and nips his way down my body and tongue fucks me with wild abandon. After I come again, writhing on his tongue, I bring one hand down to try and cover my clit. He brushes it aside. I grab his horns and hang on as he licks and fingers me open enough take his cock. I’m a trembling mess by the time he pulls back and rolls us to put me on top.

I stop him by shaking one horn so hard his head jostles back and forth. When he looks up, I shake my head. “I want you on top. Just start slow and once I’m used to having you inside me, you can go faster.”

His expression is shocked. I suspect it’s because Draconian queens always mount their males. They’re bigger and rougher, so the experience can be humbling, I’m sure.

“Come on, handsome,” I encourage him. “You can do this.”

He nods, swallowing thickly. “I just never thought to have a beautiful, submissive queen beneath me. It is the thing dreams are made of for warriors such as me.”

He eagerly notches his cock at my entrance and when he hesitates, I wrap my legs around his waist and tug him down. He’s a smart man; instead of one hard thrust, he enters me by rocking his hips. He uses a breathtaking series of thrusts, each slightly deeper than the one before. I didn’t expect it to be so uncomfortable or for the slow burn of taking him so deeply. Finally, when he bottoms out, I release the breath I’ve been holding in the whole time.

He rubs his nose up one side of my face and down the other before whispering, “You feel so soft and warm around my

cock.”

Our gazes lock and, in that moment, I swear that just for a second, I can see my whole line stretching forward to infinity in his dark eyes. What’s more, I think he sees it too, because his head drifts down to claim a kiss that seals me to him for all time.

When he finally begins moving those glorious hips of his, I know real pleasure for the first time in my life. It’s the perfect counterpoint to all the pain and misery I’ve suffered in my lifetime. We lock ourselves into a rhythm that seems both primitive and ethereal. Our bodies writhe together pushing us to our fall.

I come first. It feels like a blaze of white-hot molten pleasure thundering through every part of my body. The moment my body locks around Relic’s cock, he begins chasing his own release, fucking me harder, rougher and deeper, making my own orgasm last for what seems like endless hours. He suddenly rams himself deep inside me and howls out his pleasure as he floods my body with his warm seed. We hang together in the moment, staring into each other’s eyes in wonder. The pleasure eventually slows to a faint throb that’s almost painful in its perfection. Somewhere along the way I lost my sense of time and place, knowing only that I was safe under Relic’s massive body.

Exhausted, I vaguely sense Relic moving off the top of me, wrapping his wing around and pressing me to his side. His body is warm, and his scales are smooth. I tumble off to sleep with images of having him always at my side, in my bed and in my body, teasing me with endless pleasure.

MY HEART BEATS FOR BUT ONE QUEEN

Relic

I wake with my glorious queen still nestled close to my side and the knowledge that I have proven my sexual prowess to a beautiful human queen. Though I am not officially selected, I am one step closer after a full-on mating. My mind fills with fantasies of being chosen for Queen Electra's harem.

My wings have a sharp talon at the end of each joint and rather large ones sitting on the top of each wrist. Thankfully, I had the insight to begin locking blunted metal tips onto each talon some weeks ago, for they would surely rend the flesh of my precious queen had I not done so. I wish no harm to come to this fire-haired queen who has so generously shared her body and affections with me. Queens are pernicious and often go through a multitude of males before selecting the first for their harem.

Though I have never known a queen's touch, I spent a considerable amount of time in the simulators our people created for us to practice servicing our queens. Gratitude fills my soul that our elders thought to create those rudimentary training modules. The queens in the programs were nothing more than three-dimensional beams of energy but the program

taught me how keep my talons away from soft human flesh, to touch without hurting, and how to kiss without injuring a queen with my fangs. Most importantly the program taught me how to thrust into a queen. If I gave myself the freedom to thrust as I wished, there is a very good chance I might have broken her pelvic bones.

The sweet sounds she made and the way she clutched at me and smoothed her hands over my scales verified that I had mastered the art of attending to a queen's needs. I loved the way her pupils dilated when she came, as though I had given her such overwhelming pleasure, she knew not what to do with herself.

Since the ship monitors the vitals of every person on this ship, the males of her clade will know I spent time between her legs last night. So far, they have not shown disrespect or disfavor toward me. That might change if they believe I just inadvertently received a status upgrade by being bedded by such a prestigious queen. Though I care not for such things, I know others do. There are plenty of males not of her blood who wished not only to catch her eye but to be the first male chosen for her bed. I stare up at the ceiling, realizing there will be many disappointed males this day.

I cannot believe that I set my sights on such a rare and beautiful queen or that she smiled on me. When we first landed on Onello, I spent many cycles gathering gemstones and precious metals, as all our people are encouraged to do. My one and only goal was to find a queen who spoke to my heart and ensure she had the very best of everything a female could want. My queen seems comfortable in my care. This is one of the very few times in my life where everything worked out according to my carefully laid plans.

My queen moves and only then do I realize she is looking up at me. “You’re awake early, Relic. What are you thinking so hard about this morning?”

I dare not lie to my new queen, so I tell her truthfully. “I am just thinking about how fortunate I am to have caught the attention of the one queen that spoke to my heart. It feels like a dream come true.”

She smiles. “Yeah, finding you feels like the dream I never knew to dream.”

I run my hand over my chest, wary of telling her the rest. “I worry how your clade will feel about your accepting a low status warrior as your first.”

Her brow drops into a slight frown. “I don’t care about status. If they don’t like us being together, they’ll have to deal. I didn’t think you cared about status. Was I wrong about that?”

I pull her closer and drop a kiss onto her lips. “I do not care about gaining status in general or the prestige of finding the favor of an original fire-haired queen. I care about you not being shunned for my old blood heritage. That and enjoying you on my sleeping platform for however long it lasts.”

Her frown drops away and she walks two fingers up my chest in a gesture surely meant to distract and arouse me. “Me being the only surviving ancient doesn’t factor into your decision at all?”

“I would have wanted you had you boarded this ship as a refugee. In truth, I might have preferred that. You would have sheltered under my wing instead of forever putting yourself in harm’s way.”

She gasps and her eyes fly open in surprise. “You don’t mean that. I know you don’t. You wouldn’t want me safe under your

wing if it meant the death of millions.”

I reluctantly admit the truth. “I would have you be none other than what you are. What I wish is that the ’verse were not filled with evildoers intent upon harming the innocent. I will give my life in an instant to protect a queen or a child. I find that I am not quite so generous with the life of the queen who holds my heart.”

Her hands come out to cup my face. “That is a sentiment I understand all too well. I wish for peace as well. If and when peace for our people finally comes, what will you do with yourself?”

I answer without hesitation, “I thought of returning to Dracon Prime in Exion space. The Naxis is wonderful and Onello was the first free colony for our people, but I wish to see the planet our kind originated on. Do you think that is a far-fetched dream for a simple old blood warrior?”

“No. I understand the need more than you know. Earth fell before I was born. I can’t really remember my mother. My earliest memories are being passed from woman to woman until I was old enough to be left alone, maybe six or seven years of age. At first, we had a school that fed us two meals a day, but that didn’t last long. My clearest memories are of scavenging around in the lower levels of the bio-domes, trying to find food, water, and a safe place to lay my head. When I was abducted and taken to the planet that became known as Dracon Prime, the natural beauty was breathtaking. Even though I was a slave and not free to explore as I wanted, that planet with all its wonders got imprinted upon me as home. I think that’s why I bonded so easily with Draconians and fought so hard to secure the planet. Even now I long to see Dracon Prime again. Perhaps one day we can see it together.”

Though I wish nothing more than to lounge on my sleeping platform with my queen for the day-cycle, we have duties to attend to. “Shall we ready ourselves for the day, my queen? I am certain Captain Nalic could use a break.”

She rises into a sitting position and stretches, inadvertently displaying her body in the most alluring way. I am unsure if I am permitted to gaze upon her naked body now that we are not intimate, so I lower my eyes and do not return my gaze until her arms drop and she pulls the covering up with a yawn. I can tell my queen is still waking up because she runs her fingers through her long copper strands and sits for a moment before answering my question. I think she is both adorable and perhaps the most dangerous human queen I have ever encountered.

Strangely enough, I like that she is a warrior, much like myself. Of course, she prefers the finer things in life, for she is a queen after all. Still, it would be foolish to underestimate her prowess in battle. Although I have not seen her in a real fight, the way she carries herself and the stories she tells of olden times leave me with very little doubt she could clear a battlefield through combat and her cleverness alone.

She moves towards the edge of the bed. “Yes, let’s get on with the day. I’m curious to find out how the Agorians are holding up after being swarmed by our women last night.”

“Since we did not have the foresight to limit the duration of their visit, I’m going to guess several were invited to stay.”

“Good. If any of the women end up leaving with an Agorian husband it will be fewer that we’re forced to transport, care for and worry about settling. As long as the women are happy, fed, clothed and have access to proper medical care, I don’t

particularly care if they go with the Agorians or come with us to the staging area on Onello.”

Sure enough, by the time we shower, get dressed and make it to the dining hall, it is filled with very satisfied-looking felines and a multitude of human queens swarming them. Two have females tucked to their side, much like my kind do when we are feeling possessive. The two females seem to be basking in the attention, as they are smiling and talking amiably with them.

Menoix rises from the grouping of females surrounding him and approaches us with an inscrutably blank expression on his face. My queen glances back at the food table longingly but dutifully turns her attention to our guest.

Knowing all too well that my ravenous queen must be fed, I excuse myself to retrieve food and drink for us, for it is my fault she expended all her energy reserves writhing on my cock last night. My cock grows hard at the memories of how we woke twice in the night to fuck, once with her on top and once with me behind her mimicking the animals of her home world. I must admit that animals on many worlds mate in this position, but humans have a word for it that involves the small furry creatures they keep for pets. They call it the position of the doggie. I enjoyed it very much.

After filling our plates with our preferred food items and grabbing drinks, I rush back to my queen with a hovering tray overflowing with nourishment. She eagerly takes the clear box filled with dolma and the sweet foods she craves. By the time I take my seat she is deep in a conversation about the Agorians

taking up residence on one of the several empty continents on Onello.

Queen Electra is negotiating as though Queen Caroline is not the ruler of that planet. I feel as though I should speak up but dare not. Although my queen has given me leave to speak my mind, contravening her wishes in public would surely be frowned upon, more so because she is negotiating with a potential new ally. Relief surges through my mind the more I listen.

“Since you have a dozen ships that can be retrofitted for military use, I suspect the governing body of Onello will be interested in making a deal with you.”

“We would make good citizens of Onello. We are extremely self-sufficient and would be willing to defend a new home world with our dying breath.”

Queen Electra leans closer to him, “There are some things you must know. The most important issue is that Draconian males are extremely protective of those they see as vulnerable. You must cull any from your ranks that can’t peacefully co-exist as well as those with any propensity towards violence toward women and children. There is only one penalty for harming either of them and that is death. Draconian society places the emphasis upon caring for those in need. They do not waste time caring for criminals, so there are no jails or prisons.”

“Among my people, if males cannot care properly for their females and children they are removed from their care. The few females on our ships expect to be treated with dignity and respect. They will leave a male in an instant if he fails in his duty to them in any way. This means things rarely escalate to the point of actual violence.”

“Heed my words, Menoix. This is the most important rule among the Draconian. They will hold your people to the same standard they hold themselves.”

“This is a steep price to pay, for there are so few of us left that we abhor the taking of any Agorian life.”

My queen looks him in the eyes and replies, “This is why you must cull hard and bring only those you trust.”

For the first time Menoix looks shaken. He rubs his clawed hand down the front of his pants and nods his head in the human way.

“I will choose well and make it known that this is the law on Onello.”

“I know you have the wisdom to see the need to maintain order and protect our most vulnerable citizens.”

“I truly do. This is, however, a large deviation from the laws we live by. What else did you wish me to know?”

My queen grabs her com device and pecks out a message. “I’ve made arrangements for you to speak with our elders. They will explain Onello’s legal structure, laws, and cultural expectations. I’m asking them to carve information out of the database to help explain our ways. For now, I’m withholding classified information. I will tell Queen Caroline that you will be approaching the ruling council requesting a treaty and possible allocation of land for settlement. Moving forward, your point of contact will be with her. I’ll send you her contact information.”

“We talked earlier about how our people will assist with the evacuation of the peoples of Earth. I will begin negotiations, even as we continue supporting the evacuation effort on Earth.

I wish Queen Caroline to see that our people are honest, hardworking, and able to follow directions.”

“It will be a pleasure to have you at our side. I’ll tell Queen Julia to factor your ships into the evacuation plan. You will need to forward me the names and contact information of your captains.”

Braxon approaches the table. Our navigational officer looks like he’s just woken up. He is well put together, but I can always tell by the lazy way our males’ horns drop when they first wake up. I shake my head and force mine to stand at attention. Draconians are the only beings whose horns rise and lower at will. It is, no doubt, a hallmark of our dragon heritage.

Before my queen can introduce Braxon to Menoix, Slayor slinks through the door. He is twice the size of even the largest Draconian warrior and usually ill-behaved around everyone except human queens. The pernicious creature prances and preens as he moves around the room, getting pets and fed by the queens who favor him the most. I shift into my secondary battle form and rush over to him before he can torment one of our guests.

I don’t make it in time, for Slayor sticks out his long neck and licks one of the Agorians. He must have liked what he tasted because he unhinges his jaws and is in the process of wrapping his mouth around the shocked Agorian’s head by the time I reach him.

I wrap one hand around his right horn and another around his huge fang and muscle his jaw all the way open. He hasn’t yet clamped on, so it is at least possible. Once the man backs away, Slayor shakes my hands off and turns to glare at me.

“I am the slayer of monsters and beasts, protector of Dracon Prime and battle partner to a true Draconian goddess. Therefore, I am entitled to have my pick of fresh meat each day. I chose the furry creature with yellow eyes. My body requires fur to function properly.”

Queen Electra’s voice sounds off from nearby. “Yeah, almost nothing you just said is true.”

Slayor preens a bit and prances over to Queen Electra. “I most definitely am a slayer of monsters and beasts.” He thumps a clawed paw against his chest. “That is why you named me Slayor, is it not?”

My queen reaches up to scratch behind his ear. “I named you that all those years ago to inspire you to be a great fighter, not because you already were one.”

Slayor shakes her hand off and rises to his full height. “Yeesss,” he hisses with a tendril of smoke coming out of his nose. “I became all that you wished me to be. Now, I wish for my reward. Give me the furry one to dine upon.”

My queen stands with her hands upon her hips and looks up at her longtime friend. “What in the world has gotten into you? You’re allowed to eat an occasional enemy in battle. Never allies or innocents. You know that, Slayor.”

He drops back onto all fours. “I never agreed to that rule. I need fresh meat to survive, Electra.”

“You want to spread your wings and fly and hunt, don’t you?” Her voice is indulgent as she steps closer and runs her hand over the scales on his neck.

“Who doesn’t,” I announce. “I’ll bet that even the Agorians would love a good hunt.”

Menoix steps closer. “I’d say yes to a nice hunt, but only if we could be certain your dragon crew member didn’t have it in his mind to eat us.”

My queen seems uncertain, but I believe Slayor is just showing off. He gets bored and is used to a world of more excitement than he’s currently getting. I’m not surprised that he’s taken to manufacturing his own entertainment.

Slayor suddenly perks up. “If I promise not eat a single one, can we stop on a world flush with game for a few days?”

Queen Electra shakes her head. “We can stop for a few hours, maybe a day, long enough to fill our larders. But then we must press on. We have to keep to our schedule as much as possible. Nothing can be allowed to slow down the evacuation.”

Slayor dips his head in agreement. “We are used to having an enemy to fight. Now, our enemy is time.”

Menoix speaks up, “Now that you have my people assisting with the evac, it should take some of the pressure off.”

“Indeed, it will. And we will need food to fill the bellies of those we rescue. So, a short hunt is in order.”

GUT INSTINCTS

Electra

S layor and Relic are down on the planet hunting along with Menoix and a mixture of Agorians from both his ships. They've been on the planet for hours, taking down one wild beast after another while our bots process and package the meat. They've been in jovial spirits, and so was I until about forty-five minutes ago. That's about the time I began to sense something strange. At first, I thought something was amiss on the ground or somewhere on the ship. I even contacted the two Agorian vessels to make certain all was well with them, but there was nothing obviously wrong.

Now, I am on the bridge, pacing as my crew scans surrounding space for danger. All is not as it should be. I can feel it in my gut.

"Echo," I say tensely, glancing at my coms officer.

I don't even have to ask if he's picking up anything on the long-range scanners.

He responds quickly, "Nothing yet, my queen. Do you mind if I ask what you expect to happen?"

My hand goes to rest on the plasma pistol at my waist as I gaze at the view screen, which is currently showing nothing but the vast emptiness of space. Something in the timeline must have changed. I can feel it in my bones. I swallow thickly and sound off a warning in my head to Slayor through our telepathic link.

'Do you sense danger, old friend?'

'Yeesss, my queen. It is so thick in the air that I can taste it.'

'What do you think it is? Where do you think it's coming from?'

'I smell stench of the Garoth in this sector of space, my queen.'

The moment he speaks the name of our age-old enemy, I realize this sick feeling of dread twisting in my stomach can be nothing other than my sixth sense telling me they are near.

Gather the others and come back now.

I turn from the view, my mind reeling with the as of yet unverified gut feeling that they are once again tracking us. I don't even have to wonder what they want with this ship that was once theirs. We have their technology, and if they are here, they will be wanting it back again.

As the seconds tick by, I become ever more certain the danger is growing. Suddenly, I know how to get the verification I need to keep from thinking I'm going insane. I take off running for my old quarters, which are on the same level as the bridge.

It feels as if I'm having a full-blown panic attack. I pick up my pace and sprint the last few yards. I'm going so fast that I slam into the door a moment before it opens. When it does, I tumble into the room. Everything looks the same at first glance.

I carefully go from tile to tile looking to see if significant parts of our history have changed since my bright idea to interfere with the timeline. I feel a bit like a cautious, scared little spider as I crawl along the walls going from one metal engraving to the next.

I choke up when I see that instead of the girls that were abducted with me being scared and gaunt in the underbelly of the ship, they're smiling and appear to be singing. Singing is what the women who took care of me did to calm me down when I was toddler. Since I explained the situation to my younger self, gave her inoculations, and vitamin boosters to keep them healthier and put her in charge of keeping everyone safe and sane, it stands to reason they had an easier time of it. And it makes a certain kind of sense that she would use the same soothing technique that was used on them to calm the others down.

Out of everyone on the ship, Relic and I are the only ones who can see when things change. I believe it might have been because of the impenetrable shielding around the room when we talked to my younger self. I've heard it said that the epicenter of changes to the timeline are mysterious places. Points where time bends in strange and unpredictable ways.

I kneel to get to the next tile and am so shocked by what I see that literally fall onto my ass as I try to process what I'm seeing. The first of our tight knit group to fall was Anna. I remember retrieving her dead body from the battlefield like it was yesterday. One of the beasts had torn open her throat. Yet on the memorial tile, it shows her being victorious and holding up the head of the beast with one hand while holding her battle sword in the other.

I quickly move to the next tile and the next. Each new tile shows that we rose to the occasion. I led us to victory over and over again. Many of the women I fought side by side with died, but it looks like at least half a dozen survived. I choke back my emotions and keep moving down the engravings. They were meant to tell a story and for once reading of our exploits is satisfying instead of just grim.

Time gets away from me as I try to work out all the details. I have to understand what happened and since there is a huge break in Draconian history in their database, this is my best chance of figuring it out. I remember when Meric came up with the idea for this historical record. It was stamped in metal to withstand the test of time and a pictorial format was selected so the languages spoken by future generations would not be a barrier to understanding Draconian history.

I remember he came up with this during a time period when he'd lost all hope of winning the war. I think deep down he wanted our story told to whoever recovered the wreckage of our lives in the distant future, never suspecting that one of us would survive. Or in my case two of us survived, Slayor and myself.

The door slides open and Relic rushes in with Slayor on his heels. "What is it, my queen? Slayor said there is a grave and ancient danger about."

I turn to him and try my best to explain. "Are you aware that our ancient overlords performed genetic experiments on your kind?"

He folds his wings neatly behind him and dips his head slightly in acknowledgement. "Yes, Draconian lines are gifted with certain psychic gifts. Some sense danger. Others have the gift of knowing and can tell what another person is feeling by

staring into their eyes. I have heard that one line can scent death, no matter the circumstance. It is said that one commander can sense his enemy's intent in battle sufficiently enough to counter his moves in real time. Other species think our gifts are nonsense or some clever ruse to make others fear us. Our elders say that is not the way of it."

"What did your elders have to say about this phenomenon?"

"They insist that our ancient ancestors were created by manipulating and combining our DNA with creatures who possessed many natural defenses and often our overlords did not fully understand the capabilities."

Slayor snorted a bitter laugh, "Your elders are correct. If the Garoth knew what they were doing, they would not have killed so many with their experiments."

I quickly explain, "Our overlords experimented on everyone, not just Draconians. Their medical treatments and modifications were extremely painful. When I was young, I believed I could sense when they were coming to take me to their lab. As I grew older, I realized that somewhere along the way I had become sensitive to their presence. Being able to sense their presence enabled me to survive. I thought that the war was behind us, but today I sense them."

"As do I, my queen," Slayor adds.

I reach out to slide my hand along his scales in an attempt to sooth him, because he alone knows how dangerous the Garoth can be. "It is because we share a psychic link."

He shakes my hand off. "I can sense things on my own as well, not just through you."

My eyebrows shot up because I did not know that. Instead of arguing the issue with him, I point out, "They're growing

closer. We need to get away from this area of space.”

Relic walks over to the com panel and begins shouting orders to the crew. Then he comes Menoix and apprises him of the situation. We turn our small armada and make a run for Onello. It’s a good call. We have reinforcements there and it’s a defensible planet. When he’s finished, he walks back over to where Slayor and I are standing.

“We are now on route to Onello. Both of the Agorian vessels are flanking our ship. We should arrive in approximately twenty-nine human hours.”

Though Relic is speaking to me, I’m frozen as the carnage of the past overwhelms me.

Slayor murmurs, “You are trembling, my queen. Do you still fear the ancient enemies we once vanquished?”

I tap a particularly troubling tile on the wall. “According to our historical record, we didn’t vanquish them entirely. We simply drove them from our sector of space.”

“That is not what I remember, my queen.” Slayor is too polite to call me a liar to my face. He’s nice like that. I take a minute to bring him up to speed.

“Remember when you were sleeping in your alcove and I interfered with the timeline, hoping to save lives and set them up for a better rebellion than we had?”

“Yeesss,” he responds as a whiff of smoke rises from his nostrils. “I awoke while you spoke to the child.”

I nod, “You heard all my best laid plans and told me that I was meddling in things I could not begin to comprehend.”

“Soiling your own timeline is exceedingly dangerous. You risk erasing yourself or worse.”

“Well, I’m still here and according to the changes in the historical record, so are a handful of the other queens.”

Slayer startles and cranes his neck to nose his way past me to look for himself. “Yeesss, look, my queen. Several of your friends survived, including Christiana and Ember.”

One claw comes out to rest on the next tile. “This one I do not know, but she has a dragon at her side.”

From the tone of his voice, I know something is up. I remember briefly looking at that tile. I turn and run my hand over it for a second before realizing it is the little girl who died early in our abduction experience. Only on the tile, she’s all grown up. Shooting Slayer a sly look I murmur, “Her name is Jolene, and she appears to have a dragon friend at her side.”

His eyes light up as he gazes at the tile. “Yeesss, a female dragon, much like me.”

We both know there were many like him, but in our timeline they all died.

“Don’t worry, once we evacuate Earth, we’ll work on finding the others.”

Relic speaks, his voice incredulous, “You think they survived to the present time?”

“It’s possible.” Gesturing back at the tiles near the end of the wall, I explain, “Look at the last few tiles.”

We move a few steps and I run my hands across one that supports my belief. “This image shows seven ships just like mine orbiting Dracon Prime. They’re dark like they’re in hibernation or in low power mode. You can tell because there are no beams of light coming from the ship to indicate the power is fully active, like in the other tiles. I orbited Dracon Prime for hundreds of years in my stasis unit. The ship was

manned by a skeleton crew who woke me only when there was a crisis.”

I move to another nearby tile. “This tile shows all our ships activated and moving in different directions away from the planet. I believe this was because they hid our ships when the Draconian queens began to show signs of open hostility. They probably didn’t know what caused it, but they were afraid our ships would be attacked and us killed in our stasis pods.”

Only then do I realize that Slayor hasn’t followed us. He’s still staring at the tile with Jolene and her female dragon. I’m not even surprised when he lifts his hand, digs his sharp talon between the mounted tiles and begins to rip it from the wall. I can feel his obsession for the only other of his kind growing exponentially in his chest. He holds the tile close to his chest and slithers away to his alcove and locks himself inside.

I try to imagine how I would feel if I thought I was the only human in a universe that had no compatible mates for me and suddenly found one single male that I could make babies with. Even though he’s closed off his mind to me, I know he’s thinking over ways to lure this female dragon to him.

“There is no guarantee the female will wish to mate with Slayor,” Relic states unhelpfully.

“You forget, she likely thinks she is the only of her kind as well. In her position, I would be grateful to find such a worthy mate. Slayor is more of a warrior than you or I will ever be. Finding this female dragon is at the top of my things-to-do list the moment we finish evacuating Earth.”

“In the meantime, we need to prepare for the Garoth.”

I nod and my mind starts grimly running through all my old and best tricks for defeating them.

“I don’t know if they are targeting this ship or if they’ve heard there is a big push to get human women off Earth. If they’re still up to their old tricks and something tells me they are, millions of innocent women would be a draw they couldn’t resist.”

“My brethren will ensure they do not get their hands on Earth’s most precious natural resource.”

I step forward and snuggle under his wing. “I’m worried that they jumped past us while our crew was hunting on that planet. I can almost feel the danger level diminishing. Either they didn’t see us or they’re headed for Earth.”

“My best guess is both, my queen.”

I take a deep breath and consider doing the one thing I didn’t want to do. “We need to share this ship’s technology with the rest of the Draconian fleet and our allies if we hope to defeat such a formidable enemy.”

“I must caution you, my queen, to think carefully about sharing advanced technology. Although we are at peace with most of the beings in this sector of space, they are not always at peace with each other.”

“You are worried they’ll use the technology to wage war against each other?”

“Of course. Most of the beings in the Naxis and Exion space are nearly equally matched. No one has weapons such as you took from the Garoth. Even two and a half thousand years ago, their technology far outmatched anything I have seen in my lifetime.”

“We’ll start by upgrading the Draconian fleet and then decide who to share the technology with after that, if anyone at all.”

“I think that is a wise choice, my queen.”

I sigh, “Only time will tell, Relic. Every life the Garoth take while I’m withholding knowledge on how to fabricate weapons to destroy them will be on my conscience.”

“Let us not assume when it comes to the Garoth. They have had two and a half thousand years to evolve. Perhaps they have learned different values. Also, you sensed them and assumed there were enough of them to pose a threat. Perhaps it was one lone survivor, going about his day.”

I nod, reluctantly forced to admit that he is correct on this issue. “Of course, you’re right. We need more intel before we begin distributing technology upgrades for outsiders.”

DROP OFF AND PICK UP

Relic

We have traded out the House of Meric aboard this vessel. Not out of malice or discontentment with their performance. Queen Electra made this decision in order to improve the Draconian fleet. We trained them on how to fabricate and install plasma cannons and reassigned them to other ships so they could train others and see to the upgrades.

My queen is determined to ensure our fleet is ready to face off with the Garoth if needs be. She has spent endless cycles recording information and sharing it with the fleet from her history fighting our most ancient enemies. My Draconian brethren are enthusiastically devouring every new piece of information she provides.

My queen has even developed several informational packets for our allies, particularly the Agorians, on how to better prepare themselves for a confrontation with the Garoth. They too were hungry for any information that might give them insight into dealing with this new enemy who is thus far unknown to them.

We are now on Onello. Our ship is busy offloading the multitude of queens we were carrying when the panic about

being caught unawares by our makers struck. We are high in Queen Caroline's tower of glass and steel looking down on the queens disembarking from shuttles.

Since the war against the infected queens was concluded in Exion space, a dozen or so gigantic warships have come to Onello to help with evacuation of Earth. As is everything to do with Draconian society, transferring and caring for the refugees is a neat and orderly progression from the shuttles to the temporary shelters erected for their use. Even as these queens enter the area, others are rested, nourished and moving on to various allied worlds who have agreed to give them sanctuary. I have never been prouder of my Draconian brethren than I am in this moment.

My queen's eyes lift from the females to Slayor, who is soaring through the air. His scales gleam in the sunlight and his wings are outstretched. It's clear at first glance that he is a pureblood dragon. He thumps his chest with one clawed fist and proclaims, "I am Slayor, protector of queens everywhere. No matter the danger, you have no need to fear for Slayor is near."

Ah, it's a jingle of sorts in the human language.

He roars and the queens below clap while a long stream of fire shoots from his mouth into the sky. None can stand against a pureblood dragon. Unlike the wild dragons our people met on the remote planet where this vessel was hidden, Slayor can speak human. Queen Electra insists he can speak three of Earth's major languages. This is likely one reason the queens are all so infatuated with him.

The shameless creature soars back and forth over the heads of the queens, who are shading their eyes from the sun to get a better look at him. Even I have to admit that he looks

impressive for his size. He roars and spits more fire. He is thoroughly enjoying his moment in sunlight.

“Hear me roar and pay heed to the words I say, for I will roast any male who mishandles a queen this day.”

Whereas our crew would have approved of the display, I can tell his behavior is annoying some of the other males here today. Our crew came to know Slayor and all his strange ways. These males only wish to continue the transition in an orderly fashion. If they were not working and the dragon was not threatening to roast them, I am certain they would have more interest in Slayor making himself the entertainment of the day. As it stands, he’s being a distraction and mucking up the process.

Before my queen can call him home using their telepathic bond I put my hand on her shoulder.

“Let him fly, my queen. This will be one of the few opportunities he gets in the coming day-cycles.”

She turns to wrap her arms around my waist, and I bring my massive wing up to wrap protectively around her.

“I’d like to say he’s cutting loose today because he’s really ramped up about the possibility of one of his kind surviving. Unfortunately, that would be a lie. He’s always this outlandish.”

I tug her closer. “Perhaps you forget who you are talking to this day, my queen. I am his sparring partner and as such, know all too well how pernicious he can be. If I didn’t have the advantages of agility, speed, and tough scales, I would be wearing his bite marks.”

My queen smiles at me. She can tell by the tone of my voice that although my words are not far from the truth, I am jesting

with her. I have grown quite fond of Slayor. He is a loyal friend to my queen and beneath all his obnoxious behavior lies a heart of pure gold.

The doors open behind us and Queen Caroline and King Mathadar enter. Naturally, my queen turns to greet them.

Queen Caroline has all her pale-yellow hair piled upon her head and is wearing a long formal gown with heavy beading and gold trim. On her head sits an elaborate crown. It marks her out as the queen in charge of ruling this world.

The difference between her and my queen couldn't be more pronounced. Queen Electra is wearing a black form suit with her black exquisitely engraved dark armor attached. Her black boots come up almost to her knees, sleek and beautiful. She wears her sword upon her back and a multitude of weapons and other necessities on her utility belt. This is full battle dress for my queen which she has worn since the day she sensed the Garoth.

My queen's dark copper hair is also pulled up into a tight circle on the top of her head so that it looks like a rudimentary crown. Every now and then there is a tiny surge of light that flickers for a brief moment before dimming again. I have long accepted that this is simply a byproduct of her hair follicles being modified to act as a neural download. It seems as though the optical filaments need to discharge energy at regular intervals to operate at optimal levels.

Queen Caroline smiles, a little unsure when faced with my formidable queen. "Greetings, Electra. Welcome back to Onello."

My queen responds politely, "Greetings, Caroline. I just met with Julia and was pleased to discover almost fifty percent of the people on Earth have been evacuated."

Queen Caroline's face lights up. "Julia is a force to be reckoned with. She convinced Earth leadership of the danger and strong-armed them into agreeing to our plan for relocation."

She gestures towards a conference table with hovering chairs innocently bobbing in place. "Please have a seat."

My queen is quick to accept her hospitality. "I arranged this meeting to discuss the relocation of the Agorians to one of the empty continents."

Queen Caroline's face falls. "I read through your proposal." Glancing from my queen to Mathadar and back again, she stammers, "I'm unsure if this is a wise decision. We have many males who have not yet been successful at luring a queen. It seems wrong to bring hundreds of thousands of alien males to our planet and have them competing for mates."

There is a tiny change in the tone of my queen's voice. "This is about the survival of an entire species, not about breeding rights."

Queen Caroline's eyes go big, but she doesn't respond.

"I vetted the Agorians myself and feel they would be an asset to Onello. They have an armada of large, well-armed ships that could be used for defense of this planet. They seem to be naturally submissive to female authority and hold elders in high esteem, like Draconians. The ones I brought with me today formed fast friendships with my crew, which tells me they are compatible with my people. There is no better fit for their species than Onello. I have found them to be trustworthy and loyal."

I do not miss the subtle jibe my queen delivers when she says *my people*. She's once again asserting her authority over all

things Draconian.

Queen Caroline sighs. “Why do I get the feeling you are going to relocate them whether I approve or not?”

My queen responds firmly, “I’m in the habit of making decisions that are in the best interest of my people, as are you. I realize this not only gives you more people to worry about ruling but it introduces the unknown variables that come with integrating a new species into the social structure of your world. You will be stuck with the decision we make here today. I would not push for this if I did not think there were genuine advantages to be had.”

Queen Caroline leans over the table and speaks more firmly, “Let me be clear about one thing. I do not like this idea one bit. However, after the women on the council got one look at the felines, I was roundly outvoted.”

Queen Electra’s shoulders sag with relief. “I’m glad they saw the wisdom in giving the Agorians a chance.”

“The minute you brought cat aliens, wisdom and good decision-making went right out the window on this issue.”

My queen smiles ruefully, “I believe one day you will thank me for the gift I bring to you this day.”

My queen has a tendency to speak more like a Draconian than a human at times. I watch as she brings her com device to her lips and calls Menoix to join us.

We come to our feet and step out to greet him when he strolls through the door. He is wearing freshly pressed civilian clothing, no weapons, and holding a box which has been tied with a bright red bow. I must admit, he looks like the least threatening male I have ever seen, which should work to his favor in this situation.

The box is clearly a token of his respect, presented in the human tradition of gifting. Menoix is smart and made good use of the information we sent him on human traditions.

He bows slightly, “Good day, Queen Caroline. I am honored to meet the ruler of Onello. Thank you for giving me an opportunity to speak with you about relocating to your beautiful home world.”

My queen interjects, “The ruling council voted this morning and your people have been accepted.”

Without missing a beat, he holds out the box he brought and purrs, “Then our meeting becomes a celebration, worthy of the gift I brought for you.”

Queen Caroline, who is used to being gifted by foreign dignitaries, accepts the gift with a plastered-on smile. I can only imagine what she has unwrapped in the past that makes her so unenthusiastic about receiving his gift.

My queen teases, “Come now, Queen Caroline, I’m sure it’s not a dead bird or mouse.”

Menoix seems taken aback. “Delicious rodents are an acceptable gift item on your world? If I had but known, I would have eagerly accommodated that tradition.”

My queen unabashedly explains, like she always does with our new ally. “Our pet felines on Earth often gifted us with small kills as a token of affection. They pretty much saw us as big hairless cats that could not hunt for ourselves.”

A grin takes up his feline face, causing his whiskers to twitch and the vertical slits of his pupils to dilate.

“I can almost see how they came to that conclusion.” His voice turns amused, “I’m not going to say I agree with them,

but I will point out that I have yet to see a human hunt for their own food.”

I can't help the chuckle that escapes for he is correct. When we hunted together, there were only Draconian warriors and Slayor. Human queens have little interest in hunting or processing foodstuffs.

Queen Caroline laughs at his not-so-subtle teasing as well. “Well, let's just open your gift and see what is considered an appropriate gift among Agorian felines.”

When she pulls off the lid a soft glow emanates from the box. It's a smooth blue orb. It's not only glowing but vibrating. Queen Caroline carefully lifts it from the box. “Oh, my goodness, what is this? It's amazing. Holding it makes me feel contented and relaxed. It's like every problem I have is a million miles away.”

Menoix hovers his hand over it for a moment and closes his eyes. His eyes slowly drift open after a micron or two and he gazes at Queen Caroline. “It is called a Lobon. They were once so plentiful on our home world that we gave them to our children to lull them asleep at night. Now, Lobons are incredibly rare.”

Queen Caroline holds the Lobon out to Menoix. “I couldn't accept such a precious heirloom of your world, especially if it lulls your little ones to sleep.”

He places his clawed hand on the front of the Lobon and gently presses it back to her. “Though there are very few left in our possession, we usually keep them in our healing center, so that all who might need them can have access. Our people wish for you have one in order to help you deal with the stress of having so many more citizens to worry about.”

Queen Caroline reluctantly pulls the gently glowing ball back and cradles it against her chest. Her eyes turn glassy with unshed tears. She murmurs, “Thank you for such a rare and unique gift. I will cherish it and make it available to our healers to use, the way your people do. Rest assured that many will experience its healing relief.”

Pleasure lights up Menoix’s face to hear his gift was received with such respect and warmth. “My people wish happiness and long life for our human and Draconian neighbors.”

“We hope you find the contentment and stability your people seek here with us on Onello. This morning, our ruling council opened three more seats on our council to be filled with your elder females. I know your people will choose queens worthy to the task of assisting us in ruling the world.”

Menoix is speechless for a long moment. His mouth falls open slightly, his ears droop and his tail stops swishing back and forth. I get the feeling he wasn’t expecting such consideration to be extended to his people.

He finally shakes off his shock long enough to respond, “I speak for my people in saying this opportunity for power sharing is both unexpected and generous of you, Queen Caroline. Words alone cannot express our gratitude.”

She responds regally, “We are honored to meet and share our world with your people, Menoix.” Turning to my queen, she smiles slightly. “I dare say your visionary words came true more quickly than either of us imagined. I thank you for bringing the Agorians to our attention, Queen Electra.”

My queen dips her head. “I’m glad you see their worth.”

King Mathadar speaks for the first time. “We have three uninhabited continents for your people to choose from.” Then

he bows again before speaking. “Would you like to survey them with me?”

We say our goodbyes and leave Menoix in the capable company of the royals.

The moment we step outside the building, I murmur quietly, “That went a lot smoother than I expected.”

My queen stops and looks at me. She shrugs with one shoulder. “Humans and felines are like magnets. They’ve always and will always be drawn to one another. I’m not surprised they hit it off.”

Just then our comms sound off. She flicks her link open and a holographic image of Nalic comes up.

“Greetings, my queen, Commander Relic. I wish to alert you that we are offloading the last of the human queens from our vessel. When the last of them are gone, we will load supplies onto our ship as well as the Agorian vessels. We should have new crew in place and be ready for lift off in four Earth hours.”

She responds crisply, “Thank you, Nalic. I know you will be an asset to your next commander.”

He dips his head. “Queen Julia has already assigned me to the Triumph. I have linked with their weapons specialist and engineering department to begin the upgrades you specified.”

“Be safe, Nalic. And thank you for your service,” my queen intones.

His voice becomes choked up at hearing her express her gratitude to him. “Serving you has been the honor of my lifetime, Queen Electra.”

The screen goes blank, and I realize this was a seminal moment for my queen. From this point moving forward, she is no longer under the protection of her clan. They have all been sent to other ships to help with the upgrades. I wrap my wing around her and murmur, “You sacrificed the joy of being among your clan to protect the lives of others. Such a noble decision deserves to be rewarded. Unfortunately, all we have to offer is more duty and danger.”

She turns to look up at me. “Maybe duty and danger are so deeply embedded in my psyche that I crave them, like other women do relaxation and sim-caffeine.”

“If so, you are much more like a Draconian warrior than even I knew.”

OFFICIAL CLAIMING

Electra

*W*e are headed back to Earth to pick up another load of women. There has been no warning sounded from Earth or any other planet regarding an attack or visit by unknown aliens. Therefore, I must conclude that the Garoth have not made first contact with the people of this sector.

I would be doubting myself, except Slayor sensed them as well. Even now he and Relic are busy burning off energy in the sparring room. Slayor is giving him and whoever else wants to hear it a run down on all the vicious beasts we have fought previously.

I've been spending my time trying to figure out where the Garoth went after we drove them from Exion space. I have inspected the tiles a dozen times. I swear it looks like they were being forced into the northernmost territories. I cross reference everything we know of that area of space but am forced to wait for the ship's computer to sift through vast amounts of information to get to it.

With nothing else to occupy my thoughts I let my attention turn to my relationship with Relic. There is no longer any doubt in my mind that he is my one. There is a new tradition

among the humans to claim their old blood warriors in meaningful ways.

I have no wish for Relic to feel slighted, for he is well worthy of some thought and consideration going into his official mating request. Since it seems that everything to do with me is steeped in tradition, I decide that nothing short of a public display will do. I want everyone to see how adored and respected he is by his queen.

I have been working on adapting my insignia to include a reference to the old blood heritage he is so proud of. I keep rearranging the image components on my tablet, hoping to find something I like.

What I'm doing is, in essence, creating a new clan. Since I can't be part of two clans, I will have to either forgo the House of Meric or they will have to officially join my new clan. I'm torn because I think they would join my clan out of respect and affection for me. However, I don't want to erase Meric any more than has already been done.

It seems there is no easy way to move forward without letting go of parts of my old life. The thing is, since I have no intention of going back into stasis, I only have this one life to live. And others have expectations of me. I'm reminded of that fact every time I pass through the huge common room and see the altar to me and my friends that the crew erected before I was awakened from stasis. They still use it even now.

They call me a goddess and that's hard to cope with sometimes. I feel compelled to live up to the mythology they've created around me, not because I'm proud and think I deserve their devotion, but because they deserve to keep whatever spiritual beliefs they've created. Their beliefs stretch back over two thousand years and I have no right to take that

away from them simply because it makes me feel uncomfortable.

Therefore, I snatch up all my courage and make the final decision to move forward with Relic at my side. I load the image I've chosen onto the ship's computer and order new uniforms for Relic and myself. I add an order for a new insignia to place on my battle armor and his.

Sitting down at the console in my old room, I peck out an invitation to the command crew. Then I make out another open-ended invitation for the rest of crew to trade themselves out for my gathering tonight. I let them know that I have an important announcement to make. Part of me wants to sort this out before another crisis pops up.

I use my particle cleanser and pad around in my unders until the delivery bot arrives with the items I ordered. I put on my new uniform and then my battle armor with my new insignia and put on a long coat over it. I want to show it to Relic before I wear it openly for others to see. Tucking the box under my arm, I go to our shared quarters.

I expect him to be finished sparring and enjoying a nice long mist or soak in the lagoon. Instead, I find that he has already cleansed and is quickly pulling on his unders. His head snaps up when I walk into the room.

“There you are, my queen. I was just coming to find you to discover what is this announcement you wish to make. Is it related to Garoth? Have you sensed them again?”

I walk over and sit the box on the bed. He is so busy paying attention to me that he simply grabs the uniform I give him and begins pulling it on.

I explain, "It's nothing bad. For once I have good news to deliver."

He relaxes as he pulls the uniform around his massive waist. "I suppose you wish to officially welcome the Agorians. This will go a long way towards our people accepting them."

I run my hand down his wildly muscular chest and down to cover his cock. He sucks in a gasp when I slide my hand up and cup his balls.

I'm only half teasing when I say, "Some days I think Draconians are too suspicious for their own good and other days I think none of us are suspicious enough."

His eyes linger where my palm is now resting against his stiff cock. My hand drops away, and as he tries to figure out the new patch from upside down, I reach into the box with one hand and unclick my insignia with the other. When I click the new one in place, the sound catches his notice. He stares at the round metal disk for so long I begin to wonder if I made it plain enough that I am claiming him.

Finally, he speaks, "You added the symbol I was given upon completing my rite of passage, the one that marks my uniform and all my equipment." His hand comes up to trace over the large, brutal horns that now decorate the top of our new clan symbol. "The horns are twisted like mine."

His eyes lift to mine and I tell him in no uncertain terms what I want. "I would like you for my takadon. The gathering tonight is to introduce you as my one true mate, if you will have me."

He places his hands on my hips and pulls me closer. When the front of my armor is touching his equally hard chest, he begins to shift. First his scales harden into his primary battle form. He still looks more human than dragon. I love all his forms, but

his fighting forms are the best. He stops long enough to rub his nose up one side of my face and down the other in the sweetest Draconian kiss he's ever given me.

Then he stares down at me while he shifts into his secondary battle form. His body bulks up, making him appear even more primitive. His claws expand. That long tail of his becomes longer and thicker. Hand-sized spikes emerge. His scales become even harder and more durable. In this state, I doubt he even needs armor. His face contorts into an expression that is more dragon than human.

I'm awestruck by how easily he shifts forms.

Words slip out of his mouth along with a tendril of smoke. "It would be our honor to be your chosen one, spawn your hatchlings and shelter you under our wing for all times."

I used to be confused by the fact that Relic refers to the dragon part of his mind as his inner dragon and sometimes acts like it's a whole other being but at other times insists it's all him inside his head. I think the fact is it's all him but the part he calls his inner dragon is the well-developed dragon instincts he carries with him.

I smile, pleased that he is accepting my claim. "Thank you, Relic. I'll work hard to make sure you don't regret becoming my mate."

His hands tighten on my hips, and he states, "There will be no regrets, my Queen. We are a good match. Does this mean we will breed?"

He's looking at me so intently that I stop to consider it for a moment. I had planned to put that off for a few years. However, if losing Meric and most of my friends has taught me anything it's that no one is ever truly safe and that the

future is far from guaranteed. The only thing we can be certain of is right now, the moment we're living in. I do want to have children with Relic, and I feel compelled to do it before some Garoth snatches my life away. Our people have lived for generations on these ships, having and raising offspring as they traveled, traded, hunted and fought off their enemies. I'm no better than my Draconian brothers.

I slowly nod. "Yes, no matter the danger or the consequences, I want to have children with you. I don't know what the future holds but I'll regret it every single day of my life if I don't at least once hold our little ones and look them in the face before I die."

"You are not going to die, for you now have an old blood takadon to protect you."

"Do you want to stop by the healing unit and have your suppressor removed?"

He cranes his neck and hisses, "Not necessary."

He freezes in place, and it seems like every muscle in his body is flexing at the same time. He brings up one arm and stares at it as he flexes his gigantic bicep. A small bead rises on his skin and when he flexes harder, I realize he's forcing something from his body. His other hand comes up and he uses his thumb to punch under one scale and a round nanobot pops out, along with a stream of dark green liquid. Blood! It's blood seeping from his arm. I grab the bed covering and hold it against the hole.

"I can't believe you just did that." I should be angry, but I'm more worried than anything.

He responds with a smoky whisper, "The suppressor has always been unpleasant. I can yet feel it coursing through my

veins.”

I ask, “Why didn’t you tell the healers it was unpleasant?”

He lowers his voice. “I did tell them, but it was before I became the protector of an ancient fire-haired goddess. They paid me no mind and told me it would go away.”

This makes me angry on his behalf. He pushes my hand and the cloth away. The thumb-sized scale just above the bend of his arm is now closed again. I tap it to be certain.

Relic preens a bit. “For the whole of my life, I did not think my line had been encoded with any gifts like some of the other lines. Then I began to spar with Slayor. He is skilled and has difficulty moderating his enthusiasm for blood sport. Over the last few days, I have realized I heal very quickly from battle wounds, when I did not before. The only difference is now, for the first time in my life, I am sexually active and have a queen to protect. It must have brought this trait to the surface.”

I examine the spot more closely and even try to lift the scale with my fingernail. It is locked down tight.

“That’s a handy gift to have, my takadon.”

He pulls me closer again and just stares at me for a long moment. “I cannot believe I have been chosen by the queen of my heart, not just for companionship but for mating. This is by far the best day of my life, my queen. Especially now that I am permitted to forgo the suppressor.”

I reach up and tug him down for a kiss. Just before our lips meet, I whisper, “For the first time in a very long time I feel like I have a future and hope of a family, rather than just endless duty.”

He responds quietly, “Thank you for choosing me as your one and only mate. I feel stronger now that I have a mate to

protect.”

I tug the uniform up and he slides his arms into the sleeves. “I’m glad to hear you are so resilient. That means I can stop going easy on you in bed.”

Relic laughs, his voice deep and delightful. “You surely jest, my queen. You are yet small and fragile compared to me.”

I shove him back onto the bed and climb into his lap. “Smaller? Yes. Fragile? No, far from it.”

Our lips meet and I feel the warmth of his body even through my armor. I’m tempted to take it off and luxuriate in his arms, but I find that I’d much rather honor him in public now and make love to him later. Still, we get lost enjoying the moment for way longer than we should. When our kiss ends I slide back out of his lap and give him a few moments to set himself to rights.

“We’ll pick back up with that the moment we get back.”

He stops long enough to click his new clan insignia into place on his chest plate. He slides his sword onto his back as well as the other various weapons and equipment he normally wears.

“It is just as well, my queen. Now that the suppressor is out of my system, my body will rapidly metabolize the enzyme the suppressor used to ensure my reproductive system did not activate. I guarantee that within the next three to four human hours, my mating scent will be potent enough to drive my male counterparts away for an arc in every direction.”

An arc is a Draconian unit of measurement that I understand well since I grew up with their kind. What I don’t understand is why he keeps using the human term hours to denote time like I don’t understand the concept of a micron.

This is his special day, so I do not bring it up to him. It will remain a curiosity to be explored on some other day than the one celebrating our joining.

I'm absolutely dumbfounded when we step outside the door to our quarters and the corridors are lined down each side with warriors, each with their sword raised into the air to form a long arch, like in some old Earth holo-vid.

Slayor is standing at the other end of the corridor practically vibrating with happiness. "Come, my queen. Bring your takadon and claim him before your altar."

I feel like palm smacking my forehead. I hadn't bothered to intentionally close off my mind to him because I didn't sense him. I assumed he was preoccupied with other endeavors. Truth be told I'm not used to my attention-seeking friend being so quiet in our psychic link that I literally forget he is there.

Relic and I step out into the corridor and as we walk past, I hear the warriors dropping the tip of their swords down to touch the ground in a reverse arc. I am not familiar with this ritual.

When we get to the end of the hall Slayor dips his head respectfully.

"You have chosen well, my queen." My longtime friend turns to Relic and thumps him in the chest with his tail. "You have lured the best of queens. Treat her well and walk strong and proud, my friend."

We murmur our thanks for his kind words and follow him towards the common room. I feel Relic slip his wing around the back of my shoulders so I move closer to him. It feels warm and comfortable under his wing.

As we approach I hear the thump of primitive drums and voices raised in song. Slayor moves among the men and women assembled there as though he were a royal king bestowing his blessing upon all that cross his path. It's clear they all love him.

My mouth falls open when I see three large round burning bowls running down the center of the room with fires blazing in them. There are huge white flags with my new clan symbol imprinted upon them running down each wall. Once Slayor realized I had new a clan symbol it would have only taken him a moment to order the bots to make the flags.

They have pulled out a couple of large chairs for us to sit on and there is a table laden with food. I see several more tables with food in the back of the room. I step out from under Relic's wing and turn full circle around the room.

All the times we held feasts to celebrate our many victories in battle come to mind. More so when warriors come with large trays of meat to roast over the fire. Of course, we celebrated outdoors on Dracon Prime. In order to do the same on a spaceship they have force fields erected around each large bowl to contain the fire. I can tell because of the blue shimmering light around each one. I begin to tear up as I turn to my oldest and dearest friend. "You've created a banquet of old, Slayor."

He tosses his head proudly. "There were males in the fabrication room who saw your new clan symbol being created by the bots. They came to me with questions. I could see what you did with the design adding the sign that marks his belonging to your own. When I focused in on your thoughts, I heard you ask him to be your takadon."

"You were eavesdropping," I point out.

“No admonishing allowed, for I am the sacred bringer of knowledge from our goddess. I announced to all that you had taken your protector to heart.”

“I didn’t expect such a lavish celebration.”

Slayor preens. “It is not every day that a goddess takes a mortal mate. Of course, your faithful wish to honor this day. I taught them the ways of old, so you might be honored in a way that reminds you of home.”

I walk up to him and hug him as best I can. “Thank you, Slayor. This is a wonderful mating gift.”

“I know. I’m great at picking gifts. I know you better than anyone,” he brags, while giving Relic the side eye.

I should be offended by that comment, but I’ve never expected my old friend to be other than what he is. Plus, there is a grain of truth in what he says. Instead of arguing the point with him, I simply say, “Yes, you know me well. It’s too bad we don’t have time to stop on one of the nearby worlds where you could stretch your wings and make the announcement for me from the air.”

Slayor’s eyes light up because he loves making open air announcements. He did it all the time during ancient times. Each of our feasts was marked by him blowing fire into a carefully laid bonfire and then taking to air to talk about our prowess in battle. Truth be told, I miss those days.

NIGHT OF CLAIMING

Relic

This entire evening surpasses anything I've imagined in terms of being claimed by a queen. To be claimed by the queen of my heart would have been enough, but the fact that she is an ancient warrior who loves to fight as much as I do makes the moment all the sweeter.

My queen is intelligent, strong, resourceful and dedicates herself to good deeds. Although she seems only interested in saving millions of precious queens on her home world, I alone see the bigger picture, which is that each of those queens is destined to fill the heart of a lonely warrior. That in saving these lives she is creating family lines that will stretch on for infinity on many different worlds. In the coming generations, millions, perhaps billions of beings will be born and live long, happy, productive lives because of the decision she makes in this moment. I feel blessed to walk this path with her.

The warriors all gather around us in a circle. I see so many faces among our newly appointed crew that I know from my time in the Draconian fleet on Onello. There are even a few I recognize from Exion space when we were under the claw of the infected queens. Our losses were staggering during the

war, so it pleases me that these males survived to see a true goddess in the flesh. I stand tall and proud by her side when she speaks.

“I asked you all here this evening to announce that I have selected my takadon. Relic has been by my side since I woke. His patience, understanding, support and dedication garnered him my notice and once I began paying attention, I discovered he had many attributes to be admired.”

She slips her hand in mine and continues. “Relic is of the old blood and can be more dragon than Draconian at times.”

Slayer whoops it up from the sidelines, making me grin. He loves my more resilient secondary battle form. I’m one of the few that he can spar comfortably with, after all, so he sees us as more similar than different. My queen shoots him a wry smile for interrupting and continues with her speech.

“I’m certain you have noticed I have a genuine affinity for dragons, so his old blood heritage endeared him to me from the start.”

Looking from one warrior to another, she ignores the few queens present for the moment and speaks directly to why they should accept me as her first. “Commander Relic proved himself in battle many times over during the war and has captured two warships. He has the experience to give good counsel and the valor and courage to stand by my side in any battle. As my takadon, you are to respond to his commands as though they are my own. I have every confidence in his abilities, loyalty, and devotion to our cause.”

The warriors break into loud and resounding applause, which for Draconian males means hitting their chest with their fists. Some few have drawn their wings into a tight knot at the

center of their back and knock them together to make a similar sound. It is all the same. It means they approve of her choice.

The small handful of queens must be happy for us as well, for they are clapping and smiling.

When Menoix shoulders his way through the crowd with a small feline female at his side, I notice she is carrying a gift box much like the one Menoix gave to Queen Caroline. I pray he is not giving up another of his people's precious orbs. His people have but a few true treasures. I am not keen on seeing him give them up, even to high status queens.

He beams at us. His fangs glint from the overhead lighting and his fur is smooth, sleek and seems incredibly well groomed. Instead of his normal civilian clothing, he is wearing dark pants and a vest with elaborate decoration. He looks more festive than normal.

The young feline on his arm I would think cannot be more than nine or ten turnings of the seasons old. I am stunned to see a young female of their kind. She has his grey coloring and bright green innocent eyes. I suspect this might be her first time off their ship for a social occasion, because she is wide eyed and looking around the large gathering room like we are the strangest beings she has ever seen.

“Greetings, Queen Electra,” Menoix states loudly to be heard over the banter of others.

“Greetings to you as well, Menoix.” She eyes the youngling at his side. “I am pleased to see you have brought a young guest with you this evening.”

He nudges his little one forward slightly and announces with pride, “I wish to present my offspring, Daneria. She will soon

be thirteen summers old.”

Taken aback to discover that he has a daughter, and she is thirteen years old, it takes my queen a moment to respond. Finally, she clears her throat and speaks, “Greetings, Queen Daneria. I pleased to make your acquaintance.”

The youngling dips her body down and back up again by bending her knees, her long fluffy tail curled around her stomach like a belt. This dipping is clearly some mannerism of respect that I am not familiar with. My queen smiles at her and the young one squeaks out, “Thank you, Queen Electra. I am pleased to be on your fine ship.”

She glances up at her sire who gives her a slight nod sideways, as if to confirm that was a polite response.

He then turns his attention back to us. “We wish both of you a long and prosperous life together.”

My queen responds smoothly, “Thank you, Menoix. I’m glad you came to our mating celebration.”

“I also wished to congratulate you, Queen Electra, on choosing such a worthy mate.”

He reaches out and smooths his hand down her glorious copper strands and gently scratches behind her ear. The gesture takes me by surprise, because it is much the same as how our kind pet our pontons. My queen only grins in response and accepts the gift his daughter holds out to her.

When she opens it, thankfully there is no orb, only a long ribbon. It has our names written in Draconian script stamped onto the end in small, neat letters. My queen lifts it up to admire the script.

Menoix tugs it from her hand says, “This is a traditional binding cloth. Among my people, couples spend their wedding

night bound together. It is a very obvious symbol meant to represent you joining your lives together. Would you like to wear it tonight or simply keep it as memento of your mating?”

My queen holds out her arm and I automatically follow suit. A pleased expression spreads over our guest’s face and his ears flick back and forth in what I interpret to be excitement.

“You honor our gift, Queen Electra.” His eyes shift to me, “Are you certain, Relic, that you wish this as well?”

“Yes, I wish it. This custom is one to be honored. I would like this ribbon to become an heirloom of our line, to be used for future generations.”

His face lights up all over again and my queen smiles at me. “I never knew you were such a romantic, my takadon.”

I recognize this word and all it entails from the human database. “Being an old blood, I appreciate expressions of love and devotion more than most.”

Although I do not come right out and state that our kind have been devalued and heavily abused by our former queens, my mate understands. She remembers that much like herself, I was a foundling raised by strangers in the nursery of our old, infected queen’s ship. She links her fingers through mine and holds them out for Menoix to bind.

“I like your idea of making it an heirloom for our line. We can just keep stamping names on it until we run out of space.”

I gaze down at her struck by the idea that I now have a queen to love and protect. And I will be having hatchlings and if the gods allow it, my queen may even swell with my child one day. I look into her eyes and think of all the young and their young we might see before we take our final flights. It is both overwhelming and wonderful. I’m vaguely aware that Menoix

is talking about how his people add names to the ribbons as well and they are passed around family, used by people and friends the couple is close to as a way of honoring them.

When he is finished with the last ornamental knot, his little queen speaks up shyly. “The two of you look good together, like you’re equally matched.”

I know not what she means by this, as my queen is beautiful, and I am almost a feral dragon, but it makes me want to laugh. To my mind me and my lovely mate are different species, different status and differently abled in many ways. My eyes land on my queen as she continues conversing with the young feline and I realize maybe it is all the small things we have in common that are important.

We spend the rest of the evening with my arm bound to hers. Many approach to offer their wishes for a long happy union and to congratulate me on being selected for mating by an incarnated goddess. I have never been particularly devout, so I cannot fathom the feelings of a spiritual male, one who would have seen mating with her as some kind of providence. Therefore, I stay humble in my responses. For my own part, I think she is much better off with a male who sees her as female and a fellow warrior, rather than a divine being.

We eat fresh meat from our recent kills, drink mead from our food synthesizers, and enjoy the fellowship of our crew well into the night. It seems that every warrior has a tale of growing up under the claw of Draconian queens and my new mate is eager to hear them all.

At some point I realize that this is a huge breakthrough for my queen. Never has she socialized this freely with the warriors. She normally spends her time with Slayor or me, while they admire her from afar. Tonight, I can see that more gatherings

like this are in order. I wish her to get to know my brethren and feel that she has friendships among my kind. She fought and won against a virtually invincible foe for our freedom all those solars ago. She deserves to reap the rewards of her hard-fought battles.

By the time we stagger back to our quarters, she is laughing and happier than I have ever seen her. Who would have thought mating me would make her so joyful, much less that our mating celebration would be filled with such cheer and goodwill? I finally feel the acceptance I always longed for from my fellow warriors and the queen of my heart. It is enough to heal every old hurt I ever had.

The moment the door closes behind us, my queen backs me against it and pulls me down for a kiss. We have been drinking inebriating beverages but are not too intoxicated to enjoy a proper mating. She prefers for me to show her how much I like her, indeed how much I love her.

Therefore, I lift her body and pivot, so her back is against the door. The look of surprise on her face is priceless, only because of the overlay of arousal causing her cheeks to flush. I don't even have to ask her to disrobe. She grabs for the insignia on her chest, twists it off and pushes the button to retract her armor. I go to my knees, eagerly unclasp her utility belt and toss it to the side. My movements are encumbered by that binding on our arms, but I care not. I begin peeling her bottoms off along with her boots while she works on her top. I am forced to rip the fabric for us to be rid of our tops. It takes me but moments to retract my own armor and remove my top. One hand goes down to rip at the seam in my pants. Only when my cock springs free do I stop worrying about my clothing.

I lean forward to lick one taut nipple. “You are a beautiful female, my queen.”

She laughs, “You think that because I’m the only queen naked in this room.”

I nip at her flesh causing her to choke out a surprised noise.

“I have always thought you beautiful, even before I saw all your lovely pale flesh. You have my heart and are locked tight in mine. Never doubt my words again.”

My voice has gotten growly and possessive.

She responds by inhaling deeply. “Is it just me or do you smell amazingly good right now?”

I smile on the inside that she likes my mating scent. Since there are those other few queens about and my queen will soon be releasing her own pheromones when she comes on my tongue, I state out loud, “Computer, initiate stasis field around our quarters. We are not to be disturbed. Do not discontinue until my mark. Acknowledge command.”

The ship’s computer repeats my command and I see the walls light up with the shimmering blue that is the hallmark of a Draconian stasis field.

Then I lift her up with the hand that is not bound and nudge one of her long pale legs over each shoulder. When she is spread out, all fragrant and delicious before me, I get right to work licking her from her seeping core up to the tiny pleasure nub she hides in her tender folds. Our bound arms clasp onto each other as if we are swearing a secret pact.

My queen jerks in my hold when I swirl my tongue around the pleasure nub in tiny tight circles.

She tastes so good that I lose myself in licking all her favorite spots. I tease her with the tip of my tongue and revel in the pretty noises and kicks she makes.

Forget about the savory fresh meat we skewered over the fires earlier; this is the real feast tonight. I've dreamed of performing the revidian all my life and although this is not the first time I have worshipped my queen thus, each time surpasses my wildest dreams.

Her free hand grabs at one of my horns to steady herself, but I don't care. I have thick, strong horns that are good for grasping and her soft hands feel good. The fact that we are doing this bound together makes it different and all the more potent for me. It successfully drives home the fact that every move I make affects the person I love most in the entire universe.

When she comes, I spear her with my tongue to make certain she is wet enough to take me. When I flex to stand, her legs slip away, and the hand on my horn slips down to grasp my shoulder. She wraps her legs around my waist as I stand. We move together as though we know each other's mind. The aroused, dreamy look on her face ramps up my lust in ways I can't quite understand.

I put our hands against the door over her head and thrust into her with force.

She moans, her voice ragged and breathless. "Yes, just like that. Don't stop."

I take her lips and give us both what we want. Where once I was worried that my gigantic cock might be uncomfortable for her frail human body, I now know better. This queen was made to be loved by a Draconian warrior like me. My lips move down to nip at her neck, and she gasps. When I lick away the

sting, she presses her hips forward and practically rides my cock, even as I thrust roughly into her.

I spread my wings and lift us from the floor and wall. Hanging a handspan from the floor she can't get purchase. Instead she has to take what I offer and nothing more. I bring up the hand bound to hers and let my fingers graze across her cheek.

"Speak, my queen. Tell me what you want, and I will give it to you."

She looks up at me with unfocused eyes. "I want hard and fast."

My hand smooths over her soft skin and then skims over the delicate column of her neck. "Then you shall have my thick cock filling you just the way you wish."

Wrapping my free arm more firmly around her body, I hold her tight and give her the hard fuck she so richly deserves, that we both deserve. I make her come on my cock over and over again before filling her with my heat. I want to plant my seed so deeply inside her that babies come out for many solar revolutions. Uncertainty swirls in my brain about whether human women can store and use a male's seed that way but if it is possible, I wish it.

By the time our feet touch the ground and I tuck my wings away, my queen is a hot, sweaty, exhausted mess. I love seeing her so well loved and knowing that my cock alone made her this way. I lay her upon my sleeping platform and hover over her drowsy form, our arms still joined. When she holds her unbound arm out for me to join her, my heart squeezes with the joy of being wanted at long last.

VOWS OF RESPECT

Electra

I wake this morning once again draped over my massive dragon warrior. He is resting peacefully and still smells delectable. This tells me he is not spawning for me yet. Of course, I've seen Draconian hatchlings before. They are nothing like human infants. Hatchlings break out of their shell and chaos ensues. They're active, inquisitive, and primarily learn through experience. They're even born with their dragon language in place. It later gets replaced by the Draconian language so they can interact and work with others of their kind.

I dragon speak only because I grew up around dragons and learned their language the hard way. Later, when I met Slayor and we formed our mind link, I learned the subtleties of dragon speak. Relic speaks dragon because the barrier that separated him from his inner dragon was destroyed. We will be among the few who will be able to speak to our young straight from the shell.

The more I think of what our hatchlings will be like, the more I want them. I can see myself settling down on Dracon Prime and finding something productive to do while Relic and I raise

our young. Once everyone is safe, that's exactly what I will do.

The queen who sits on the throne there is reputed to be a fierce defender of all things Draconian. Queen Dawn mated with two commanders and the three of them are currently reviving all their oldest traditions. I could teach them all I know of the old ways. It would be a good life.

A gigantic, clawed hand lands on my ass and a low growl that sounds more like a purr sounds off in my ears. I turn and throw one leg over Relic's ridiculously large hips. When he lifts me, I eagerly straddle him and ease down onto his cock. He's rock hard and the room is still swamped with his mating scent. He needs me and I have no intention of letting him down.

He looks down his torso to watch me riding his cock. His upper lip pulls back in a sexy snarl. "You are a good queen to tend to your mate's needs so early in the day."

I respond breathlessly, "I think that Draconian males release an enzyme that spikes their female's sexual arousal. I was wet and aching for you the moment I woke up."

He wraps his arms around me and pumps into me, hard and fast. "It is my mating scent. It lures females into a mating frenzy. That's why I put a stasis field around our quarters."

He rolls us so he's on top and I let him fuck me the way he likes because I like it too.

"That was a good call, my takadon."

Although he is totally aroused, me using his new title makes him smile. "Takadon means only. You know this, do you not?"

I pat his sweaty chest with one hand. "I don't need a harem, handsome. All I need is you."

He gives me a wry grin. “I believe you are going to end up with more of me than you could ever want before my mating scent abates.”

I wrap my legs around him and stammer, “Not possible. I’ll never get enough of you.” No sooner do I get the words out than my orgasm hits hard and fast. As I get lost in overwhelming sensation, I feel him speed up, chasing his own release.

Looking up into his eye, I murmur, “I want you to spawn my young. I can’t wait to hold our first in my arms.”

That does it for Relic. He comes with an animalistic roar that’s so loud it could have been heard on the other side of the ship if it weren’t for the stasis field. He presses himself firmly into my body and I can feel him come for what seems like forever. It’s warm and reassuring. I think about what it would be like to grow a baby in my belly, and I don’t hate the idea. I need to make sure everyone is safe and then I’ll definitely make that happen.

After several long moments, Relic pulls out, scoops me up with one wing and holds me to his side. We take a few moments to catch our breath and then do it all over again. In fact, we fuck ourselves to exhaustion and I’m so there for it. It’s like I can’t get enough of this thing I’ve been denying myself for my entire adult life.

When we finally wake again, Relic’s mating scent is diminished. Excitement strums in my stomach because I know what means. He’s spawning our child. I love that Draconian males can create young. To my mind, it balances the relationship. Why should the woman be solely responsible for bearing children, especially when it takes a gigantic toll on our bodies. Draconians spawn so effortlessly that some enjoy

continuously spawning for their queen for years. I'm not greedy; even one child to love would be a blessing.

The more I think about it, the more excited I get. In a few weeks, a small egg with a pliable shell will be removed from the sack on his hip and placed into an incubation unit. He's already told me that old bloods are all over the place when it comes to how long it takes them to break from the shell. Some are trying to break out in a couple of months and others hang in there for close to four. It's different for every family line and since he never knew his father, there is no way of telling how long the process might take.

My hand wanders down to his side and I gently press my palm against the area where my child is growing. Relic's amused voice sounds off. "You must wait, my queen. There is nothing to feel and won't be for at least a couple of weeks."

I slide down his body and inspect the area with my own eyes. The small bulge is practically unnoticeable. It looks much like a regular muscle grouping on his ripped torso. I know Draconian physiology like I know my own, so I'm aware enough to look for the signs, the first of which is a warming of the area as his sack fills with the Draconian version of amniotic fluid. Unlike humans, their eggs don't attach to the wall of the sack that houses them. The cells divide repeatedly as the embryo creates its own self-contained habitat, what will later become a shell.

Relic's drowsy voice asks, "What do you see, my queen?"

I look up along his ripped torso and into his eyes. "Nothing yet, but the area is getting warm."

"In a few days, we will be able to scan to discover how many young I carry."

“I’m not greedy,” I tease. “I’ll be happy with one strong healthy little warrior who looks like his sire.”

Relic grins, showing more of his sharp fangs. “That is what you will get, for only breeders absorb genetic material from their females. Warriors reproduce by parthenogenesis. Our reproductive system is triggered by the scent of female pheromones.”

I pinch his arm. “I know all about how Draconian males reproduce. I was there when your species was created.”

He pulls me up and begins unwinding the ribbon that is loosely binding our arms. It must have partially worked its way off in the night. He drops the ribbon onto the bed and carefully looks over my arm. “There are very few physical signs that we were bound throughout the night.”

I playfully poke his chest. “That because all the signs are in here.”

He swallows thickly. “That thought did occur to me as well. Thank you for selecting me to be your takadon. I will stand between you and danger, provide you all the hatchlings a queen could desire, and do my best to ensure that you never regret the decision you made in taking me to be your one and only male.”

Taking his hands in mine, I reply sincerely, “Thank you for agreeing to be mine, my takadon. I have no doubt in my mind about you being the perfect male for me.”

For good measure, I lean over and give him a kiss, lingering on his plush lips. When I pull back, he has a dazed look in his eyes. I give him my personal vow, “I pledge never to place you in danger unless it cannot be avoided. You are precious to me, and I’ll not risk you except in the direst circumstances.”

“We warriors were made to die in the service of their queens,” he replies while gazing steadily into my eyes.

“No, you weren’t. You were meant to be life mates, beloved sires, and the source of strength for your queens. You can’t do that if you’re dead.”

Climbing into his lap, I cup his face in my hands. “I need you with me, helping save lives and caring for our little ones. That’s why you can count on me to always have your back in a battle. Anyone who harms you will pay with their life. You might be a strong and capable fighter, but I know all too well the many ways a strong warrior might be brought to his knees. If our enemies want you, they’ll have pry you from my cold, dead hands.”

The color drains from his face. “Do not speak of your death, my queen. I could not bear to lose you, be it in battle, childbirth or though being supplanted by another.”

“You won’t ever be replaced. But I want you to know one more thing. I value you above your ability as a fighter, protector, and sire to my children. You’re smart and clever in all the ways that I’m not. Your logic holds sway when my impulsiveness needs quelled. Therefore, never bite your tongue if you think I am wrong about something for fear of displeasing me. I want you to speak up. I’ll always listen and respect your thoughts and ideas.”

He brings my hand to his lips and kisses each knuckle, careful to keep from nicking me with his fangs. “You please me, more than I ever thought a queen could. When first I met you, I wished only to serve you. Instead of service, you offer me equality in all things large and small. This is something I never expected from a queen, but I find myself coveting these things now that I truly understand the value of such.”

I can't keep the smile off my face for anything. My strong warrior has finally come into his own, and it looks good on him.

"We're going to be good together. I know that because we already are."

He kisses me and if I hadn't just had an entire night and morning of mind-blowing sex, I might have suggested we stay in bed. As it stands, I ask, "Want to soak in the lagoon with me?"

"No. I wish you to wear my mating scent all day long."

I chuckle at his possessive reply. "Not a chance, hot stuff. Come on, let's clean up and make sure we're still on course for Earth."

"If nothing slowed us down, we should be approaching Earth shortly."

"All the more reason to get on with our day. There are lives to save and emergency aid to distribute."

We climb into the cool water, and I sink down until my head is below water. I rest there for a minute before pushing up to the surface again. I shake my hair out, much like a dog does his fur. I grab some cleansing foam and glance over at Relic. He's just watching me with a little smile tugging at his lips.

I grab another large glob of cleansing foam and lob it at his chest. "Look alive, soldier. We've got work to do."

He perks up instantaneously and begins rubbing the soap over his scales. I like the way they gleam when he rinses the foam off.

"I have been reviewing the information sent by Queen Julia and have discovered a way we could help save overlooked

queens.”

I freeze, turning to look at him. “What do you mean by overlooked queens?”

He reaches down and roughly rubs cleansing foam over his cock and then moves down his legs as he replies. “Queen Julia identified thirty-seven different sites scattered around Earth where families or small groupings of queens are kept or are staying in isolation. None of the other species have dedicated resources to securing their safety. I was thinking that we could send shuttles to explore these sites and try to convince the queens to evacuate.”

I gape at him because this is literally the first time I’ve heard of outcasts trying to survive outside the bio-domes. My genetic modifications kick in and my brain begins supplying information from databases on Pern and his outcast queen.

There is a limited amount of information on the subject. There were sister queens whose mother survived in the mountains for years, coming down only to trade and for medical care. They wore particle respirators and lived rough deep in a cave system.

My eyes close as I access every piece of information I absorbed from the database on this subject.

“There was a war on Earth between humans and the parasites that infested the Draconian queens for generations. Our warriors came to support the humans and set up feeding stations in remote places for humans that had been displaced. We need to factor those locations into our plans because they have surely drawn the notice of wandering indigents.”

“That is a wise decision, my queen. Let us get dressed and prepare our crew for their new mission.”

GENERALS OF EARTH GOV

Relic

Once our crew learns of queens living in the rough, they are enthusiastic about rescuing them. We are having a meeting to fine tune the logistics of covering such vast amounts of territory when our communications officer on the bridge interrupts.

“Forgive the intrusion, Queen Electra, but the Earth Gov ruling council wishes to speak with you directly. I have a General Stallings on hold.”

“Thank you, Echo. I’ll take the com here in the meeting room.

She cuts her eyes to me, “Please put it on our view screen, Relic.”

I do as she commands. The screen lights up with the face of a stern-looking Earth queen wearing a battle green uniform.

My queen speaks first, as is her habit. “Greetings, General Stallings. What can I do for you today?”

“Greetings to you as well, Queen Electra. Julia told us that you are the one who got the evacuation effort started. I wanted to thank you personally for seeing the danger coming and trying to get your people evacuated. However, we need you to

prioritize getting the leaders of our world relocated to our preferred allied planets.”

Queen Electra responds tersely, “You’re not my people. In every way that matters, I’m Draconian.”

“You look very human to me,” the female on the screen responds evenly.

My queen steps closer and sets the record straight. “Until a few short months ago I was a child, surviving in the underbelly of the bio-dome in New Georgia. Earth Gov didn’t give two hoots in hell whether I lived or died. I was constantly thirsty and went to bed on an empty stomach most nights.”

The older woman’s eyes narrow. “I’m not following you, Electra. You’re not making any sense.”

We could hear other voices sounding off around the Earth General. My queen responds with a frown. “Perhaps it would be better if we spoke face to face, General Stallings.”

She had only to say my name and I knew what my queen wanted. I pulled out a computer interface and used our particle technology to transport the female general to our meeting room. The older queen’s eyes grow wide as she realizes what we’ve done. She darts a quick around the room.

Another queen comes into view on the screen. Her indignant voice demands, “How dare you transport one of our generals onto your ship without permission. I demand that you return General Stallings at once.”

I reached over and mute the speaker so my queen can focus on her conversation with the general.

My queen lifts her head and says, “I was abducted, along with a few dozen other red-headed children, months ago by a race of aliens called the Garoth. We were all orphans without

means to care for ourselves. Your government labeled us indigents and made no attempt to care for us. Therefore, I doubt Earth Gov even realized we were missing. In case you're wondering, I was twelve years old when I was abducted."

The general looks uncomfortable. "I didn't hear anything about children being taken."

"No one ever checked on me, so I'm not surprised to hear no one reported me missing."

The general looks shaken. She glances around the room at the warriors who are staring at her with inscrutably blank expressions. She finally stammers, "Who were they? What did they want with human children? How did you grow from a child to an adult in a few months? Are any of the others still alive? Can we get them back?"

My queen answers without hesitation, "The Garoth are an advanced race of aliens who long ago mastered the use of particle technology, opening portals into another dimension and even time travel. They took us two and a half thousand years into the past and we ended up in Exion space, where they founded the planet we now call Dracon Prime. I grew up being slaved out by them as they worked to create the perfect warrior species to protect them from other hostile aliens."

"Deep space sounds like a dog-eat-dog place," the older queen responds sharply. "But you didn't answer any of my questions about the other children."

"In my timeline, those little girls grew up. I became their leader, and we joined forces with the Draconian protectors the Garoth created and were attempting to control. The first thing I did was blow their lab up and rescue everyone there. Then I led a brutal war against our oppressors that lasted for many

long years. I watched as one after another of my friends died in battle. Some had their throats ripped out by the beasts our oppressors created to keep us in line. Others were killed on the battlefield, lanced through the chest, or cut apart by lasers. Several died in traps set by our oppressors.”

General Stallings sucks in a sharp breath. “War is like that. I lost many of my comrades in the war against the Vithacan parasites.”

My queen’s voice takes on a steely edge. “In the end there was only me and a handful of Draconian warriors. They put me in stasis and took me out when there was trouble brewing. For hundreds of years this ship orbited around Dracon Prime, waiting for the need to arise to awaken me for yet another battle.”

The older general searches my queen’s eyes, as if trying to figure out if her words are true. “This is why you claim to be Draconian instead of human. Humans let you down, but Draconians followed you into battle.”

It wasn’t a question, so my queen didn’t answer. Instead, she states coldly, “Tell me again why I should pull my warriors off task and prioritize saving the very people who allow children to be marginalized and left to fend for themselves?”

The general takes a deep breath and squares her shoulders. She didn’t even try to justify the treatment of Earth’s impoverished, parentless children. Instead, she states, “Earth must keep an operational government in place.”

My queen leans forward and speaks slowly. “You have nothing left to govern. You’re all refugees at this point and that makes you no better than the indigents you left to fend for themselves all these years.”

Shock permeates every part of the general's face.

Before the older female can respond, my queen adds, "Soon the remaining human population will be absorbed into roughly a dozen alien worlds. If you want something to govern, find yourselves a planet and start over. Only this time do a better job of taking care of your people for I will not come to your rescue again. Am I making myself understood?"

"Shall I assume you are refusing to expedite relocation for the rulers of our world?"

"You can assume that if it were up to me the self-aggrandizing, grossly incompetent leaders of Earth would be the very last human beings removed from this world. I strongly advise you to direct your appeal to Queen Julia."

"We did," the general shoots back. "Julia Watson was formerly in charge of Earth's military. She turned us down flat. She communicated that the ruling council on Onello followed her recommendation to show no preference in evacuees."

My queen's shoulders relax. "Then I would say that you have your answer. I would advise the leaders of Earth to pack up and stand in line at the evacuation points, just like everyone else."

The general nods curtly. "I would like to go back to my council meeting, if it's all the same to you." Her voice is strained, and she is shaking slightly. Since I doubt a battle-hardened veteran would tremble, even before the might of my queen, my assumption is that she is angered by my queen speaking truth to power.

I reach for the controls, but my queen holds up one finger for me to wait a moment.

She pulls out her com unit and the walls around the room light with images and personal information on the entirety of Earth's ruling council. Each has their genetic profile attached, because that is what Earth Gov now uses to identify its citizenry.

Queen Electra holds out her arms. "I want to warn you that if any harm comes to the citizens of Earth during your eagerness to escape, I will lock onto your genetic profiles and bring you to this ship to face justice."

The general's mouth falls open, but it takes only a nod from my beloved queen, and I use the controls to send this demanding general back to where she came from.

Without pause or comment, my queen and I conclude the meeting with our commanders. Our warriors head to the loading bay and begin preparing for their missions. We reserved three shuttles to ferry queens from Earth to our ship as is our normal procedure. I am pleased that my queen and I will be taking a shuttle down ourselves. With a skeleton crew, it takes every pair of hands we can muster to fill our ship with needy queens this day.

Saylor and our new captain, Havoc, meets us in the loading bay. The moment they catch her eye she steps out to greet them.

"Thank you both for meeting with me at the last minute. Havoc, I'm leaving you in command of my ship. As you know, I just had a bit of run with Earth Gov over them wanting priority evacuation. I wouldn't put it past them to mix in with the refugees and try something stupid like trying to take over the ship."

Havoc looks a bit confused. "You mean the ship they can't possibly know how to fly?"

My queen nods. “Don’t underestimate them, Captain Havoc. If they threatened to kill some of the other women, would you be tempted to do their bidding?”

He immediately straightens up and his face sobers. “It never occurred to me to think they would do something like that. Of course, I would feel obliged to come to an agreement with them if only to save the life of an innocent queen.”

“Here’s how to handle that. I’ve left a file in the database full of Earth Gov’s current and past leaders. Bio-scan every single queen who is present at our access points. If any of them match a genetic profile in the files, detain them until I get back.”

Havoc takes an involuntary step backwards. “You wish me to imprison queens?”

“No, you don’t have to put them in our detention cells. Just remove any weapons they might be carrying, house them in a secured area and don’t let them wander around the ship on their own. Maybe set up a lounge or banquet tables. They’ll assume they’re getting preferential treatment because of their status.”

Havoc replies grimly, “You wish me to be deceitful to a queen.”

“Nope. Just distract them in a secure location until I get back. Don’t volunteer any information to them. If they ask tell them I told you to make sure they are safe. I doubt you’ll get a lot of pushback. They want to leave this world. If they’re in line waiting their turn, we’ll transport them.”

Finally, he relaxes. “I will follow your orders to the letter, Queen Electra.”

“Thank you, Captain Havoc. You’re dismissed.”

He takes a step back and then turns to leave. My queen turns to her old friend who is still pouting.

“Slayor, you’re my failsafe. Your mission is top secret. I want you to move among the queens and sound the alert if anything at all seems suspicious to you. If things get out of hand, you are to quell the situation just like we did during times of war.”

“Right. I will begin biting off heads until everyone cowers in fear.”

Queen Electra replies, “Don’t even joke about that, old friend. Use the stasis pods. Stick one on every single person posing a problem and I’ll sort it out when I get back.”

He grins, “Much less fun but I will do as you say.”

She brushes one hand down his scales and states with no small amount of amusement, “Biting heads off usually escalates the chaos, while slapping a stasis pod on the ringleaders usually dials down the overall chaos. Remember that, my friend.” There is a slight pause, and she adds, “Be vigilant, Slayor. I have a bad feeling about this run.”

“I will, my queen. You two watch your back out there.”

“We will,” I assure him.

THE QUEENS OF EARTH

Electra

*A*fter I finish advising my captain and crew on how to head off problems with Earth Gov, Relic and I head down to the planet. We're carrying a pallet of hydration drinks and high-grade palatable food bars. I let Relic handle the controls and spend time scanning and monitoring the Earth's surface. There is some seismic activity in the Appalachian region where we are going to land. It must be terrifying to the people stranded on the top of the mountain.

Having been born and raised in the New Georgia bio-dome, my entire concept of Earth was comprised of the tales that people told and the few glimpses I got during the short time I was permitted to go to school on one of the upper levels. I remember staring out a window at the barren, desolate terrain and wondering what it must have looked like before the fall.

Relic asks, "Are you picking up any life signs?"

I shake my head. "No, try the next mountain range."

He veers to the left and within seconds my long-range scanners pick up life forms. "I'm reading eight biosignatures

due north.” I throw the reading up on the screen and overlay it with a topographical map.

Relic murmurs, “They appear to be right on top of the mountain.”

“There might be a cave formation or some other kind of shelter up there.”

When we get closer, we see a large stone home and a dozen outbuildings. There are several cold frame greenhouses with plastic pulled over the top, making a dome shape.

I explain. “It looks like a small farm. If there was enough flat space on the mountain top, sometimes humans would set up a homestead there.”

The ground stops trembling just as we land our shuttle. An older man comes running out to meet us, while the others hang back fearfully in the doorway.

“Thank God someone came for us.”

I extend my hand and he reaches out and shakes it.

“It’s nice to meet you. My name is Electra, and this is my spouse, Relic.”

“My name is Clyde Morgan. I’ve been sending SOS messages on my ham radio for months. Did you bring fresh water and medical equipment?”

I pull the door the rest of the way open so he can see the supplies we brought.

His eyes bulge, “You’ve got enough there to feed an army, girl.”

I pull out a few hydration packs and hand them to him. “Well, we brought it for you and your family. How many do you have

up here?”

He responds quickly, “We’ve got fourteen. We’ve got eight adults above ground and two adults and four children in the basement, three girls and a boy. We have a fallout shelter down there.”

Relic rounds the shuttle and rips the lid off the food bars. “You have small queens? We must prioritize their care. It’s not safe here any longer.”

The man’s voice turns angry in an instant. “We’re not handing over our little ones, jackass.”

I grab the man’s arm and walk over to the doorway with him, carrying more hydration fluid.

“Look, my husband is right. We’re part of an evacuation program set up by Earth Gov. All the tectonic activity is about to cumulate in a huge earthquake. Earth Gov scientists are saying it’s going to be the biggest one North America has ever seen. The fault line that made these mountains is about to take them away. We need to get you and your family out of here immediately.”

We begin putting the hydro-packs and food bars in everyone hands. A couple of the women run off downstairs with some of them. Whether they are alarmed by my words or simply going to give their children supplies, I’m not sure.

The old man whirls around to stare at us. “Are you sure about this, young lady? If we give up our homestead, we’ll become indigent.”

I sigh, understanding that he’s got a lot riding on the decision to move or stay in place. I take a minute to break down the situation for him. Granted, I’m not telling him the full truth

because I don't want him to totally lose his mind at the thought of being taken off world.

"If you stay here, you're all going to die. If you come with us today, I give you my word that you'll get a plot of land all your own to homestead. Somewhere that's still green with drinkable water."

"I didn't think there were any places like that on Earth. You promise?"

Looking into his eyes, I nod. "Yes. If you put your trust in me, I won't let you down."

A woman's voice sounds off from across the room. "Clyde, we don't have a choice. Don't force her to make promises she might not be able to keep. If we can get food, water, and medical treatment for the sick one, that'll be enough to keep us going in a new place."

These people are breaking my heart, but I give them time to decide for themselves what they want to do before I force the issue. I have zero qualms about slapping a stasis pod on every single one of them and dragging them out of here by their feet. If that's what I have to do to save their lives, I will. Letting them stay here and die is simply not an option.

The older man struggles, running his hand through his hair. When he starts pacing, my hand goes to one of the tiny stasis pods on my belt. Just when I think we're going to have to haul them out the hard way, a Draconian voice drifts from the one of the doorways.

There is an emaciated warrior standing there, leaning heavily on one of the women who left with supplies for the little ones. All four of the kids are clinging to their parents' legs, sipping on hydration packets that look huge in their small hands.

Both Relic and I freeze in place, absolutely gutted to see a Draconian warrior that looks like skin and bones. “So, it’s true. There is another of my kind here.”

Clyde’s voice is tight with exasperation, “What are you doing up here, Jumper? You shouldn’t be out of bed.”

“I don’t remember my people, but my instincts tell me to trust the male.” He stares at Relic for a long hard moment. “What do you say, male? Is what she says true? Are we going to die if we stay?”

Relic moves forward and replies sincerely. “Yes. It is as my queen says. If you don’t leave right now, you will not get another chance. This whole mountain will soon cease to be. If you have ever trusted one of our kind, trust me now.”

“I am ill and can’t protect my queen and little spawn. Will you help me?”

Relic dips his head in a gesture of agreement. “I will see you get the best care from our healers and that your entire family is safe, including your queen and little spawn. You will be warm, well fed, and happy until we can relocate you some place where your family can thrive.”

Turning his head to look at the older man, he says softly, “We must go, Clyde. I don’t see another way.”

The older man finally nods. “Okay, if we all agree that it’s best. We’ll take a chance.”

Relic responds quietly, “I promise the place we are going is a virtual paradise compared this area.”

Relic has cottoned onto the idea that talking to them about going to a new world is a bit much right now.

“We need to load up as soon as possible. There are other sites we need to check for people. What can I do to help you pack up?”

The sick Draconian male asks, “We have little in the way of personal possessions. What do we need to survive where we are going?”

Relic responds honestly, “Nothing. Clothing, food, accommodations, bedding, and anything else you need will be provided.”

The older woman moves forward to stand beside Clyde. “Let’s roll the dice, babe. We’ve tried everything else. Let’s give a fate a chance to lead us where we need to go.”

Sounding defeated and his shoulders sag. “Alright, Carol, if that’s what you want to do.”

Suddenly, the ground shakes and several more adults and two adolescents come running out of the house.

I say, “Let’s get the hell out of here before the ground falls out from under us.”

We all rush to the shuttle, and I sit down at the navigational panel while Relic gets everyone settled in and engages the safety shielding around each seat.

“They’re seated and their safety protocols are in place. You can take off.”

I lift off while my warrior opens a med kit and begins working on the Draconian warrior who can’t remember who he is. I’ve only seen such a sight during times of war. Usually, it was because of intentional abuse or neglect. The way his mate looks at him and the way the older man deferred to his wishes

makes me think he was not abused by them. They all are looking malnourished, dehydrated and like they've been suffering long term nutritional deficits. All that is except the children. They're not pleasingly plump but they do look fed and seem to be developing properly.

I head for our second destination. It's at the foot of the long mountain range where our warriors had set up a feeding station during the war. I suspect no one has been checking them since the Draconians pulled up stakes and headed back to Onello. When I get close, I pick up three images on my scanner. I do a fly by and see that there is a shallow cave stuffed with old cargo crates from the war. And there are three bio-signs moving inside.

I set the shuttle down off to the side and stand up to find Relic is struggling to provide medical care to the sick warrior. I recognize what he's doing and it's a complicated way to get a vein on a person who's dehydrated. He's shot nanites under his skin to search out and puncture a vein.

I hit the switch to turn off Clyde's safety protocols. "Clyde, you're with me." I hit a compartment on the wall, and it pops open revealing body armor and weapons. I push one of the armor pods into his chest and the armor spreads over his body. Then I place a laser pistol into his hands.

"What the hell is all this?" His stunned voice does not sound angry. More like surprised and a little excited.

"The armor will stop anything a human can shoot at you. The pistol is on the lowest stun setting, so you might have to shoot twice to bring someone big down if things get ugly. For now, keep it in your holster. We don't want to seem threatening if there is no danger."

I hit the lever to open the shuttle door and jump out. Our boots are made to be a little buoyant, so I bounce. Clyde climbs out awkwardly behind me.

I gesture towards the cave. “This is an old feeding station. My people set them up during to war for people who were stranded and needed food, water, and picked up.”

“That was mighty nice of them,” he responds gazing at the cave.

“I picked up three life signs. Whoever they are, they need to come with us.” As if on cue the ground trembles. “You and I are going to talk them into saving themselves by leaving with us.”

He nods, “Got it.”

“Let’s do it and get the hell out of here. If they’re orange and look like cat people, shoot first and ask questions later.”

I already knew they weren’t Garothian because I didn’t sense them, but no sense not giving the warning.

The old man rolls his eyes. “Sure, we’ll shoot the cat people but only if they’re orange.”

I frown at him. “If they look like they’re a cross between an alligator and a person, shoot them too. They’ve got short arms and look ridiculous, but don’t let that fool you. They’re still dangerous.”

He just looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. “Anyone else I should kill on sight?”

I remember how fond of raiding Earth the aquatics are. “Fish people. If they have fins on their heads and they’re on Earth, they’re probably trying to traffic women.” I kept my voice calm so as not to frighten him.

He gives me a strange look. “Well then, they deserve to die.”

“You’re not killing anyone,” I remind him. “Your gun is on stun, remember?”

That is when he quits talking to me full stop and walks towards the cave. I’ve clearly been hanging around the Draconians too long. I’m accustomed to people taking me seriously, following my lead and being serious when it comes to saving lives. I reluctantly admit to myself that bringing Clyde is not turning out to be the best idea I’ve ever had.

I follow along behind him, keeping lookout. When we walk inside there is just one woman. Clyde just starts blurting out everything I said to get him to leave his place.

“We’re here to evacuate survivors. The earthquakes are supposed to get worse. Earth Gov scientists believe the ground is going to open along the mountain range. You’re not safe here anymore.”

The woman looks from him to me and then her eyes dart over to a huge crate for an instant before jerking back over to gaze at Clyde.

“Where will we go? Earth Gov won’t let those of us who have bedded down in the wild back into the bio-domes.”

She’s referring to the fact that Earth Gov had quarantined the cities when the parasites were infecting the population. I speak up. “That doesn’t matter anymore. They’ve an inoculation that cleans out any problem you have.”

The woman’s expression turns hopeful. “Really? They’ll let us back into the cities?”

About that time, the crate she glanced at before shakes and I hear the muffled sound of children laughing.

Clyde nods, “Yep, that’s what they say. Everyone is welcome. You can hang out with my family if you want. There are over a dozen of us. But we have got to leave right now, ma’am.”

The woman runs to the crate and takes out two small children that look to be twin girls both with dark hair like their mother. They look fat and happy.

“We’ve been living here for coming up on two years. Since there was three huge crates of food bars and a little natural spring in the back of the cave, there weren’t no need to take a chance dying in the wilderness to get to a city they weren’t going to let us into anyways.”

Clyde comments, “You’re a smart lady. Lucky you found this place. Seen anyone else wandering around out here?”

The woman shakes her head. “Not a living soul in two years. I was beginning to think we were the last three people on Earth.”

The old man approaches and holds out his hand. “Clyde Morgan is my name. How about you?”

She smiles nervously up at him, “My name is Josie Parker. My family used to call me Jo.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Jo. Is there anything you need to pack up before we leave?”

She looks around at the sparse cave and responds, “Just the food? It’s too precious to just leave behind.”

I interject quickly, “Forget the food. We don’t have time for that. There will be more than enough for everyone where we’re going.”

Josie gathers her little ones and follows me out of the cave. It only takes about ten steps for us to see that a second ship has

landed. I've never seen an Agorian shuttle before and am taken aback, to say the least.

Clyde is the one to point out the obvious. "Is it my imagination or is that ship shaped vaguely like a cat?"

"I believe my mate called for back-up because your friend Jumper is sick. We have alien allies that are a feline species."

Clyde asks casually, "These wouldn't be the orange ones we're supposed to shoot on sight, would they?"

I answer quickly, "God no. Agorians are grey and they're really nice people. The orange ones are Karaix. They're larger and more aggressive." When they both just stare at me, I sigh. "It's complicated. I'll explain more when we're not on an evac mission."

Why the hell I'm so out of my element with humans is beyond my ability to reason. Their behavior baffles me. I can't help but notice the Agorian shuttle does look a bit like a cat, positioned like the Great Sphinx, with little triangles that look almost like ears. I'm used to weird alien things, but this is by far the most comically strange thing I've ever seen.

When we climb back on board my shuttle, sure enough Menoix is there with his daughter. They're wearing neat grey uniforms and are trying to help the sick warrior onto a hovering Draconian medical platform. Our shuttle is spacious and there is plenty of room for it. The sooner he gets on one, the better his chances for a full recovery.

His daughter catches sight of me out of the corner of her eye and glances over her shoulder. "Greetings, Queen Electra. Your captain sent us with a Draconian medical platform for your injured crew member."

I smile at the polite young feline. “He’s not our crew but we really appreciate you and your sire bringing the equipment we needed. You’re both amazing.”

Her face lights up for a second before she turns back to the task at hand. I suddenly feel a bit paranoid. Here I am thinking there’s a bad guy behind every bush and Menoix brings his ten-year-old to help out.

I’m shocked when one of the younger kids reaches out to grab her fluffy tail. Her mother is watching over her mate anxiously and grabs the little girl’s hand just in time.

I turn back to my own duties and raise Havoc on the com unit.

“Greetings, Queen Electra. I understand from speaking with Relic that you’ve found a number of humans in need of rescue.”

“We have. In fact, we have a full house. We have seventeen on board and I’d like to get the warrior we found back to the ship for a proper healing. Could you assign another team to check the last feeding station on our list?”

“Of course, my queen. I will see it done.”

“Thanks, Captain Havoc. Are you having any issues with the refugees?”

“I followed your directions and we have not had any issues thus far. I will rest easier when you are here to deal with them though.”

“Who are we dealing with? Which members of Earth Gov are aboard my ship?”

“General Stallings and her extended family of thirteen. So far, they are enjoying our hospitality, but she has asked to be moved to her quarters. We also have six Earth Gov soldiers, or

should I say former soldiers. They are mixing and mingling with refugees. Nothing about their behavior seems alarming thus far.”

“Alright, Captain. Thanks for the status report. I’ll be there shortly.”

I try to reason this out on our way back to the ship. Perhaps Stallings really does just want to relocate. As long as she didn’t trample anyone to take their spot and isn’t planning to cause chaos on my ship, I’ll take her safely to Onello. Still, I can’t help but wonder if she has some particular reason for wanting leave Earth as soon as possible.

Menoix and his daughter escort us all the way back to the ship. I am not entirely certain why they appear to be shadowing us this way, but we are always safer in numbers. Therefore, I don’t complain.

DEEP SPACE SPAWNING

Relic

*W*e are now loaded down with humans, mostly queens, and on our way to the staging area on Onello once more. My queen has spoken with the Earth general, who claims only to want her family relocated. She has asked for no special treatment, nor has she been offered any. She did have a young female grandchild with a congenital heart problem that our healers fixed. My queen is now convinced that is why the general was so eager to leave Earth. She knew our medical technologies were advanced enough to help her little queen.

My queen steps out of the cleansing unit fully dressed for the day. Her face lights up to see I have ordered food for us to share.

“That looks and smells fantastic, my takadon.”

I hold out her chair like human males do in holo-vids. “I thought it would be nice to dine in for once, my queen. We have both been busy as of late and I have no wish to share your company with anyone else just yet.”

She beams. “I’m always happiest when I have you all to myself as well.”

We sit down and put food on our plates. My queen is doing good work, saving lives and leading our people to glory. Now that I see this is what makes her heart happy, I will not drag her away from it.

She asks, after taking a drink of her hydration fluid, “Have you heard any more about how the Earth Gov soldiers are settling in?”

I smile because I have good news to deliver. “I am told the Earth Gov soldiers were eager to ditch their uniforms in favor of civilian clothing. Their attention seems squarely on males rather than sneaking around the ship for nefarious purposes.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Now that I’m thinking more clearly, I don’t know why them being onboard was so anxiety producing for me.”

“I believe it was because they didn’t do a good job of protecting you as a child. Now, you don’t trust that they wish to do the right thing in this new situation. In your eyes, they have been tested and failed.”

She swallows the food in her mouth before responding. “I’m certain you’re right. We’ll be on Onello soon and then they will become someone else’s problem.”

“I have been told they wish to be sent to the Talidarian home world.”

“Even better,” she responds happily.

Her com goes off and when she answers it, Menoix’s daughter Daneria’s face shimmers into view. “Greetings, Queen Electra. I hope you are well this day.”

“Greetings to you as well, Queen Daneria. I am well. How about yourself?”

The child responds politely, “I’m well and hope I’m not interrupting.”

“Of course not. I always have time for my new allies. What can I do for you today?”

The youngster’s eyes cut to the side for a moment before she focuses once again on my queen. “I wish to ask if you will mentor me in leadership. Not full time, of course. Just a few hours here and there when you get an opportunity. I admire you greatly and would be grateful for whatever guidance you would be kind enough to bestow upon me.”

My queen’s eyes light up with genuine pleasure. “Of course, I would be delighted to have you at my side. I was thrown into leadership by necessity when I was young. However, I suspect your kind matures at a faster rate. You’re so grown up for your age.”

“Yes, the healers say our biology is different and we do mature faster.”

My queen responds smoothly, “I think we have much to learn from each other.”

The youngster is practically bursting with excitement at the positive response she received. “When can we get started?”

My queen thinks it over for a few moments and replies, “Perhaps today and every day you can spare. I do not know how much longer our ships will remain in sync. We should take advantage of the time we have together.”

The girl’s eyes are shining with excitement. “Shall I come now?”

I speak for my queen. “Now would be wonderful. If you like, I can use our particle device to transport you to our quarters and you can dine with us.”

Daneria turns to the side and asks, “Can I, Papa?”

Menoix steps close to his young queen. “Yes, if Queen Electra is certain this is not an intrusion.”

“Absolutely not. I’d love to become one of Daneria’s mentors. It would be an honor.”

I chime in, “You should come as well, Menoix. Your company is always a pleasure.”

He gazes down at his daughter. “No, I have other duties to attend to. Perhaps we can get together later this evening or even tomorrow.”

I suddenly understand that he wants his daughter to have this experience all on her own, independent of the long shadow he casts. She throws her arms around him and nuzzles her face into his uniform. I must admit seeing them together makes me long to see my own little spawn’s face.

An instant later, Daneria is sitting at our table, and we are enjoying her innocent questions. I listen as my queen tells her all about her abduction from Earth, how she grew up under the control of the Garoth, and how they were geneticists that spliced the genes of different species to create unique beings that had never existed before. Beings such as Draconians. She tells her about making friends with Meric and how they instigated a rebellion against her Garothian overlords and drove them from that sector of space.

Daneria is mesmerized by my queen’s tale. To my surprise, my queen even told her about meddling with the timeline in the hopes of saving more lives. Since it seemed to have worked and Earth was soon to be ash, I guess my queen cares less about who knows such things. She spends two hours giving Daneria a tour of the ship, introducing her to the bridge crew,

and showing her how the Garoth had modified her hair to enable her to absorb vast amounts of information through a neural upload. Daneria even takes a liking to Slayor and mimics the tone my queen uses to speak to him while she smooths her hand down his side like her mentor.

This is when it hits me. I am used to being in Exion space, where until very recently there was a massive war playing out. My queen also fought a brutal war for our survival over two and a half thousand years ago and then was put in stasis, only woken to fight when our kind was in mortal danger. All the battles are still fresh in our mind, so we see the 'verse as a dangerous place. Meanwhile, others are aware that the occasional dangers exist and still manage to live normal lives and raise families without the kind of internalized paranoia that my queen and I share.

As I watch my queen interact with Daneria I can see two things. The first is that this very psychologically mature youngling looks up to my queen and is taking in every word that falls from Queen Electra's mouth. The second thing I notice is that my queen's normally impenetrable walls are slowly coming down. Being in the Naxis is good for us because even though there is danger, it is minimal compared to what we are used to. Being here gives us a chance to decompress, let down our guard and enjoy friendships we wouldn't otherwise have.

I know my queen is intent upon returning to Exion space. She wishes to live on Dracon Prime. I know that we will find happiness there, but it is these days that we will cherish the most. When our missions are relatively safe and our free time is our own. My hand goes down to gently cover the now engorged egg sack on my hip. It has grown to the size of my queen's fist and although it is barely noticeable under my

clothing, I feel it burning with the fire of a thousand suns. Now is the time I and my queen have been waiting for. Our spawn needs to come out of my body and go into his incubation unit.

I don't need to alert my queen, for her eyes are forever on me. Even when she is engaged in a deep conversation with Daneria she glances at me from time to time, to see that I am well. When she glances at me again, her eyes travel down the length of my arm, and she excuses herself from speaking with Daneria without taking her eyes off me.

When she approaches, I feel my heart thumping in my chest. There is such concern on her face.

“Are you okay? Is it time?” Her voice is more worried than excited. It is almost as though she thinks I am the first of my kind ever to produce young.

I smile indulgently at my beautiful queen. “I am well. Nothing in the 'verse can slow down an old blood warrior, especially not spawning for his queen.”

She grabs my hand and leads me down the corridors to the main healing unit. Daneria and Slayor follow behind. I can hear Slayor excitedly explaining Draconian reproduction to the young feline. I stay focused on my queen and our little spawn. By the time we get there, the healers are already rushing around to prepare for our arrival.

It occurs to me that Slayor must have messaged them that we were coming. They swarm me, because I am spawning for the queen of this ship and because she is perhaps the most revered of all the fire-haired queens.

My queen hovers, for she recognizes this moment is one of the most important in our lives. Our little one is being spawned. It

is a moment that will be long remembered, the day the first in our line was placed into his stasis unit.

My queen smooths her hand down one of my wings. “Hey, my takadon, how are you doing? Are you in pain?”

I cup the side of her face with one hand and reassure her, “It is more discomfort than pain. Luckily you have an old blood warrior spawning for you. We are practically impervious to pain.”

I know my queen downloaded the entire Draconian database in addition to being present when our progenitors were created, so she is more knowledgeable than any other human queen when it comes to Draconian reproduction. Therefore, she does not ask a bunch of unnecessary questions to the healers. She simply keeps her attention on me until it is time to remove our egg from my sack.

I take her hands in mine and run my nose up one side of her face and down the other. She accepts my Draconian kisses with a gentle human kiss of her own.

“I can’t wait to see our little spawn,” she whispers, excitement making her voice higher.

I snort a laugh. “Fresh Draconian spawns are not pleasing to the eye. At this stage they resemble a slimy blob.”

My queen playfully pinches my arm. “I know what fresh spawn looks like. I’ve seen thousands of them, in every stage of gestation while slaving in the overlords’ laboratories.”

I place my hand over hers, which is now resting blamelessly against my arm. My tail curls around her waist and I tug her closer. “It seems as though I am destined to underestimate exactly how much you were exposed to in those labs for all eternity, my queen.”

She mimics Slayor's voice as she preens a bit. "I know everything about Draconians that there is to know. In fact, I'm the queen of all knowing."

She grins at me and then looks over her shoulder at Slayor across the room. Naturally, with the psychic link and his own excellent hearing, he caught her impersonation.

She chuckles and turns back to me. "Slayor's glad I'm finally learning to act like a true goddess and suggests that next time I should remember to allow my hair to lift up around my head in a burnished halo. He insists it will add to my magnificence."

I smother back a smile and give her hand a gentle squeeze. "I think you're magnificent enough just the way you are, my queen."

Suddenly, we are swarmed by healers. They don't elbow our queen out of the way but crowd her until she steps back. I loosen my tail's hold on her waist, but I do not let her go entirely. I don't need this connection between us while I spawn but I like it.

I have never felt my egg sack open before this day. Until now it was sealed tight against my body and went mostly unnoticed. When the healers break the seal, it is disconcerting. My queen and I watch as one small, pliable egg is carefully removed. It has the dark green coloring of an old blood warrior, yet it is misshapen.

My heart sinks because I have delivered to my queen an imperfect spawn. In the days of old, when we lived under the claw of Draconian queens, our old queens would have reaped my humble offering on the spot. Although human queens do not reap our young, I am certain they feel some small level of disappointment over such things.

My wings close into a tight formation at my back and my tail slips from around my queen. My joy diminishes as I realize loving this child of ours will fall to me, while my queen overlooks him in favor of future young that are spawned without deficits. This is the nightmare that all Draconian males fear, being given a chance by the beautiful queen of his heart and then failing to provide viable hatchlings.

My queen reaches out to me, but I shrug away her touch. “I wish to be alone, my queen.”

I don't look back to see the anger, disappointment, or whatever emotions are in play upon her lovely face in this moment. I am too wounded at this stroke of bad luck that will surely divide us and perhaps cause her to rethink making me her takadon.

She moves back but does not leave as the healers insert a tube into my egg sack and finally drain the stinging fluid that housed my egg away. The procedure relieves the insistent burning sensation almost immediately. The healers caring for me give each other knowing looks and the ones further away whisper. I could perk my ears and listen more closely in an effort to understand what they say but I do not because in this moment I do not care what they say. No matter if he is perfect or not, he is my child, and I will cherish him with all the love in my soul.

I do not know how they manage it, but the healers take my queen with them when they leave. Perhaps they wish to give me space to come face to face with my failings as a male. I come to my feet, holding one hand over my aching egg sack and walk across the room to peer into my little spawn's incubation chamber.

It is yet tiny but even my untrained eye can see something is amiss. Although it pulses with life, there is a noticeable

formation on the very top that looks almost as though my tiny scion attempted to chew his way out of his egg. Draconian eggs start out being very pliant, much like an organ membrane. It will grow from the size of my thumb to the size of a Draconian fist or larger. During the last stages of development minerals get pushed to the outside to create a hard shell, which the little spawn must break through in order to survive.

I turn this situation over in my mind. This is a serious situation. If the original egg was compromised and some of the fluid from my egg sack leaked inside, it would have burned and perhaps disfigured my spawn. Old bloods are not a pleasure to look upon but being scarred thus in the shell will ensure he is ever less so, if he survives long enough to break from the shell.

I press my hand against the cool glass of the incubation bubble and will my scion to live, vowing to him that no matter what, I will never forsake him. The blue medical scanning laser dances lazily over my scion.

Producing perfect spawn is such a strong expectation among my people that I do not know how they will react to having one among our ranks with glaringly obvious imperfections. If my people shun us, I will take him into the mountain clades on Onello, where I know we will be welcomed, and we will live amongst other old bloods who do not care about such things.

I cannot even think about the possibility of being forsaken by my queen. I believe she will attempt to stand by us, but I cannot hope to retain my position as her takadon if I cannot spawn for her like a warrior should. Even if she holds true to the oath she has made to me, I will not allow my little warrior

to be raised in an environment where his peers see him as less than.

I spread my fingers against the incubation unit. “Our future may seem bleak, but we will find a way, my scion. Old bloods always do.”

GREAT THINGS SMALL PACKAGES

Electra

I want to stay with Relic, but the healers are insistent that I come with them. I refuse until they tell me that my takadon needs to rest and they wish to discuss something unexpected about our little spawn. I worry it might be something they don't want to discuss in front of my clearly exhausted mate.

When I am safely ensconced in the medical office, I realize our primary healer and his two highest ranking assistants are present. The rest of our nearly twenty-person medical team have moved on with their duties.

After we make ourselves comfortable in his seating area, I turn to Healer Covac. "What is it you want to tell me about my daughter?"

His mouth falls open and suddenly all three of the healers are wearing the same exact dumbfounded expression.

The fact that he glances at the others for a second before he speaks alarms me. He recovers his composure and explains, "We did not expect that you would recognize the sign of a

female egg. They are rare and even more so among old blood warriors.”

I can't help but wonder if this is the same healer that didn't care about the burning sensation Relic suffered when he was implanted with the fertility suppressor. Probably not, but I'm still mad about that.

Leaning forward I try not to glare. “I keep telling everyone that I witnessed the progenitors of all your lines being created. Being present in the Garothian laboratories means I've seen more as a child than you will likely ever see as a healer. Even if I were totally clueless, I've downloaded your entire database and there are several examples of old blood female eggs.”

“What you say is true,” Covac grudgingly acknowledges. “We simply wanted to make certain you understood the significance of this event. Females are precious and their eggs need to be identified early and treated with care.”

“I don't disagree with anything you said but I well know what a female Draconian egg looks like. The nub on the top was genetically engineered as a handle of sorts. Because female eggs were so much smaller the Garoth found it difficult to keep hold of them.”

The healer opens his mouth, but I cut him off.

“I know they are no longer noticeably smaller. The Garoth tinkered with their genome to make them more robust. Still, they liked the visual reminder of which eggs were female. It facilitated the counting when they didn't want to scan.”

The healer's eyes narrow. “You are our goddess. If you say it is so, then it must be true.”

It seems as though the healers are the one classification of Draconians that don't automatically defer to me like the

others. This is the moment it hits me that the reason is probably because they are more pragmatic, evidence-based thinkers.

I cut them some slack in my own mind. “I know that it’s hard to discover a physical trait that you thought evolved naturally was achieved artificially, but you need to understand the magnitude of the Garoth’s experimentation. There were thousands of them with hundreds of labs, all working on different genetic manipulations. My hair should be evidence enough that they took their work seriously.”

His frown relaxes. “We have a difficult time imagining things we did not experience,” Covac acknowledges.

“Well, I might be able to make some notes about what I witnessed during that time period which might help you understand the Draconian genome a little better.”

Their expressions go from guarded to excited in an instant. “That would be highly desirable, Queen Electra. Anything that would help us understand our original genome might assist us in treating rare illnesses and genetic abnormalities among our people.”

“Well, if that is all you have to say, I should return to my takadon and my daughter,” I state, trying to be diplomatic.

“Yes, your old blood has given you a queen. That is cause for celebration.”

I turn on my heel and leave the medical bay, not liking the slight bitter edge to Covac’s voice. It seems that my takadon was right about some of his brethren not being thrilled that I took an old blood as my one and only mate.

When I get back out to the main medical bay Relic and my child are nowhere to be found. He’d left to take her home

without me. I don't know why he didn't wait for me but knowing my mate the way I do he must have had his reasons.

I hurry to our quarters to see if he is alright. Cognitively I know he is because our internal scanners track our vitals and alert us immediately if anyone is ill. Maybe the healers were right and he just needed a moment to himself.

When I enter our quarters, I find him fitting the incubation unit into the wall. We added the mechanics to support it last week in anticipation of this spawning.

“You left without me. Is everything okay?”

He continues fiddling with the incubation unit without responding. I move closer, trying to process what is going on with my new mate.

When he turns, he looks grief stricken. I panic and rush to the incubation chamber and gaze at our little one. Everything looks fine. I use the touchscreen at the bottom to check to make certain her scans are within normal ranges. When I turn to speak to Relic, he's distanced himself from me.

I ask cautiously, “Can we talk?”

He gestures to the seating area we rarely use because we spend most of our time in this room in bed. “Certainly, my queen.”

I sense something is terribly wrong with Relic. It can only be one thing. Spawning must have been such an unpleasant experience that he has no desire to spawn again and has no idea how to break the bad news to me. Realizing this is what is bothering him I start the conversation.

“I'm sorry if spawning was an unpleasant experience for you, my takadon. If you don't want to do it again, we can talk to the healers about finding a suppressor that doesn't cause the same burning sensation your old one did.”

“If that is what you wish, it will be so.”

Staring at his bereft face it's clear that I still don't get it. There must be something more wrong that I do not understand. “What I want is for you to talk to me. Let me in. Help me understand what you're going through.”

“I have failed at the most fundamental task expected of a male. It stands to reason that you no longer wish for me to spawn for you.”

“Failed?” My mind grinds to a stop. “Are you upset that you spawned a female? I thought Draconians loved little queens.”

His wings snap closed and his horns slip back against his head. “What do you say, my queen?”

“Let's start again. What do you think you failed at? Exactly how did you fail?”

“My offering is not robust, and the egg is damaged. Many would see my little warrior as a less desirable offering, but I warn you that I do not.”

“For the last time, our child is a girl, not a boy. Her shell is not damaged.”

“Warriors do not spawn queens unless they are breeders,” he responds tightly.

“A couple of old blood warriors on Onello have spawned queens. And now so have you,” I insist.

“It does not matter; the shell is damaged on the top.”

I stand and cross the distance between us then kneel in front of him. “It's not damaged, I promise. Haven't you ever seen a female egg before?”

His brow ridge drops into a frown. “No, it was forbidden to look upon a young queen. We were not permitted to see the egg of a queen, for they were kept hidden away in the dame’s chamber.”

“Haven’t you looked at the few images in the database of the ones on Onello?”

“I focused on gathering information on little warriors because none in my line have ever spawned a queen.”

I take his hands in mine. “Look, I can tell this whole situation has thrown you for a loop. How about you and I curl up on our sleeping platform and look through the images ourselves. You’ll see, they look much like your egg.”

His grief-stricken expression eases to one of profound concern. “I did wonder why the scans didn’t pick up any problems though I clearly saw there was an issue.”

I give him a quick hug. “There are no issues with our daughter.”

“We were taught that warriors can only breed other male young that are almost identical to their sire.”

“Yeah, you reproduce by parthenogenesis. Your reproductive system is activated by female hormones and all that jazz.”

He gives me a wan smile. “I am greatly confused by warriors spawning queens.”

“All that mumbo jumbo about only breeders absorbing the genetic material of their queens to spawn was clearly not true. I think that was part of the lies your infected queens told you in an effort to control you and keep you under their claw.”

“I cannot imagine carrying a queen in my body and spawning her without realizing. I would have been much more careful,

had I but known.” The quiet, somber tone of his voice rips at my heart.

I stand and hold out my hand. “Come cuddle with me and let’s look at those images of old blood queens.”

We dim the lights so we can rest then lay on our stomachs on the bed. My handsome mate stretches his wings out above his body, trying to get comfortable. His tail swishes back and forth. Even though he’s all gleaming scales and sexy fangs, something about him is different. He seems wary, exhausted even. I am certain it is from spawning. When he quiets down, I lean over and place a kiss against the side of his face.

I pull up three dimensional images of the eggs spawned by old blood males on Onello. His dark alien eyes glimmer in darkness as he carefully looks from one image to another. I can tell he’s processing every detail he sees.

His eyes flick up to mine. “You are correct, my queen. There is a strong resemblance between the egg I spawned and the ones spawned by my kind on Onello. The likeness is uncanny.”

“Would you like to see images of them as hatchlings?”

“Yesss,” he replies with a smokey exhale. “Onello has a robust old blood community in one of their mountain regions.”

We watch them run around playing together. Other Draconian children join them. The children are clearly having the time of their life being outdoors, for they chase after each other and jump up to soar through the air.

They swarm around their mothers and fathers, all smiles and laughter. I watch the women doting on their Draconian mates and children. The males seem contented, proud, and strong.

They remind me so much of Relic, I begin to dream of living amongst them.

Relic murmurs, “The little ones are so carefree.”

“It’s the way children are, I suppose.” My response is automatic. I say it without thinking.

“No,” Relic states boldly. “You weren’t carefree when you were slaved by the Garoth as a child. I was not carefree when I crept around our ship’s nursery being shuffled from one area to another to avoid the likelihood of being reaped by our infected queen.”

I nodded, “You’re right, of course. It is the way children are supposed to be.”

Gazing back at the children playing, he continues this thought. “I believe there are very few places in the ’verse where my kind are truly accepted. I wish my spawn to know the kind of unconditional acceptance these children have. I want the fellowship of my kind.”

My heartbeat speeds up. “You like the idea of being on Onello? I was just thinking the same thing.”

His eyes search my face, and he finally tells me what’s on his mind. “I wish to be well positioned to care for my young should you decide to move on to a new adventure without me.”

I freeze in place, wondering why he thinks I would ever leave him behind. As the quiet hum of the children’s voices continue playing in the background, I remind him, “The word takadon means one and only forever. No queen would leave her one true mate behind.”

Relic takes a deep breath and explains quietly, “I do not think you believe yourself capable of such a thing. However, you

live to fight for a good cause. If an opportunity came for you to save a multitude of lives, you would leave us behind. What choice would you have? You cannot take our hatchling into the heart of darkness, nor can you allow others to suffer and die.”

A long silence draws out between us, for my clever takadon is not wrong about any of that. It would indeed be an excruciatingly difficult decision to make between staying with my loved ones and saving lives. He’s right about wanting to plan for that eventuality, for I cannot say ahead of time exactly which I would choose.

“Let us finish the evacuation of Earth. Then I will speak with Queen Caroline about acquiring a space for us in the mountains of Onello. I would like to think my days of fighting are over.”

“It will be as you wish, my queen.” My strong warrior is still not fully recovered from spawning. His voice has a wooden, hollow sound to it that I do not like. I set the tablet we were using aside, and cuddle up to him. We do not speak because I suspect we are both trying to process what just happened. We drift off to sleep still wearing our clothing. My dreams are once again haunted with battles long past.

LONG LOST ENEMY

Relic

A slip of distance now stands between my queen and I that wasn't there before. I feel it in my soul and know not what to do about it. My queen's calling is to protect our people and save innocent lives. I cannot fault her inherent goodness. Before I spawned for her, I thought such would be my life as well. Now, I strongly feel my future duty is to our children, but also to my queen as well.

I am a male ripped apart. I cannot imagine being separated from my queen. But I also cannot imagine our children being on board when we are fighting for the cause of righteous, nor can I imagine allowing others to raise them in my stead. I would never wish to be away from my own little queen. I curse myself for not thinking clearly about our situation until it was too late.

What's worse, I am positioning myself to spawn again. My queen seems to have forgotten about talking with the healers about my suppressor and I am content to say not a word about it. I have no wish to remind her, for I do wish to spawn again so that my little queen will have a sibling growing up. I know the loneliness of being raised without someone to play with

and confide in as a child and I would not wish that on my precious little queen. Therefore, I will spawn as many as my queen allows.

My queen and I are on yet another mission to collect humans that have been isolated from our group and we are entering Earth's atmosphere.

Daneria and Slayor are with us today. Their company is most welcome. I am displeased at being forced by circumstance to leave my little spawn. Even though one of the more experienced elders from the nursery is with her, I don't like being parted from her. My protective instincts are wildly out of control when it comes to my youngling.

Daneria is excited because this is her first time piloting a Draconian shuttle. My queen is at her side, supervising. So far it has been a smooth ride. Slayor is laid out on the floor, licking one paw. He has been talking incessantly about seeking out the female dragon he thinks might have survived in stasis with his queen, like he did with Queen Electra. I wish this for him, for he is a strong warrior who deserves a mate of his kind, so he might enjoy the privilege of creating young of his own one day.

Suddenly he stops talking. Slayor freezes in place and his eyes drift closed. His nostrils flare. For the first time ever, I realize he has a battle form. His scales ripple into a green that's so dark it looks almost black. My queen's hands go for her weapons, and she palms them in blink of an eye. Whatever Slayor senses, my queen does as well.

The dragon's smoky voice speaks with growly edge. "They're here, my queen. Prepare yourself."

Queen Electra hits the shield release in the center of the breastplate of her armor. Then she grabs another shield pod

from one of the storage cabinets and attached it to the front of Daneria's armor.

I pull out my own weapons as Electra tries to send a warning to our ship. Finally, she stops trying. "They're jamming our signals."

I ask grimly, "The Garoth are on Earth?"

She nods and takes the helm from her faithful student. "I can sense them. I'm going to get us as close to their location as possible."

Slayer slinks over to sit on the floor beside her. "They are on our lutar, where the sun rises."

"You're right as always, my old friend."

Daneria announces, "I brought weapons and I'm prepared to fight."

I reassure her, "Thank you, Daneria. Your father would be proud. However, I think it best for you to remain with the shuttle. One of the most often used battle tactics is for the enemy to cut off our escape as the battle rages. If that happens we will lose access to the heavy weapons this shuttle carries and a safe place to fall back to in addition to our only means of escape."

"You need me to protect our most valuable asset? I can do that."

I give her shoulder a squeeze. "Thank you, Daneria. When we land, you keep the shields up until you see us coming back."

"Yes, sir. You can count on me in a battle sequence."

We cannot allow a dangerous adversary to run free culling the people of Earth during an evacuation. Although Daneria looks and behaves like a young adult because her people age

differently, she has only seen thirteen solar revolutions according to how our people track time. Therefore she will remain safely on the ship, for it is the position that affords her the most safety.

Meanwhile, I open an artillery storage unit and begin pulling out weapons of every shape and size. I load my bulky form down with as many as I can carry and then pull out a pulse cannon. While I am attaching it to one massive shoulder, my queen speaks.

“You have exactly the right amount of weapons to fight the Garoth, if we can catch them unawares.”

“They sound like a formidable enemy.”

She steps past me and loads up with weapons as well. “It depends upon how many and what kinds of beasts they have brought.”

I don't like the sound of any of that. But still, old bloods love a good fight. I can already feel the excitement building in my chest. I stretch and ripple into my secondary fighting form in an instant. “Stay behind me, my queen. If Slayor and I fall, you fight.”

She frowns at me. “That's not how it works. I'm bait. I'll lure the beast closer. You and Slayor come up on each side. When I turn, we attack together. Trust me on this. It's the only way.”

“It will be as you say, my queen.” I do mean that truthfully, for my queen knows best how to fight our ancient enemy. She knows all their tricks and the best strategies for defeating them. I need to stop thinking like a Draconian warrior and adapt my fighting style to what is most likely to defeat the Garoth.

We lower the ramp and Slayor stomps out first and takes to the sky to do recon. We close up the shuttle and activate the shield with Daneria inside.

“Is there anything you can tell me about the Garoth that you haven’t shared, my queen?”

She gives me the side eye before disclosing, “They see us as meat in addition to slaves. The Garoth are very much a waste not, want not, kind of species. They won’t kill us for food unless they’re starving. However, they do eat the remains of the battlefield, both humanoid and beast.”

“That’s the reason you spirited away your fallen comrades from the field of battle,” I state quietly.

Her eyes become haunted for a micron or two as she remembers the horrors of war.

I unhinge the pulse cannon from my shoulder and respond lightly, “Then we should do our best not to fall in battle, for I have no desire to be eaten by the Garoth and know you are not strong enough to drag my hefty corpse behind you, much less Slayor.”

She grins at my morbid humor. Our moment of levity is short lived, because Slayor lands and scurries over to us. “There is a Garoth shuttle over the ridge line. I sense our enemy within.”

“What about the surrounding area?”

“I saw nothing for an arc in every direction. My scanners pick up nothing, not even the Garoth shuttle I saw with my own eyes.” After a brief pause, Slayor asks, “What kind of magic is this, my queen?”

“It’s no magic,” she says. “It’s just them jamming our scanners as well as our communications. You know as well as I that the

Garoth are always inventing new ways to make capturing slaves easier and more efficient.”

Smoke drifts from Slayor’s nose because he’s so worked up. “It does not matter. Just like in the days of old, our enemies will die this day and their tech will be ours.”

“We will be victorious, like always,” my queen intones.

This seems like some solemn vow they make to themselves, so I join in. “We will kill them, no matter the costs.”

Both Slayor and Electra turn to look at me and their eyes light up.

We take to the air, with my queen on Slayor’s back to free up all our hands for weapons. My eyes eat up the sight of Slayor and my queen moving through the air together. My queen leans into the wind, making it easier for her dragon to bank, and they move as one. Jealousy rises in my mind, but I push it away. Slayor is our closest friend. He does not deserve animosity from me over something as trivial as jealousy.

We crest the ridge line and dive right down to land on the ground in front of the shuttle. The moment my feet touch the ground I pull out my scanner, intuiting that it might work if we are closer to their ship.

“I’m picking up one Garoth life sign, my queen.”

She glances back in a panic. “Only one and no beasts?”

Before I can answer, Slayor takes to the air, screaming, “It’s a trap.”

He circles the area and watches from overhead.

My queen and I watch in horror as several beings reveal themselves. Slayor was right, it is a trap. Not a Garothian one

but one set by the Karaix. Large vicious-looking males with orange fur step forward.

My queen glances back at me. “Go. Protect the child.” She dares not say Daneria’s name for fear of exposing her.

I shoot forward, grabbing her with my free arm and taking flight, unloading my plasma cannon on the aliens who had hoped to trap us below. Slayor flies around positioning himself between us and the enemy’s return fire.

My queen yells, “Let me go. I need to capture that Garothian. We need answers as to why they’ve aligned themselves with the Karaix.”

I fly as fast as I can back to our shuttle, back to protect the teen, because I am sure that’s what this is all about. The Karaix are one of the few species that are not biologically compatible with humans. They are desperate enough for a feline mate to resort to this kind of deceit to secure one. Capturing a human and a dragon would sweeten their victory for they would be priceless commodities on worlds that deal in illegal trade goods.

Sure enough, the Karaix that lured us away were small in number. There are close to thirty surrounding our shuttle. We alight on the ground and begin firing our weapons as Slayor attacks from the air. An aerial assault is the most effective, but I do not wish to leave my queen alone on the ground.

“Go,” she says. “Take to the air. Kill as many as you can, as quickly as possible. I want to get back to the Garothian.”

I hesitate but a moment and then do as my queen commands. Slayor and I manage to kill expeditiously as we keep most of the Karaixian away from Queen Electra. She does more than

her share by picking them steadily off one by one with her plasma pistols.

This is not a bad situation, really. I can protect my queen while engaging the enemy. Slayor screeches, “See to the shuttle. They have broken through the shield.”

I turn as he blows a long stream of fire towards the males prying open the shuttle door. I turn my plasma cannon on them as well, careful to keep from blowing up the shuttle with Daneria on it.

I see my queen move forward and remove something from her belt. There is a blistering white light and the next thing I know I am on the ground with my queen, Slayor and Daneria. She used one of the particle devices to transport us.

The young feline is panicking. “They were shooting at the shuttle. The shield came down and I could hear them clawing at it.”

“Don’t worry. We’ve got your back.”

A shot lands near us, and my queen starts quickly giving commands.

“Everyone keep their personal shields at maximum. Daneria, I want you stay in the middle. The rest of us will form a protective ring, facing outward. We’ve got our weapons set to kill. Gun down as many of the enemy as possible. Don’t stop until every single one of them is dead. If I fall in battle, retrieve the Garoth.”

When the Karaix regroup and come at us again, we are ready. Electra and Slayor have a maneuver where they keep stepping to the side in a never-ending circle. I follow suit because a slow-moving target is still harder to kill than a stationary one.

We exchange fire for I don't know how long. It's unfortunate that we don't have time to find a fallback position that affords us some small measure of protection. Slayor's shield goes down shortly before mine. We both take hits that sting but the scales of our enhanced battle forms offer some protection.

We've killed all but a handful when Electra's shield flickers out. Somehow it spontaneously lights up to full force again. That's when I see Daneria is hugging her from behind, sharing her shield.

Just when I think we have a chance of making it out of this fight alive, another handful of Karaixian warriors wearing jet packs land. One is gigantic compared to the others. He has a massive weapon on his shoulder. When he points it at us, Slayor and I jump in front of the queens. I cannot believe he would chance destroying the prize he hopes to gain in battle.

When he pulls the trigger, I realize it is merely a weapon designed to knock us out. It's not particularly effective on Slayor and myself because of our dragon heritage. Nor does it totally immobilize the females because they are sharing a Draconian shield. It does give the enemy a minute to wrench our weapons away.

It's Daneria who speaks first. "What is the meaning of this? Why do you attack me? I have done nothing to the Karaix to warrant retaliation."

"You misunderstand. We attack those holding you hostage in order to liberate you."

"I'm not being held hostage." She gestures to the weapon they stripped from her on the ground at his feet. "Can you not see I was armed? Hostages are not given weapons."

His voice turns sly, “There are many ways to curtail another person’s freedom. Sometimes it is done with chains and rope. Often is it though deceit and offers of friendship. You, kitten, do not belong with the dragon warriors.”

He kneels down to appear less intimidating and to look her in the face. “Come to me, little one. Tell me what you wish of me.”

Daneria pays no heed to my queen’s hissed warning. She steps closer to the male that is at least three times her size. My eyes go wide. Am I the only one who notices that her walk is more of a predatory stalk? Even her tail twitches. When she is face to face with him, she purrs. “I am not certain what you wish of me this day.”

“I wish only for what all males want, a mate to call my own. And I will gladly kill the others to make you mine.”

“They’re my friends,” she states quietly.

He responds flatly, “They are unworthy of a budding queen such as yourself. They aren’t very smart. I easily trapped them with the creature they fear so much.”

Daneria glances from one to the other of the five remaining males and then over her shoulder to us. Only the look she gives is one that communicates she is about to do something we might all live to regret.

When she turns back to the Karaix, her voice sounds small and timid. “I am not of an age to breed.”

His nostrils flare and he moves his whiskers back and forth.

“It matters not. In a few solars you will be.” When she hesitates, his voice becomes hard. “I must insist.”

His next teasing words seal his fate. “Even a dowdy little feline with mousy grey fur can breed magnificent Karaixian warriors, after all. You, kitten, belong with your own kind.”

When her hands come up to touch his whiskers, his ears slick back submissively. She runs her fingers gently down each whisker and then up to the one sticking up from his brow.

As she moves her hand along his brow ridges his eyes drift closed. When he opens them again, she unexpectedly drives her now extended claws straight into both of his eyeballs and then slices deeper as she grits out, “You’re not my kind, Karaix.”

The warrior flails and pushes her back but not in time. By the time she disengages, her claws are tipped with grey matter and he is holding his hands over his eyes, groaning. With one powerful foot, she kicks the large warrior on his ass.

Without waiting for the shock to wear off, I reach inside my uniform and pull out another weapon they didn’t have time to take. Slayor rushes forward and bites the head off one enemy, while my queen digs a weapon out of her boot and begins shooting again.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Daneria fling her body at the flailing warrior she blinded. She grabs the dagger from his belt and plunges it into his neck screaming, “That is for every one of my kind you’ve killed, Salwart the Destroyer. How can you believe for a second that I would not recognize your face?”

Daneria is clearly dealing with her own stuff right now. My queen, Slayor and I finish off the few remaining Karaix. We have to pull Daneria off the one she called Salwart the Destroyer, for she is still cursing him and stabbing at him with that damnable dagger that in her small hands looks more like a sword.

My queen wraps her arms around the teen. “Daneria, calm yourself. The battle is won.”

The teen starts crying. There are no tears but that has to be what she is doing. The wheezy sound and the way she chokes out each sob breaks my heart. She is too young to fight fully grown warriors. It was his own folly to underestimate a female of his kind. Salwart never should have kneeled before her, insulted her fur or threatened to take her against her will. Those were severe errors in judgement on his part, ones that cost him his life.

When Daneria calms, her expression turns embarrassed. “I apologize for my emotional overflow. I should have held myself to a higher standard.”

My queen steps back. “I was a mess after my first kill as well. Was that your first kill?”

Daneria wipes at the fur on her face, clearly intent upon tidying up. “Yes. My very first battle and my very first kill.”

Queen Electra states soothingly, “You did well. I thought you were a seasoned warrior the way you used your charm and claws to defeat a male twice your size.”

The young feline’s spirits lift as she admits, “I didn’t do that on purpose.”

I interject, “That is even better. It means you have the instincts of a warrior. Your people will be proud. This is the battle that marks you out as a true warrior among your people. From this moment forward, you are considered by Draconians to be a protector of your people.”

Slayer slithers over, picks up the dagger she used to kill her enemy and presents it to her, “Good warriors have first rights to the spoils of war.”

She grabs the dagger by the hilt and wipes the blood off on her fallen enemy.

Slayor reaches down and plucks several items of value off the dead warrior and dumps them into one of the pouches on her belt. “Since he was such a victorious warrior, you will want to take keepsakes of this day to share with those he has wronged.”

I quickly release a flying memorial drone to take scans and images of the fallen dead for our database. Slayor gathers items of worth and their weapons, tucking them in the hold of our shuttle.

Daneria asks, “Do you think the shuttle is flight worthy?”

My queen shakes her head. “It might get us to the Garoth shuttle they used to lure us here, but it won’t be able to break Earth’s orbit.”

I speak up, “Once we deal with the Garoth, perhaps we can use their shuttle to tow our own back to the ship. I know our engineers will want to have a look at their technology.”

My queen agrees. “Let’s get out of here before the Garoth catch wind that their allies lost the battle.”

ENEMY OF OUR ENEMY

ELECTRA

*W*e manage to get our shuttle to the site where the Garoth landed with some complications. I thought for a minute Slayor and Relic were going to have to get out, hoist the craft up, and fly us there.

There are only two guards on the ground when we land.

I instruct the others, “Set your weapons to stun. I want to interrogate these Karaix, so don’t kill them.” Turning to Daneria, I state teasingly, “I’m looking at you, Daneria.”

The young one grins. “I will try to control myself. If one of them tries to mate me, I’m not making any promises.”

We disembark with Slayor and Relic in the lead. We’ve loaded up with fresh shields, so the fight is pretty one sided. By the time we’ve got them subdued and have them tagged with stasis pods, I find myself eager to confront the Garothian. I head for the door of his shuttle.

Relic rushes forward and takes the lead position, so he can shield me if we are attacked. Slayor steps in front of Daneria and uses his tail to snake around her waist. She huffs out a growl of exasperation, likely because she sees this as something his kind do to keep their young in line. We search through room after room.

I murmur with my own exasperation, “I can sense him. He’s so close.”

Slayor grumbles, “His scent is too thick. It’s hard to tell where it’s coming from.”

We finally break into a tiny compartment in the back. Instead of a Garothian hiding there, we find one in a cage. When he catches sight of Relic, the happiness at being rescued fades from his eyes. “It is most unfortunate to be rescued by our oldest and deadliest enemy.”

Relic responds tightly, “This isn’t a rescue. It is going to be an interrogation, but that can wait until we arrive on the Draconian warship orbiting overhead.”

“Don’t forget about me,” I interject. “I’m the one who originally drove your kind from our borders.”

“I know who you are, Electra.” He practically spits my name out of his mouth in disgust.

“Our legends are full of tales about how you savaged our ancestors in a brutal war. Whatever fool thought jumping back in time to bring you here was a good idea should be killed. Nothing good ever came of your involvement in any situation involving the Garoth.”

Hearing him say such warms my heart. I realize that I’m practically glowing with pleasure to hear how much they hate me. “Now, don’t think I’m going to go easy on you simply because you lob useless compliments at me right off the bat.”

The hunchbacked being with six fingers and oversized eyes and pale molted skin spits back, “I curse you and your line for all eternity. It is what you deserve for the evil you have wreaked on my kind.”

I inform him curtly, “It’s good that humans aren’t superstitious, or I might be quaking in my boots right now.”

With that I turn on my heel and walk out of the small compartment. Soon I will be privy to everything this male knows about his kind. I want to know where the Garoth are hiding and if they are still doing genetic experiments. I also want to divest them of their tech so they can’t jump back and forth in time.

With a final glance over his shoulder, Relic slams the door shut and locks it.

Slayer smiled at me, showing all his sharp teeth and asks, “Do I have Karaix fur in my fangs?”

I chuckle, charmed by his immature sense of humor. “No, but you do have lots of blood.”

He shrugs, “I need a particle cleanse. How about you?”

“I do,” I answer as we make our way to the bridge. “However, that’s not first on my list of things to do.”

He responds knowingly, “You wish to interrogate our enemies, do you not?”

“You know me well, my friend.” Slayer always talks a lot after a battle because he is still worked up. I’d long since made peace with his quirky personality.

He turns to me and peevishly says, “I am not worked up and my sense of humor is not immature. Perhaps I am the one who made peace with your lack of reciprocal conversation skills.”

I give him a pat on the side. “Don’t be grumpy. You know I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Well, you thought it,” he shoots back irritably.

I sit down at the helm and begin running through the startup procedures. The relevant information I downloaded all those years ago rises in my mind just when I need it. Glancing over my shoulder at Slayor, I remind him, “I can’t help the thoughts that fly through my mind. You have weird thoughts sometimes too, like flying through the ship spitting fire at everyone. I don’t get upset at your random thoughts.”

He tosses his head proudly. “My random thoughts are glorious.”

“Well, I’m only responsible for the words that come out of my mouth, not the thoughts that pop into my head, okay?”

He waves one paw dramatically and settles down to sleep. “We talk too much about nothing.”

Daneria scampers around until she finds a cloth and begins shining her new dagger.

Relic comes over and eases himself down into the seat beside me. It creaks under his massive weight. “Are you well, my queen?”

I nod, “Yeah. This wasn’t what I was expecting but battle never is.”

“I do not expect that Menoix will allow us to take his daughter off the ship again,” Relic worries out loud.

“He might be upset about her almost being taken by the Karaix. She did a good job of taking down one of their big warriors though. She’s smart and capable. I think he’ll be terrified at how close he came to losing her but proud of the way she fought in battle.”

Daneria’s voice drifts to the front of the shuttle. “The Karaix attack us every chance they get. My sire will not blame you for their ruthless behavior.”

Relic intones, “Thank you for trying to allay our fears, Daneria. That is a kindness we won’t forget.”

I ask her, “How are you holding up?”

“I am well. Killing a Karaix is a nearly impossible task. They are our mortal enemy and left us no other choice.”

We chat back and forth as we head back up to our ship. Once we break orbit, Relic sends a message to Havoc.

Havoc responds, “It’s good to hear from you. We were worried when we lost contact. Echo thought it might be some kind of equipment failure, but we were prepping another shuttle to check on you.”

Relic’s deep voice replies, “Thank you for following safety protocols, Havoc. Perhaps that shuttle can go in search of our intended target. We were unable to make contact because we were ambushed by the Karaix. They had a high value target which we brought back with us.”

“Do you need up to make special provisions for a high-status guest?”

I interject, “No. Prepare three holding cells and assign a five person round-the-clock guard.”

Havoc responds in a surprised tone, “Those must be some incredibly dangerous high value targets.”

“One is our ancient enemy and two are the enemy of our Agorian allies. Will you alert Menoix that there has been fighting and his daughter distinguished herself in battle?”

“Of course, my queen.”

Relic and I chat quietly about the possible implications of the Karaix becoming more active in this sector of space and of their lone Garothian captive.

Menoix is anxiously awaiting our arrival when we ease the Garoth vessel into the landing bay.

Daneria runs into his arms with her pockets jingling with loot and her new dagger secured firmly to her belt.

Menoix dips his head in the Draconian way. “I do not know what happened on the surface of the planet, but I thank you for bringing my daughter back home safely.”

I go ahead and tell him the bad news. “I don’t know how many young Agorian females you have on board your vessel, but we believe a warrior by the name of Salwart the Destroyer was targeting your daughter for mating.”

“He is a powerful warrior. We must gather the last of the peoples of Earth and head for Onello immediately.”

I glance at Daneria, and she pulls the dagger from her belt then lays it across both hands for her father to see. “He tried to force me to go with him and I killed him.”

Her father’s expression morphs into one of shock and then he wraps one arm around her shoulders and murmurs, “We will speak at length about your battle. I wish to hear every detail.”

When he looks back at me to say his goodbyes, I lower my voice. “We brought back two of the Karaixian crew, if you would like to speak to them.”

Menoix’s face freezes and his eyes glance to his daughter. “I’m going to stay here for a bit. I want you to go to our ship, cleanse yourself and rest. If you need me, contact me on my com.”

“Yes, Papa,” she responds. “Be careful of the Karaix.”

“I will, my daughter. Hurry now, our shuttle awaits.”

She darts across the bay and climbs aboard the shuttle that resembles a cat sitting on his paws. The moment the door is shut behind her, Menoix speaks. “Take me to them. I will get to the bottom of why they targeted my child for mating.”

A NEW ENEMY

Relic

I pace my sleeping chamber full of restless energy. Menoix extracted information from our captives but what he says changes everything. I wait for my queen to awaken. She was exhausted after the battle and all the stress and I do not wish to wake her early, but I am ready.

I hear her stirring on the sleeping platform and peek through the door to see she is sitting up and stretching. Even with all that is on my mind I take this moment to admire her beauty. She stretches her arms over her head making her full breasts pull tight and thrust out. Her fiery red hair creates a halo around her head.

I grab the waiting tray I had prepared for her and push the door open with my foot then enter.

She smiles, yawns then says, “Good morning, my takadon.”

I raise the tray before myself as I approach then kneel beside the platform and offer her the array I laid out. There are fruits, toast, and the strong coffee that she prefers. “Good morning, my love.”

“Every day I find new reasons to love you more,” she says, sipping on the coffee then picking a piece of fruit and popping it into her mouth.

“You are well rested, my queen?”

“Yes, but now we must get to work. We must verify if Menoix is right. If so...” she trails off because there is no need for the words. We both know the consequences if he is right.

I close the distance between us and take her into my arms. She leans up and into my kiss. The fiery halo of her hair lifting while our lips move together and arousal is instantaneous.

Despite the pressing of time, we need this. Both of us. These moments between battle are what we need to remind us why we fight. She throws the sheet aside and opens herself to me and I take all that she has to offer.

We walk hand in hand onto the bridge. She wastes no time taking control of the situation, and the loyal crew are ready.

She barks commands before she even takes the captain’s chair.
“What do the latest scans tell us?”

The com officer frowns deeply before answering. “My queen, all the scans of the area show that our enemy has been in retreat. They have abandoned known outposts and retreated further from our space.”

“But?” she asks, her lips pursing as her brow furrows.

The com officer looks down at his console, clearly reluctant to say more.

“We cannot be sure...” he trails off.

“Take a guess,” Electra snaps. “Hazard it. We need to know.”

The com officer meets her gaze, his horns drooping low. Captain Havoc steps up to his rescue.

“Queen Electra,” the captain says. “I hazard that the Karaixian have infiltrated and are at war with the Garothian.”

“That’s good,” I grumble.

“No,” Electra says, shaking her head. “It’s a problem. If they’re strong enough to go after the Garothian, then they are more of a threat than we supposed.”

“The only problem is that fur is hard to get out from between your teeth,” Slayor chimes in and the crew chuckle. Electra smiles at her dearest friend.

My thoughts are on my spawn, my little queen. Being here on the bridge is where I want to be, with Electra, but my duty now is to care for my spawn.

“How goes the evacuation?” Electra asks.

“With the help of Dracon and the help of Menoix and his people it will be finished in time,” Havoc answers looking at his com panel.

“Good,” she says. “Carry on.”

I feel how troubled she is. The tension in her feels like a knot in my mind. She looks at me and together we leave the bridge. I follow her to my quarters. She doesn’t speak at first, pacing the floor.

I watch in silence waiting for her to share her thoughts until I can take it no more. “What is it, my queen?”

“This is wrong,” she says. “It just... feels wrong. I think...”

“You are worried about the timeline,” I say. She stops pacing and looks at me with a deep frown. She nods sharply. “Do you think it changed? That the Garothian are losing ground because of it?”

“I do,” she says.

“What does that mean for us? For the future?”

She runs her hands through her hair then shakes her head vigorously. “I do not know. That’s exactly the problem.”

As she resumes pacing the floor I wrestle with my own truths. The conflicting calls of duty; biologically I am meant to protect queens, but now I have two. Our offspring and her. I cannot imagine leaving my youngling behind, but then how do I send my queen off to battle without me by her side? It is not that she is not a capable warrior — clearly, she is — that does nothing to lesson my concern. No matter how good a warrior is things happen.

Softly I start to voice a thought. “Perhaps...” I stop myself speaking before I say too much. My queen is too sharp for that though. The word was spoken and she’s not going to let it go.

She paces towards me with her steady gaze locked onto mine. She places her hands on my chest and runs them up to rest on my shoulders.

“Share,” she commands, and I can but obey.

“My queen...”

“Takadon, do not hold back.”

I nod. “Can you not hand this duty to Queen Dawn and the others?”

She doesn’t shut me down, instead looks steadily into my eyes.

“And what would you and I do? Retire?”

“We have our hatchling, our young queen...”

“We do,” she says.

“And if they need us, they could call. We would, of course, stay abreast of the news, but we could...”

“You’re in a nesting mode,” she observes.

I shrug but do not take my eyes off her.

“You are my queen,” I say. “The one I belong to; your wish is my command. I will do as you order, always. But our youngling...”

“Should not be carried into battle,” she says. She steps away and looks over her shoulder. “And Slayor wants to go and try to find the other one like him.”

“A break, perhaps,” I offer.

When she looks back there is a smile on her face that makes my heart sing with joy.

“I think...” she trails off. Her lips drop to a frown then the smile returns, and she shakes her head. “No, I think you’re onto something, my takadon. Maybe it is time for me to put my trust in this new generation of queens.”

I grab her in my arms, lifting her off her feet and pulling her tight to my chest while enclosing us in my wings as our lips meet.

EPILOGUE

ELECTRA

“*A*nd you are sure?” I ask.

Queen Dawn nods sharply. “I am certain.”

“Good,” I say, but this feeling of inaction and uselessness builds in my chest. “Then I will leave you to it.”

“Be well, Queen Electra. I will send you updates as they happen.”

I nod, frowning. “Thank you.”

The transmission blinks out and I stand staring at the empty screen. Dracon is safe. The Earth survivors are being integrated, not without issues, but nothing that needs my attention.

The Garoth are, by all accounts, in a full out war with the Agorians and neither side has a clear upper hand. Draconian space, for the first time in ages, is at peace. More or less. There are skirmishes. Short battles, but nothing for me.

Slayer knows what I’m feeling, of course, and projects his thoughts to me from where he’s pinwheeling through the sky.

You feel useless. But you are not. We could go to war. Though killing the Karaixians is unpleasant. Their fur, blech.

His desire to go to war brings a smile to my face but I know the truth of what he wants. His thoughts have not been far from the idea that there is another of his kind out there. He wants the war to avoid examining how lonely he is.

I think to him, *You should go, my friend.*

And leave you here? The tiny queen is barely walking. Who will protect her if not me?

I snort and walk out onto the open deck at the back of the house. Slayor is soaring through the crowds and knows I am out here now so he dives down and lands on the deck.

I give him a hard stare. “You cannot be serious. I think you are making excuses to not go.”

He scoffs, a trail of smoke puffing out as he does. “Me? I am very necessary to you and to her.”

I walk over to him and press my forehead to his. “You are always needed, my dearest friend. More than that, I want you here. With us, of course I do. Yet, you are lonely. You cannot hide this from me and you know it as well as I do. It is time.”

He warms in my hands and then puffs smoke as he nods. “You are certain?”

“I will miss you dearly, but find her then return. Relic and I will keep our queen safe while you are gone.”

Slayor gives me a sly grin. “If you fail, I will eat you both.”

“And I would expect nothing less,” I say.

Relic walks out onto the deck with our newborn queen on his hip. “Is he going to listen to you, my queen?”

Slayer pulls away from me and goes to Unity. She giggles and reaches her chubby little hands for the dragon. She coos and kisses him.

“Who is the cutest queen ever?” Slayer asks, cooing himself to our daughter.

My heart warms watching the two of them and Relic turns his hip so that she has better access to the dragon. She wriggles and pulls until he sets her down and then she and Slayer bond together. Relic comes to me, putting his arm around my waist.

We hold each other for a time, watching our daughter and my best friend play. At last I turn my attention to Relic. We walk together to the edge of our balcony and look down on the village.

Our home is built into the side of the mountain directly above the village. From there I can look down on the old blood village and also watch for any danger that might approach. I’ve spent so long at war that I don’t know how to be in this time of peace. I am learning though, with a lot of help.

“You are happy, my queen?” Relic asks.

“I am,” I say, watching the children soaring and playing below us.

Relic pulls me tighter, wrapping his tail around my hips and his arm around my shoulders. “Good.”

I sniff. “Is that... are you?”

He smiles staring down at the children playing. “Would it please you?”

“Please me? Already? I didn’t think...”

He shrugs. “These things happen, my queen. Besides, Unity needs a sibling. It will be good for her.”

“Yes, yes it will,” I say as my heart feels like it might burst from my chest.

I rest my head on his chest and take a deep breath of the clean, fresh air. Peace. I never imagined I would be alive to see this and now that it’s here, I am adjusting. With a lot of help.

“I love you, my takadon.”

“And I love you, my queen.”

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author Miranda Martin writes fantasy and sci-fi romance featuring heroes with out-of-this-world anatomy that readers call ‘larger than life’ and smart heroines destined to save the world. As a little girl, she would sneak off with her nose in a book, dreaming of magical realms. Today she brings those fantasies to life and adores every fan who chooses to live in them for a while.

Though born and raised in southern Virginia, Miranda Martin is a veteran who’s traveled to places like Korea, Hawaii, and good ‘ole Texas. She’s since settled in Kansas, the heart of America, with her husband and daughters, a cat, and wishes for a pet dragon or unicorn. When she’s not writing, you can still find her tucked away somewhere with a warm blanket and her nose in a book.

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