



ROGUE ALIEN
WARRIORS

A S C I - F I A L I E N R O M A N C E

FEAR

HATTIE JACKS

FEAR

A SCI-FI ALIEN ROMANCE

HATTIE JACKS




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Author's Note

Also by Hattie Jacks

Just who is this Hattie Jacks anyway?

LUCY



“**L**ucy Barnes! Will you wake up! If we don’t get up now the Gryn will have eaten anything worth eating.”

My dreams of Earth disappear with the shake of my shoulder and Sophie’s voice loud in my ears. I open my eyes to peer blearily at my surroundings—the alien lair that is my prison and my home now I’m a zillion miles from Earth in another galaxy.

Gray crumbling walls look like ancient concrete. The small room contains six ledges, three of which are occupied besides mine with the other human women, all abducted like me. At Sophie’s behest, I roll off my ledge with a groan and stumble to the tiny separate sanitary area. From what I’ve heard, we’re lucky to have our own bathing pool, even if it is about the size of a bathtub. I don’t have time or the inclination this morning to have anything more than a quick strip wash, ‘brush’ my teeth with the weird paste stuff that passes for both a toothbrush and toothpaste on the end of my finger. I hear yells for me to hurry up and find all the women waiting for me when I get back into our room.

“What were you doing in there?” Bianca fires at me with her usual blunt cockney attitude.

She’s standing, hand on her hip, cocked at an angle. Her lean, trim figure and ice blond hair are a direct contrast to my short, curvy body and unruly bright auburn mane, which is literally the only thing memorable about me. I bet that Bianca

caused men to trip over their tongues as she strolled down Oxford Street. The same men who would have just tripped over me while watching her, not even noticing my existence.

“Cleaning my teeth.” I know none of them understand my reluctance to leave our rooms, but I can’t help it.

A lair full of a hundred aliens. Winged aliens. Predators all. Walking, talking, flying predators. A species on this destroyed planet called the Gryn. Huge males, with endless muscles and faces that wouldn’t look out of place on the cover of a magazine. Who fly as easily as they walk.

It’s like I died and woke up in a nightmare.

“Come on, I’m starving.” Sophie says, linking arms with Bianca and rolling back the door to the corridor bustling with winged males. Some of them stop and stare before being dragged away by their comrades.

“You okay, Lucy?” Emma asks. She’s the only one who tries to understand me, although even her temper is getting shorter these days. I was always shy but being abducted by evil sentient robots and spirited away by a crowd of winged aliens hasn’t helped my chronic lack of assertiveness.

I bite my lip as the crowd in the corridor gets denser and will myself to take a step forward.

Small steps, Lucy. You have to get used to this sometime. It’s not like you’re going home.

Emma follows me as we join the melee of male aliens, some of whom walk up the various ramps around a central shaft, some of whom dive off, wings beating with whoops of male exuberance as they either drop down, or rapidly climb in the still air to the next level. No matter how many times I see or hear it, they still make me jump.

The food hall is packed, and Emma moves in front of me, knowing my reluctance to try to pass through the crowd. She’s tall, not as tall as the Gryn, but she has to be at least five foot nine. She has enough of a physical presence to push through, unlike me, five foot two on a good day. The Gryn don’t even notice me. I don’t want them to notice me.

I follow Emma until we make it to the huge fireplace where entire carcasses of a bovine-type animal the Gryn call a maraha, are roasting, the sticky fat running into trays below.

“Fuck it! They’ve had all the piir again.” Emma explodes, referencing the food that resembles stale French bread. “We should have got here earlier.” Grumbling at the cuisine on offer, she grabs a platter and picks over what’s left, even as the males around us swarm and grab for the meat on offer. Their voices buzz in my ears, the strong scent of their bodies and feathers in my nostrils.

A hand grabs at me as my knees buckle and Emma drags me out of the crowd, plonking me down on a bench next to her and opposite Bianca and Sophie.

“Not hungry?” Sophie asks. I look down at my platter. I’ve managed to get a single slice of maraha.

“Not really. I’ll maybe try later when it’s not so busy.” I bite into the meat, which is rare, just as the Gryn like it.

I try to tune out the noise, the chatter, and my deep and enduring fears. I try to think of home.

What I remember is the morning air crisp against my cheeks as I crunch over the gravel at the back of the estate house. A low mist hangs over the manicured green lawns of the garden and the scent of decaying leaves and yesterday’s bonfires fills my nostrils. It makes me feel alive. Some people hate the onset of the winter, but not me. Autumn in the heart of England is the best time, full of promise for the season ahead.

I unlock the door to the mews and slip inside. The temperature is warmer and the slightly sweet smell with a hint of ammonia of my charges greets me.

Ruby, the Sonarian Harris Hawk, croons at me from her perch, one foot tucked up tight in her feathers. She twists her head upside down in her usual greeting as I set about turning off the heaters under the Harris Hawk perches. It might get cold overnight in their original American desert habitat, but the damp cold of an English winter can be deadly. Her sister, Bess, ignores me as she nibbles regally at the shoulder of her

wing. Bertie, our only male Harris Hawk, hops off his perch towards me, the bells attached to his legs ringing loudly, and I crouch down next to him, offering a gloved hand. He hops on obligingly.

“Pleased to see me, Bertie?” I ask him, and he makes a low grumbling sound, the Harris Hawk version of a hello. I check over his equipment, the leather anklets and straps, his jesses, that are attached to a small metal swivel and his leash. All is in good order as I carry him through to the weighing room, shutting the door to the mews behind me as I let him hop onto the scales, ready for his morning weigh in that means I can check his condition and work out his rations for the day.

I leave my favorite until last. Wolf is the most perfect example of a tiercel, the name given to a male peregrine falcon by falconers since the Middle Ages, I’ve ever seen in my ten years as a falconer. Dark grey to the point of blackness over his back and with a startlingly white, barred chest. His cere, the piece of skin around his beak, and his feet are bright yellow. His long yellow toes end with vicious black pointed claws.

He is every inch the perfect predator, from his long pointed wings to his deep brown eyes. Solid and stocky, he sits on my fist as if it’s the only place in the world he should be. I don’t believe in stroking or touching my birds much, they are not social creatures, other than the Harris Hawks, and they don’t get any enjoyment from physical touch. But with Wolf, I make an exception. After checking his equipment, I gently push my fingers into the feathers on his chest to check the muscle on his breastbone, lightly ruffling the downy fluff, making him look down at my fingers, then fix his dark eyes on mine.

If I ever have to leave this place, I would buy Wolf from my employer, no matter what he cost. I couldn’t leave him behind. I hope I never have to leave. Not that I have anywhere else to go if I did.

This is the best part of my day. My time alone with Wolf in the silent mews, inhaling the sweet spicy scent of his feathers, reveling in his weight on my fist. Allowing my mind to travel to the moors, where he waits on over my head, scything

through the air, ready to fold into a teardrop stoop at my cry of 'ho!'. I don't have to talk, interact, or concern myself with human activity. It's only me and him, nothing else matters.

And it's all gone. It went on the fateful evening I stepped out of my caravan to complete my final nightly check. When something grabbed me from behind, and I felt a sharp pain in my neck.

The next thing I knew, I woke up in a strange room surrounded by the other human women and I would never be alone with my birds again. I drop my head to look at my plate as a single tear slides down my cheek.

My grief for the quiet, simple life I lost and will never get back.

FYN



Vrex knows what woke me, but I'm vrexing pleased it did. My feathers are stuck to my body with sweat from the nightmare hovering on the edge of my consciousness. The sickly smell of fear rises from me as water pools on my ledge. The scent of death remains in my nostrils, and I shake my head to clear it.

Myk, our weapons expert and master swordsmith stares at me from his ledge, one massive arm behind his head. He makes eye contact and grunts. It's hard to say if it's in sympathy for my disturbed sleep or in annoyance that I might have cried out before I woke. Myk doesn't talk much. He lets his craft do his talking and most of that is spiked and violent.

There's no sign of Ryak, our head of security, but then there rarely is. Kyt sits at the ledge he uses for his work when he's not in his workshop. He has several small bioluminescent plants set up to illuminate the tangle of wire he worries at, muttering. His complex thoughts keep us all awake on occasion through the strange thoughtbond it turns out I share with the others.

As Gryn, we're supposed to be social creatures. The mercs, our younger or less seasoned warriors, live in barracks, twenty deep, and they love it. Sleeping, bathing and preening together. I can't think of anything I hated more, except my time in Proto's camp. With the torture that the sentient AI that rules this planet put me through, I'm lucky I can remember my own name.

The lingering effects of my nightmare are the smooth, robotic voice ordering me to kill my own kind. Showing me videos of Gryn being ripped apart by other Gryn. Being told that I would do the same. Being forcibly tranqed and waking up covered in blood that I wasn't sure if it was my own.

When Jyr found me, I was just about to break. I wanted to escape but wasn't sure if I could be trusted around other warriors. He promised me a home and a family, but I came because I had nowhere else. And because I wanted to prove to myself that I wasn't the monster Proto wanted me to be.

So we're social, and that means that the only Gryn that gets his own quarters is our Prime, Jyr. Even the seniors such as myself are expected to be roommates. I've only ended up here when Jyr promoted me to his second in command while his mate is pregnant with his first youngling.

Eventually he'll realize that was a mistake.

"Fyn?" A merc, banded around his left bicep as a squadron leader, sticks his head around our open door.

"How many times, it's Command." I sigh.

Jyr might have thought I was Command material when he chose me to be his second, but I remain less than convinced. My anger rises even now, my feathers itching with the need for a bathe and a preen, which I'm not going to get, not by the look on this merc's face.

"Yes, Fyn - I mean Command," he stutters. "We need you for the patrols."

I lever myself off my ledge and try to shuffle my wings into some form of comfort.

"Why do you need me? I left my orders last night." I say, my voice low and menacing as the unfortunate merc trembles slightly.

Before I gave in and drank too much lynk in order to have some sort of sleep.

I can taste the strong alcohol on my tongue, and I stride through to the small sanitary area that the seniors 'enjoy'. No

bathing pool. We still have to bathe with the mercs. But we have a waste unit and a small hand pool. I rinse out my mouth and splash my face, attempting to find something redeeming in my existence which means I won't be as hard on the mercs today.

I can't.

I've swapped one endless subsistence for another. If I had thought being around other Gryn who share my burdens would help, I was wrong. I feel more alone than ever. All of this means I demand perfection from those around me. I rarely get it.

Striding back into the room, the merc still hovers by the doorway, and I glower at him.

"Don't be too hard on them today, Fyn." Kyt calls across the room, far too cheery. "We've only got a finite supply of mercs, and we could do with them all in one piece."

"Easy for you to say," I grumble. "It's as if their only aim in life is to end up at the mercy of the healer." I stomp out and launch myself down the central shaft, heading for the landing stages, where the various patrols should be getting ready to leave.

The sight that greets me is nothing short of chaos. None of the squadrons are ready. No one has any weapons and instead, they are huddled in various groups.

"Vrex it!" I roar and the noise stills, fifty heads turning in my direction. "What the vrex is it about my orders you don't understand?"

I round on the merc that came to our quarters. "Am I Command?" I yell directly at him.

"Er—" He looks around nervously.

"AM I COMMAND?" I repeat at volume.

"Yes, Command," he replies, eyes darting to his fellow mercs.

"Then why the vrex are you and your squads not tooled up and ready to go?"

He opens his mouth to speak, closes it again, and takes a step away from me.

“We heard that Prime might be bringing the humans down here today,” He says in little more than a whisper.

I think I might explode.

“Do you not—” I’m balling my fists so tightly I can feel my claws digging into my palms and the blood beginning to flow. “Think that I would have mentioned that? Last night. When I gave my orders?” Unable to help myself, my last comment comes out as a roar.

There is complete silence in the landing area. All of the patrols are now late, because they wanted to see the humans and their Prime visit them. As if they don’t see enough of the human women, who seem to be everywhere in the lair these days. Part distraction, part annoyance. The young mercs are easily waylaid by anything other than their work, and it’s vrexing with my schedules.

Given the time they were with Proto, I still don’t understand why Jyr trusts them, even if his fated mate, Viv, is human. Being at Proto’s mercy does strange things to your mind. I should know.

As far as I’m concerned, I interact with Viv because I have no option, and give the rest of them a very wide berth.

“Get your vrexing weapons and vrex off.” I mutter and turn away from them all before I decided I need to make an example of the squadron leader.

Orvos, our healer, hates me already. If I send him another damaged merc, I’ve no doubt he’ll complain to Jyr about me. Still, I’m not here to be liked. I’m here to do a job, and I’m here because I have nowhere else to go.

“Fyn?” I whirl around, ready to kill. A terrified merc lurches back from me. He’s holding out my belt and longsword, my preferred weapon.

“Sorry.” I murmur, quietly taking the proffered blade. “I’ll be with your patrol today. Mochi traders, right?” I attempt to soften my voice as I strap on my belt.

There's no point having scared mercs. They need all their wits about them to deal with Proto's bots. The joykill phalanx have been increasing in number and ferocity of late. Their new laser weapons give Orvos plenty of work. I give the merc what I hope is a friendly smile, and he nods.

"Time to go, my young friend." I clap my hand on his shoulder and steer him towards the outside world and the ruins of the once great planet of Ustokos.

LUCY



The abandoned building that the Gryn refer to as their lair is vast. Set into the side of a huge cliff, and above an enormous waterfall that pours into a yawning chasm below, all but cutting the place off from the ruined city beyond. I briefly saw it from the air when we arrived, having been saved from the sentient AI called Proto that rules this planet, Ustokos. The same AI that abducted me from Earth and, either fortunately or unfortunately did something to my brain that meant I can understand the languages of the aliens that make this dystopian planet their home.

Viv and her hulking mate, Jyr were kind enough to invite us to stay with them after they rescued us from Proto. Not that the alternative was any better. The AI wanted to breed humans with Gryn in a way that was both clinical and deeply abhorrent. I shudder involuntarily at the idea. It's not that I haven't had sex before. I'm not saying how many times, but more than you might expect for a tiny, curvy, shy redhead. Still, I'm not an animal and I didn't want to breed with anyone, human or Gryn.

Not that the Gryn aren't easy on the eye, especially the ones known as the seniors. These are the leaders of the legion. Their feathers and skin on their shoulders are darker than the others. They're heavily set, heavily muscled, with an air of seniority about them, an unapproachability. And that's fine with me. I don't want to get involved with anything that reminds me of what I lost.

My auntie Jean always told me I was good at being a wallflower. She normally said it with a sneer, reminding me that my mother was similar and that I'd never amount to anything because I was so pathetic. So when I wasn't crying under my bedcovers because I missed my parents, I was crying at her casual cruelty, until I worked out that she would leave me alone if she didn't notice me much.

To avoid being noticed in the lair, I spend my days roaming around parts that I know are mostly unoccupied. Being alone with my thoughts probably isn't the best thing, but the noise and chatter of the Gryn, and the uncomfortable silences with the other women doesn't work for me either. I'm best off keeping out of the way.

Today it seems I'm on my own until I round a corner and almost walk straight into two Gryn. It's rare to find them on their own, so seeing two shouldn't be a surprise. However, one of them holds a broken flight feather in his hands.

"I don't know what to do," he says, plaintively to his friend. "If Fyn finds out, I'll never get on the patrols."

"I told you not to take part in that last fight." The second Gryn replies, to a resulting snuffle from the first one.

Looking at the two of them, they are the really young ones. Teenagers really. They've yet to put on muscle mass. Normally they go around in much larger groups, making plenty of noise as they join in with lair life. They attend the parties, but they're not allowed to drink the alcohol that the Gryn call Var beer. But, like any teenagers, I've seen them sneaking a flagon or two when they think no one is watching.

"What have you done?" I ask with a boldness I didn't anticipate, my eyes drawn to the feather in the young merc's hands.

Both of them look startled at my presence, and I make sure I stay as still as possible. That's how I would be to avoid spooking my own birds when I went through their early training, a process known as manning. Each wild hawk or falcon, all staring eyes and gaping beak, would be held on the fist for twenty minutes, food on offer, as I waited, patiently

and quietly, to see if they could overcome their innate fear of humans to eat in my presence.

The mercs relax quickly when they see I'm not a threat, despite my lack of proffered food, and the one with the feather holds it out to me.

"I broke it. In a fight. I won. But I broke it." He garbles out as I take the piece of feather. He opens his wing to demonstrate, showing a gap like a broken tooth.

"But it's easy to fix, right? You know how?" I examine the feather, huge by my standards and yet just a bigger version of what I'm used to.

"You know how to fix it?" He breathes, dark eyes full of stars and hope.

"You mean on a planet full of winged predators, none of you know how to tend to your feathers?" I say, incredulous. One look at the two mercs tells me all I need to know. "I'm going to need some supplies. Glue and something to replace the shaft." They both look puzzled. "Some adhesive, something to make it stick together?"

They look at each other and I can almost see the cogs turning.

"Maybe Orvos?" One says.

They mean the lair doctor. A senior Gryn based on his coloring and very dry demeanor. I've only met him once, when we first arrived and Viv wanted to make sure we were all in good health. My interest and, if I'm honest, my anger is piqued and I want to know why the young ones don't know how to take care of themselves. Feather care was always my number one priority with my charges and something any winged predator that has the intelligence level of the Gryn should know.

I refuse the mercs offer of a 'lift' down to the level where Orvos has his surgery. I don't think they could carry me anyway and it's not exactly fun being slung beneath a flying male like a piece of meat, which is how I remember being brought to the lair originally. I march into Orvos's surgery

with the two males trailing in my wake. The place is quiet. A couple of mercs lie on ledges, still and pale, which takes the wind out of my sails in terms of my anger.

Instead, I approach Orvos's desk. He looks up as I approach.

"Ah! One of our human guests. What a pleasant surprise. What can I do for you?" He says in a low rumble that further serves to make my anger dissipate. I hold out the feather.

"One of these males has broken a feather and he says he doesn't know how to fix it. Is that right?"

Orvos stands, reminding me, if I needed a reminded, just how much bigger the Gryn are than me. He looks over my head at the two youngsters who shrink into each other.

"Young mercs are prone to breakage. He'll just have to wait until it's renewed in his natural cycle."

"His moult, you mean? Where you shed your old feathers and grow new ones?"

"I wouldn't have thought that humans would have a word for our renewal cycle." Orvos rubs his chin, his dark eyes glittering with interest.

"Most humans probably don't." I stand up a little straighter. "But I do. My job on Earth was to take care of birds of prey."

Orvos's brow furrows. "Birds of prey?"

Come to think of it, I don't believe I've seen any birds in the sky on Ustokos. The only flying creatures on this planet appear to be the Gryn.

"The only things on Earth with wings and feathers are called birds. Gryn feathers are more specifically like birds of prey. These have claws and eat meat."

Orvos laughs, and it's a genuine, warm sound.

"What a strange planet Earth must be." He says, and I suppose, to him, it probably would be. "Are you saying you

know a way to fix broken feathers because you used to take care of these *birds of prey*?”

“I’ve never worked on feathers as large as this, but yes. I do know a way. We call it imping.” I explain. “It’s completely painless and if done properly, it should last until the next moult.” Orvos shifts his weight back, dark eyes contemplating me as I turn the feather over in my hands. “I’ve done this process countless times. I know what I’m doing.”

“Ok-ay,” Orvos draws out his agreement. “I guess the merc can’t be in any worse state than he already is.” He gives the young one a good stare and I hear a further snuffle behind me. “What do you need?”

About an hour later, I have all the equipment I asked for, or as close to what I would usually use as possible.

“I’m going to need you to lay your wing out flat.” I explain to the young merc.

He hesitantly kneels next to a ledge and puts his wing out, spreading out the feathers so that I can see the broken one. I take the sharp knife that Orvos holds and start to clean away the short twisted fragments of the feather. The merc hisses and starts to twist as he watches me.

“Move again and I will tranq you.” Orvos warns him. “You know I will.”

I’ve already prepared the broken part of the feather. The strong adhesive provided has taken well to the short piece of flexible material that Orvos found and is reminiscent of carbon fiber. I whittled it into shape so that it sticks out of the broken end of the feather like a stubby tooth. I carefully coat the material in glue and allow it to dry for a few seconds before I push it into the hollow end of the remaining part of the feather attached to the merc. I twist it into place, making sure the edges align before I cover them with glue.

“Stay still,” I tell him. “It has to set before you move.”

Probably the first time I’ve had to provide reassurance mid imp.

After a few minutes, I check the set and that there's no movement.

"You're good to go." I smile at him.

He stands, slowly, holding his wing out and inspecting my work. Again, not something I'm used to. His clawed fingers gently probe at the mend. His friend joins him and also checks over the feather.

"It's like it was never broken!" He comments. "You can join the patrols with me after all!" He pats his friend on the shoulder. The young merc scrubs at his face with his wrist.

"What do you say to the nice female?" Orvos intones.

"Thank you." He whispers.

"Well then, don't you two have somewhere else to be than cluttering up my surgery? Vrex off!" He tells them. The pair scamper out with defiant springs in their steps, as Orvos turns to me.

"I'd never have thought such a quiet little human would have such knowledge." Orvos says as he contemplates me. "Jyr will need to know about this."

Just like that, the little mouse who wants to keep herself to herself has become an interest of the leader of the Gryn, and my heart descends to my boots.

FYN



“Vrex it!” I explode, whirling around, I slam the shoulder of my wing into the nearest merc, sending him sprawling back. “Exactly how hard is it to organize a simple supply run?”

The other two mercs hold the third in their arms. Blood drips from wounds on his chest and head.

“It wasn’t—” The one on the floor says, scrambling to his feet.

“It vrexing wasn’t what?” I fire at him. “It wasn’t something that you’ve done before? It wasn’t something you’ve trained for? It wasn’t the easiest target Proto has given us for a cycle?”

I slam my fist into the side of the merc that managed to get to his feet and send him toppling again. I know that I shouldn’t be letting my anger get the better of me, but I seem to have more of it than ever these days. Lack of proper sleep, too much lynk to compensate, and a headache that never seems to go doesn’t do much to improve my mood.

“Hey, Fyn.” Kyt ambles into the supply depot, clearly at a loose end. “Mercs driving you crazy?” He asks unnecessarily.

“Get this vrexing idiot to Orvos.” I say to the two holding up the injured merc. “Then the three of you will join me in the training hall. *Before* you eat.” I add to an intake of breath from them. “Get the vrex out of my sight.”

They don’t waste any time hurrying away. I turn to Kyt.

“Did you need something?”

“Not really, you looked like you needed rescuing.” He says with a shrug.

It must be easy being him, Part of Jyr’s inner circle from day one. He spends his days tinkering with Proto’s leftovers and his nights partying with the rest of the lair. Nothing about what he does has any responsibility. Why he thinks I need rescuing, I have no idea.

“I was fine. The mercs are getting worse. Doesn’t matter what training I do, they’re easily distracted and it’s going to get them killed. I can’t have that. Not on my watch.” I fix him with a stare.

“You’re one of us, Fyn. I know you think you’re different, but you’re not and you can’t hide that from any of us.” Kyt holds my gaze easily.

I feel him slipping into my mind, using the thoughtbond that all of us, each Gryn that was tortured and changed by Proto, has. The rumor is that Jyr also shares a thoughtbond with his mate and she can feel us too.

I’m not sure if I like the idea of sharing my mind with a mate, even if it was possible that any female would want me. I know some of the Gryn in the lair have relations with Mochi females. The furry felines being compatible, to an extent, with Gryn anatomy. The thought repels me. I’m not even sure how I feel about being with a Gryn female, if such a thing still exists. I last saw a female when I was ripped away from my mother in one of Proto’s camps. Like some of the young mercs I remember my mother, but my memories are hazy.

“Don’t do that.” I mutter at Kyt, even though his presence in my head, all mirth and lightness, has a brief calming effect. “I don’t like it.”

He snorts. “You don’t like much, do you?”

“Not really.”

“Fyn, you’re going to have to get used to the idea that you’re part of this lair and part of our family, whether you like it or not. Jyr wants you. We want you.” He risks his life by

putting a hand on my shoulder as he stares into my eyes, his dark ones contrasting with my light blue. “Why don’t you give the mercs a break and come for a drink. You look like you could use it.”

I can feel myself softening. I want to be a part of something bigger than just the daily grind here. For a moment I let myself imagine what it would be like to feel wanted and cared for.

But that’s not for me. I have to prove myself worthy of what Jyr asked me to do, and that means I can’t make friends and I can’t slack off.

“Thanks, Kyt,” I shrug his hand from my shoulder. “I’ve work to do. Maybe later.” I set off across the supply depot.

“You’re one of us, Fyn,” Kyt calls after me. “Sooner or later you’re going to have to accept it.”

LUCY



“Orvos wants to see you.” The merc with a single black band around his upper left bicep says, standing just outside the door to our quarters.

“Oh.” I reply.

“Come with me.” He adds.

“Er, no. I’ll walk if you don’t mind.” I can see him weighing up on how to carry me and that’s not going to happen.

“I’ll tell Orvos you’re coming?” He asks, hitching up a corner of his mouth in a hesitant and sharp toothed smile.

“I’ll be there.” I don’t return his smile. I’d rather keep my distance from the Gryn if possible.

“What is that all about?” Emma asks me. She’s picking her way through a pile of parchment. Apparently, she wants to learn how to read Gryn.

“I helped out with a merc the other day, he had a broken feather. I guess Orvos wants to talk to me about it.” I shrug.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Emma asks.

It’s sweet of her. Out of all the human women, she doesn’t judge me for my fears or my former job. I know the others think I’m some sort of posh weirdo because of what I did for a living. Bianca had never even heard the word falconry before she met me.

What she doesn't know is why I became a falconer in the first place. It was one of the only things I was good at, being calm and quiet. And it came with accommodation.

"It's fine. I know the way." I try to sound confident, slipping on my shoes.

I make my way down to the surgery level. The place is, thankfully, empty, save for Orvos.

"You wanted to speak to me?" I announce myself.

"We both did." A deep voice booms from a side room, and Jyr steps out.

My breath catches at the sight of Jyr, the enormous Prime of the Gryn. I've no idea how Viv even let him near her, let alone anything else. Although her swelling pregnancy is clear proof she definitely did something with him. He is completely terrifying. I can't help myself but take a step back.

"Orvos says you know something about us." Jyr growls.

"Not you," I stutter out. "My job back on Earth meant I cared for creatures called birds, specifically birds of prey. Predators with feathers like yours." I wish I could control my breathing, but I'm beginning to hyperventilate as Jyr's dark gaze rakes over me.

"Stop scaring the vrexing human, Prime." Orvos admonishes him. "I told you she knew about something *like* us. She's not a spy for Proto."

"I'm not! I'm not a spy for Proto!" I gabble out. "Honestly!"

Jyr hums as if he's contemplating whether or not I'd make a decent meal for the mercs.

"Orvos showed me what you did for that merc. It was impressive. The lair needs someone who understands how to care for our wings. Most of the mercs haven't been taught properly by their parents because they grew up without them in Proto's camps. I want you to be their teacher." Jyr announces.

"Me?" I squeak. "I don't know anything about Gryn."

Jyr glowers at me.

“You know enough. Orvos can teach you the rest.” He nods at the doctor. “You start now.”

I’m left gaping at him, my mouth flapping like a goldfish with my silent objections as the Prime of the Gryn sweeps out of the room. Orvos cocks his head to one side.

“Looks like you will be starting straight away.” He says, cryptically.

He busies himself around the surgery, directing me to find and put out dressings, pots of evil smelling gel, and, I note, he has already found a supply of the adhesive and pieces of material I used for imping the previous day.

Noise outside the surgery increases and soon there is a steady flow of mercs. Most of them have superficial injuries that Orvos tends to. Only one has a damaged feather. It’s bent rather than broken. With some difficulty, I manage to straighten it out using hot water.

I’m helping Orvos clear up the surgery when further footsteps alert us both to new clients. A Gryn the size of Jyr enters. His feathers shine with health. Dark, leathery skin over his shoulders is a mahogany color. He has a bare chest that ripples with a six pack I can imagine tracing my fingers over, but it’s his eyes I’m drawn to. Unlike all the other Gryn, his eyes are a glorious pale blue, like the Mediterranean Sea. For a moment I’m lost in them as he gives me a curious look. He has an arm slung around a merc who struggles to remain conscious.

“What have you done to this one, Fyn?” Orvos growls at them.

“This has nothing to do with me. He’s one of those still using Kaloz’s drugs. I found him like this,” the winged adonis replies.

“Vrex it.” Orvos swears. “Put him over there.” He points to a ledge. “You’ll need to report this to Jyr.”

“Of course I do. I’m his vrexing Command.” Fyn spits back at Orvos.

I vaguely remember Fyn from the time we were all rescued from the evil robot thing, Proto. He must have been giving the humans a wide berth since because I haven't seen him since then.

“What's the female doing here?” Fyn turns his azure gaze on me, and I feel myself heat.

Between my legs.

Moisture gathers in my knickers in a way I've never felt before, because this huge predator looked in my direction. I'm at once embarrassed and horrified my body would behave in this way. Fyn lifts his head as if I offend him in some way, snorting out a breath.

He doesn't like humans then.

“Lucy's assisting me with all the damaged mercs you send my way. She has specialist knowledge that is valuable.” Orvos replies, keeping his voice even.

Fyn clenches and unclenches his fists as he stares at me. I watch the vicious long claws that all the Gryn sport extend and flex. The thought of him tracing the claws over my naked body has another flush dampening me in all the wrong places.

“You tell Proto to stop attacking our patrols, and I'll stop bringing you injured mercs.” He replies to Orvos, even though his gaze doesn't leave me. “I don't think involving the humans in our business is a good idea.” He adds.

What an arrogant wanker!

“Jyr asked me to help out, that's why I'm here.” I say, bristling at him.

He sighs, his shoulders dropping and his haughty look disappearing for an instant as if the weight of responsibility is only his to bear. My stomach clenches at the flash of pain crossing his handsome face. Which is gone as if it was never there and replaced by a grimace.

“Jyr tells me nothing. Take care what you do around here, *female*.” He snarls, his blue gaze raking over me.

“Yeah, well. Whatever. I’ve got things to do.” I turn away from him and go back to clearing up.

Because if I look at this winged superstar any longer my underwear will be completely destroyed.

FYN



I couldn't get out of Orvos's surgery fast enough. Had I spent any more time in there, I wasn't sure if I would be able to think straight. The human female smelled so sweet, like hot ground after pure rain, mixed with something I couldn't put my claw on, other than to know that it caused my cocks to tighten instantly in my pants.

The one saving grace was that I managed to vrex her off enough that she turned her back on me and I was able to hobble out of the surgery without her seeing my unwelcome arousal. I still don't understand what she's doing with Orvos, and my blood bubbles dangerously in my veins as I think of the older Gryn spending time with such a delicate and delicious smelling female.

One that, presumably, doesn't want to have anything to do with me, not after how I've just behaved.

The throbbing from my cocks is not dissipating and, as I get away from the surgery, her smell is stuck in my nostrils, which isn't helping at all. It also doesn't help that I keep remembering the slight flare of interest in her beautiful, green eyes when she looked at me for the first time. She's all soft curves, her hair a cloud of red curls reminding me of a sunrise, a scarlet gold. My stomach gnaws at me as I try to work out what's going on.

I want her. I want to be inside her, to hear her moan my name as I give her pleasure. Not that I've ever pleased a female. I'm certain that with her, it would be amazing.

My pants feel like they're going to burst, and I explode upwards in a flurry of beating wings, needing to find somewhere I can quietly take care of myself. I know of one secret healing pool that the mercs haven't found and I get there as quickly as I can, stripping away my boots and trousers and leaping into the warm waters. My shafts ache. I don't ever remember my secondary cock being hard before, but it nestles in the groove under my main cock, stiff and swollen. I fist myself, my head full of thoughts of her, and with a couple of strokes and a groan, I spill my seed, white in the rolling waters.

I come to my senses a few minutes later. I have occasionally taken myself in hand before, furtively in the dark of the barracks, unsure as to what has caused my cocks to swell, but it has never been this intense. I'm aware that, in the absence of females, some of the mercs assist each other with their arousal, in the same way they assist with preening. Even now, my cocks remain hard, as if ready to be tugged again. I shake my head to attempt to clear it of whatever has a grip on me, sinking further under the waters and sitting on my hands.

I can't stay away from the rest of the lair, and her, forever. I have patrols and supply runs to organize, along with training. Yet she fills my head with a need to be near her, all the time.

Is this a test that Jyr has set me?

If it is, I know I can do it. I can ignore the human female who tempts me with her scent and her attempts to cover arousal with anger.

"If he wants to test me, I will not be found wanting." I say out loud to myself, even as one hand breaks loose and grasps my hard members once again.

"Did you see the human female?" I demand of the merc that I sent to Orvos surgery for a wing injury several hours ago.

"She was there, helped the old buzzard fix me up *and* she showed me a better preening technique." He grins, a far off

look in his eyes. “She knows her stuff.”

I’m not sure exactly when I shoved him against the wall, but he writhes in the grasp of my hand around his neck, making choking noises as he tries to say my name, claws scrabbling uselessly at my arm. I drop him to the ground.

“Try and keep out of the line of fire next time.” I growl at him before stalking away.

If they think I’m in a bad mood, I can slip away without anyone looking for me, for a while. I dodge behind a pillar, checking that I’m not being followed.

Like any merc would dare.

I wind my way through the lair until I reach the level I need. It’s just above the surgery and if I crawl through a gap in the crumbling structure, I can reach the small hole in the ceiling which gives me a reasonable view of the room below.

And the human female. The one they call Lucy.

She’s sat on an empty ledge, swinging her legs, both hands grasping the edge. She whistles to herself, then pushes off, onto her feet and walks towards the corner where I’m hiding. Involuntarily, I shrink away from the hole. She looks up and I curse inwardly that she might have heard movement. I hold my breath until I hear her start to walk again, and I can risk a peep.

Almost directly below me, she’s sorting through a table covered in items I don’t recognize as she continues to whistle. A change in air pressure puffs up her perfect scent to me, and I stifle a groan, my cocks swelling uncomfortably.

A noise in the surgery has her turning around and smiling.

“Do you need Orvos?” She calls across the room, her voice tinkling in my ears.

“Mistress, I need your assistance.” I hear a young merc reply.

“What have you done to yourself?” She beckons him over and the bedraggled junior merc comes into view.

It looks to me like he might have been playing in the old labs, the ones that Jyr ordered dismantled after his previous Command, Kaloz, betrayed the lair. At that time we produced various narcotics for sale to the other species that benefit from our protection, for a price.

I know the production never sat well with him, and he was quick to cease making the stuff as soon as he could. It hasn't kept drugs out of the lair. There were stocks left over that disappeared. I've also found out that the Kijg are starting to manufacture their own in any event. The last merc I brought to the surgery had been partaking of some Kijg merchandise. The resulting stomach pump and hangover will have deterred him from further samples.

"I fell in." The merc tells my female, confirming what I thought. "It's sticky."

She gingerly touches his feathers, her slender fingers coming away black.

"Yep, that's sticky." She confirms as she takes hold of his outer primary feather and pulls his wing out to the side, inspecting the underneath.

I imagine it's my wing she's holding. What it would be like to have her touch me, run her skilled clawless fingers through my feathers, over my skin and down to my...

"What was that?" The merc asks, looking directly at my peep hole, the vrexing little bastid!

"Mice, probably, or whatever the Ustokos equivalent is." She seems unconcerned, not even looking up, she's more concentrated on the mess the merc has made of himself.

He stares up for a few long seconds before she makes him sit and bustles around collecting various items. Orvos appears and together they work on the young Gryn, who does not make the whole business of cleaning up his feathers easy by whining and moaning, at least until Orvos threatens him with a tranq, and he finally shuts up.

"There you go." My female says, combing her way through the shoulders of his wings, her fingers coated in a

light oil. “All clean. This’ll make sure they don’t dry out and become brittle.”

The merc only hums in response, his eyelids drooping as she works her way over his wings. My cocks are rock hard as I watch the action. I’m desperately wishing she was touching me. If my hiding place wasn’t so small, I would definitely be easing the pressure in my pants.

“Have you finished?” Orvos asks, and she presses a finger to her lips, pointing at the now slumbering merc.

“Let him rest, it’s been an ordeal for him.” She says, kindly. “He’s one of the young ones isn’t he? Humans falconers call them passagers.”

Orvos frowns at her strange terminology. “He is young, but he has to learn to take care of himself.” He shakes the merc. “Come on, get up or you’ll miss mealtime.” He says, his voice booming.

The junior springs up. Shaking away his sleep at the thought of missing a meal. He takes off at a run.

“Hey! What do you say?” Orvos bellows after him.

“Thank you, mistress!” The sound comes floating back to the room and my female smiles.

“Seriously, Orvos. Where did you learn your bedside manner?” She grumbles as she clears up the debris from the cleaning process.

At once I am relieved that she is annoyed at Orvos, and there is no obvious attraction between them, but my blood still runs hot at the thought of her touching that merc. Her hands should only be on one Gryn male, the one she is mated to.

Me.

LUCY



“**H**e’s looking again.” Sophie snorts, craning her head like a meerkat and then bobbing down again.

“Who?” I ask.

The food hall teems with Gryn, the young ones squabbling and the older ones trying to keep them in line as we made it through the crowd to get our evening meal.

The naughty youngster from earlier who had gunked himself up with god knows what had spotted me. He and his friends had made way for us as a proper thank you for the service I did him, meaning we were able to get to the food and, for once, pile up our plates. They’re sitting behind us, making a tremendous din. I’m about to swivel around on my bench when Sophie puts a hand on mine.

“Don’t look!” She mock whispers. Despite myself, I freeze.

“Who is it?” I reply, trying not to tremble.

“It’s the big one with the blue eyes. Jyr’s second in command I think.” Bianca says admiringly. “Apparently he’s a tough warrior and hard to please.” She adds with a secret smile.

A further shiver runs through me. “Who is he looking at?”

“He’s pretending not to look now.” Sophie chuckles. “He knows I saw him.”

“These Gryn are something else entirely.” Bianca sighs.

She should know, from what she’s told us about her love life on Earth, she’s as predatory as they are.

I risk shuffling around on my chair just enough so I can see behind me. Fyn sits at the end of a long table, slightly apart from a group of older males. I remember him as the one who was in Orvos’s surgery the first day I started and behaved like a bear with a sore head.

He’s also the one that did very strange things to my insides, in particular my lady bits. He chews his meat and stares at the far wall, studiously avoiding looking at anyone or anything. I turn back to the others.

“He thinks we’re up to something.” I tell them. “That’s why he’s watching. He told Orvos we shouldn’t be involved in lair business.”

“What a cock!” Sophie snorts, sending him dagger eyes over my head. My heart flip-flops in my chest when she swears about him.

“He’s just not used to having females around,” I find myself saying. “None of them are, and no one likes change.” I pick at the piece of blue sort-of-broccoli on my plate. Why am I defending this Gryn who made it perfectly clear he didn’t like having me around?

“You should know, Lucy.” Sophie says.

My anger rises like lava in a volcano at her barbed comment. But instead of saying something, I stand and whirl away from them all. I know she doesn’t intend to be mean, but she is. Just because I can’t accept that I’m stuck here. That I’m not prepared to abandon everything I left behind on Earth, it doesn’t mean I’m wrong or stupid.

Of course, I don’t say anything. I never say anything. Although they looked up when I got to my feet, they’re soon talking among themselves again, and I walk away, out of the hall and into the central shaft that connects to the rest of the lair.

I don't think they even notice I've gone. There's only five humans on the whole of this ruined planet, and one may as well not even exist.

I'm used to not existing. My parents died in a plane accident when I was seven and my auntie Jean took me in. She begrudged every second of my presence, right up until I turned seventeen, and she kicked me out, telling me to make my own way in the world, having spent much of my formative years ensuring that I believed I was worthless. It's not something I like to think about. I still miss my parents, despite everything she said about them.

That's why I loved my former life. Dealing with simple creatures that liked quiet and calm. That I could do. Birds, I understood. Humans, not so much. Of course, I never expected to end up living amongst hundreds of hawk men on an alien planet. Social hawk men who like to party.

If you could see me now auntie Jean.

I'm just as she expected. Always in the kitchen at a party. It was the part of me she hated the most.

And this lair is all about the party. Rowdy parties happen most nights, starting shortly after the evening meal. It involves fighting, drinking, and various flying races that seem to have very complicated rules. I'd have thought after the work the Gryn warriors do all day, they would want some rest, but it's entirely the opposite. Their hoots and shouts go on into the early hours, often waking me from my fitful sleep.

I don't want to resent them. They are simply surviving on what's left after civilizations fall apart. Yes, they steal, mostly from the sentient AI that has control of all the tech on the planet. Yes, they provide protection for a price to the other species. Yes, I'm pretty sure they would do more of what I would consider to be criminal if there was the opportunity. The Gryn are fearsome warriors. They might have been the losing side, but they only lost control of Ustokos, not their fight, fire, or dignity.

Wrapped up in my own thoughts, I make my way down the various levels towards Orvos's surgery. I can't face returning

to the room I share with the others, the awkward questions and silences. He might have something useful I can do until I'm too tired to care.

A rustling of feathers, something I've always been attuned to, alerts me to the proximity of a Gryn. I guess they must be able to move silently sometimes, but their hard, strong flight feathers means that, generally, it's pretty easy hear one coming.

"Are you following me?" I fling myself around, angrily to confront whoever it is behind me and hoping it's not Jyr.

It's worse.

"No! Why would I do that? What are you up to? Should I be following you?" The blue eyed warrior snarls as he almost walks into me.

This close up, he is truly magnificent. Close to seven foot tall, big, dark wings, chiseled abs and skin like mahogany leather covering his shoulders. He is also highly pissed off, his fists clenching and unclenching as he stares down, looking at me like I'm something he found on the sole of his heavy black boots.

He's right, why would he be following me? I'm nothing in the grand scheme of things. He will have better things to do, like terrifying kittens, if they have anything like that on Ustokos.

"This place is a deathtrap. I don't want to be knocked over the edge, that's all." I mutter, dropping my chin to my chest and hugging myself as I shrink back from the big warrior.

He doesn't seem to be prepared to let my comment go, and he squares up to me, holding up his wings, making himself seem much, much larger. Something the massive male really doesn't need to do.

"Humans!" He huffs a hot breath that ruffles my hair. "Always complaining."

"We don't!" I fire back. I'm quaking in my boots with this powerful male only an inch from me. He could literally tear me apart with his vicious claws and not break a sweat. If the

Gryn are anything like actual birds of prey, it wouldn't bother him in the slightest either. But I can't let him get away with a comment that is blatantly untrue. "We're more than grateful that the Gryn helped us escape from Proto and welcomed us into your lair."

"You're not. I know you're not. No one is." He growls as he bends down to get closer to my face. "I'm watching you." His lips twist, exposing his sharp canines, and he puts a heavy, clawed hand on my shoulder.

I can feel the vibration of his anger flowing through him. I can also smell his feathers, like warm baking and cinnamon. Clean washing on a summer's day. I do my very best not to inhale too hard. The last thing I need is him thinking that I'm smelling him. That's going to open a whole new can of worms that could result in severe injury for me.

"Get back to cleaning up the younglings messes and make sure I don't catch you skulking around the lair again if you know what's good for you."

His sharp, white teeth glisten. He pushes away from me, great wings opening wide, the strength of the wind that hits me as he beats down is like a solid object. With a single motion, he lifts up, twists and is flying up the central shaft towards the exit that is only accessible by those on this planet with wings.

I breathe out and cough. Fyn has sucked all the air from my lungs both with his presence and with his rudeness.

"Yeah, and you go back to being a fucking asshole." I mutter to myself with no vehemence.

To be entirely honest, I'm surprised he even noticed me.

FYN



What the vrex did I just do?

Yes, I was following her. She left on her own, not with the other human females, and I couldn't help myself. I had to make sure she was safe.

But when she caught me, she acted as if I was just another Gryn. Not the warrior trying to keep her from harm. Not her mate, sworn to protect her. My anger spilled out, and I can't even remember what I said.

But I do remember the look of fear on her face, even as her delicious, glorious scent rose into my nostrils. My cocks throb at the thought as I spiral out of the lair, heading for the one place I know I won't be disturbed. I have to try to get my emotions under control. I have to attend szent with the other seniors shortly. They'll need to know the present position with the patrols, and I haven't been able to think of anything other than her for the last turn.

Who am I kidding? I haven't been able to think of anything but her for the last countless turns. Her sunrise red hair is burned into my brain. Having finally gotten close to her, I could see that her skin was fine, covered with tiny hairs and looked like the softest pelt. Her eyes were a startling green, the irises surrounded by gold flecks. She trembled under me, her perfect body demanding to be unwrapped, teased, and pleased.

I land on the hidden platform, concealed from the rest of the lair, already stripping off my boots and pants in my hurry

to get to the pool where I can deal with my monster erections. I glance briefly at the pile of furs in one corner as I dive, head-first, into the warm water. I resurface, settle myself against the side of the pool, and take my aching members in hand. I've barely touched them and I'm coming, my back arching with my sudden climax. The pool water turning cloudy with the copious deposits of seed.

A climax I wish was inside my *eregri*. Painting her delicious walls with my spill, ready to fill her belly with my young.

The mate I just yelled at, intimidated, and made fear me. The mate that is already making my empty cocks hard with a single thought. I groan and roll my head back against the side of the pool. I can't be this way. I've a lair to run and mercs to train. There are patrols to follow, supply runs to protect. Mating is the last thing on my agenda, and yet I can't get her beautiful face out of my mind.

I smash my fist into the water, trying to get a grip on the anger and confusion that rolls through my mind.

I am different.

I am feared.

I do not deserve a mate.

I nod my pounding head at the finality of the statements. Today is the last day I spend following her, checking on her and trying to be close to her. All of this ends, now.

Heaving myself out of my pool, I studiously ignore the items I've been collecting and depositing in this small cave, making it ready for my *eregri*. There will be no nest for a mate, not for me.

I have decreed it, and it will be so.

My female sits on a ledge in Orvos's surgery and sighs to herself. She looks tired, as if she hasn't been sleeping much. I

didn't think the quarters that Ryak arranged for the humans were in a good place. Far too close to the merc barrack level for my liking. I know Jyr's mate wanted them relatively close to her, but I know it will be noisy. It's bad enough on the senior level.

Not that I like to sleep, and it's a good thing that I can get by on very little. Most of the senior Gryn, the ones Proto enhanced, don't sleep much. For me it's what I see when I close my eyes. I don't know if it's the same for the others. The nightmares slam into my consciousness in such a way I'm never entirely sure who I am when I wake.

And they're getting worse.

Yesterday I found myself standing over the sleeping form of Kyt, claws extended. It was a good thing he had just returned from a merc party, stinking of var beer. His sleep was alcohol induced and heavy enough that he didn't wake to find me, apparently about to kill him.

But being close to my *eregri* calms me. I exhale as quietly as I can in my confined space, whilst keeping my eyes on her. She slides down the wall until she's lying down on the ledge, head pillowed on one of her hands, whilst the other swings over the edge, swish-swishing against the blanket that hangs there.

If I close my eyes, I can almost imagine it's me she's looking at and my feathers she is gently stroking. By Nisis it makes my cocks throb with need, and in this confined space that's not a good thing. My body wars with my mind. I want to stay close to her but I'm far too uncomfortable to stay in my hiding place. I have two choices before I go on patrol, hang around in the food hall to see if she comes in, or make my way to my nest and stroke myself, thinking about her.

I wriggle my way out of the tiny space I've made for myself, still undecided. Due to the confines, I have to exit backwards, but the corridor that allows me to enter my spy hole is rarely used. Once I'm out, I rest my head against the cool concrete and palm my cocks through the material of my

pants. I'm leaning towards going to my nest when I hear the sounds of footsteps.

"Fyn?" A female voice has me spinning around. "What are you doing here?"

It's Viv, Jyr's mate. She is very round with child, one hand resting on her swollen belly and the other on her back.

I bow. "Lady Prime. I could ask you the same question."

"I'm just taking a stroll." She says, her intelligent eyes missing nothing, she inclines her head on one side. "Baby's sitting heavily, and it's marginally more comfortable if I'm standing up." She rubs a circle on her big stomach.

"I'm—" "I hesitate for a fraction of a second, and I know I'm lost. Her eyes descend to my crotch and her mouth quirks at the corners. "I'm checking this part of the lair structure, for Jyr." I say.

"For Jyr." She parrots, slowly.

I know she's going to ask him if he wanted the structure checked and then I'm going to have an interesting conversation with the Prime.

"I need to go. I have patrols shortly." I say, attempting to sound as masterful as Jyr and failing completely in the face of this heavily pregnant human.

If only my *eregri*, my Lucy, could be as ripe with my child. The thought sends my cocks jerking, and I quickly move to the edge of an opening into the central shaft in the hope Viv does not see. The only thing that's going to save this situation is that she is too large to fit into the small gap I just squeezed out of.

"Can I assist you at all, Lady Prime?" I ask, ensuring that I'm turned away from her.

"Not at all Fyn. I can make my own way back to my quarters from here. You go and do your patrols."

There's a hint of a laugh in her voice and a whisper of sarcasm lurking there. Normally I might challenge something like that, even from such a pregnant female, but I'm desperate

to get away from her and from the place I spy on my *eregri*. The last thing I want is her knowing what I'm doing, and I'm sure the human females would tell each other.

“As you wish, my lady.” I unfurl my wings and take several rapid beats upwards, not daring to look back.

If she sees my face, she will know exactly what I've been up to, and I just can't risk that.

I'm not ready for my mate. Not yet.

LUCY



I can't get him out of my mind, and it's starting to royally piss me off. I don't really want to be part of this new world I'm living on and having a glowering Gryn warrior haunting my dreams is not helping.

Especially as the dreams are vivid, graphic, and I wake panting with need, feeling his weight between my legs and his mouth on my...

This is absolutely not happening to me. I'm just not going to let it. Fyn isn't even interested in me. From what I've overheard, the only thing he is interested in is fighting. If he's not out smashing robots sent by Proto, then he's fighting the other Gryn, or training them to fight. As Jyr's second in command, it's his job, but the other warriors I have overheard suggest that he relishes it, revels in the fight even.

I've never been a fighter. I couldn't even fight back when my aunt tore into me when she was drunk, telling me how terrible my mother was and that I had turned out just like her. Working with birds of prey is not even a battle of wills and maybe that's why I was good at my job. Being a falconer is all about a quiet acceptance, of slipping yourself into your charges lives, almost without them noticing it. The process of trust building is simple. I provide food and don't threaten them. They trust me.

Completely unlike the Gryn and one in particular. Fyn doesn't seem to be capable of taming. And he's watching me. Grumpy bastard.

Orvos's surgery is quiet for the time being. There's been less problems with the narcotics that the Gryn used to manufacture recently and because the morning patrols have yet to return, there have been no casualties. It means I get a few moments of calm and quiet, something Orvos respects, given he's withdrawn to one of the back rooms to do an inventory on supplies.

In advance of later in the day, I work my way through my own toolkit. Checking that the adhesive I've been using for imping feathers has not gone off, whittling a few more imping pegs. I've also found a way of heating a pair of tongs fashioned by the lair's weapons maker, an enormous scarred Gryn warrior called Myk, after Orvos asked him (I was far too scared to approach the big, dark, silent warrior myself). It means I can apply a gentle heat to bent feathers and return them to normal. While the time ticks by, I mix up some more of the oils I use to slick over wings after I've handled them, returning them to their usual waterproof state, because the natural oils that human skin produces removes this proofing.

Not that the rain on this planet is just water. Sometimes it's acid, and I've seen firsthand the burns it causes on the skin of the mercs. Their feathers seem relatively impervious as does the skin on their shoulders, but on the rest of their bodies, the burns run deep.

It's almost time for the patrols to return.

"Anything?" I call out to Orvos.

Apparently the senior Gryn have a way of telepathically communicating with each other, which means, like Radar, he often has some idea of what's coming his way in terms of any casualties. Recently Proto has been concentrating on the Gryn with, from what I understand, are improved weapons. Most injuries have been, fortunately, minor, with the vast majority of the warriors being up and about after a day in the surgery.

Although that might be more to do with Orvos's bedside manner. He doesn't like malingerers.

"Minor flesh wounds only for now, my dear. If you want to head up to the food hall early, you can." He calls back.

My stomach rumbles. I've found I'm hungry more and more, since I started obsessing about Mr. Winged, Dark and Brooding. Like someone as alien handsome as he is could ever be interested in a little mouse like me. He'd much rather pick a dark haired beauty like Emma, who is tall and moves like she's underwater, all languid and easy. She can talk to anyone and is kind and generous. Or ice queen Bianca, who makes doing nothing look like an art form.

No one picks the redhead. The ginger. The wallflower.

I decide to take Orvos up on his offer and troop out of the surgery, contemplating whether to find the other humans before I go and get food. Flapping and thumps behind me indicate the influx of those needing treatment. I hasten to get out of their way, putting my head down as I start to toil up the ramps towards the food hall. I may as well just grab something and take it back to the surgery. Orvos might need some assistance anyway.

"Hey." A familiar voice has me raising my head.

Leaning against a wall and looking very pregnant is Vivian, the human female who met the Gryn long before we did.

Met and married Jyr in fact. She looks like she's days off giving birth to his first child.

"Hey." I reply. "How are you?" I ask her. She's reached whale proportions, and I can't imagine that's easy.

Viv groans. "Everything aches. I could spend all day in the healing pools, and I would if I didn't go pruny. I can't wait to get giving birth over with."

"Really?" The question is out of my mouth before I engage my brain. "Shit! Sorry Viv, I didn't mean it like that. It's just giving birth..." I grimace as she laughs.

Her laughter is beautiful, rich and infectious. While I envy Emma's height and Bianca's good looks, if I could be anyone it would be Viv. Long, golden blond hair curls around her shoulders, shining with life. Being pregnant suits her. She

carries her bump well and doesn't look like too much like a blimp.

She's also got a male who dotes on her in every sense of the word. In fact I'm quite surprised he's not with her now.

"I know what you mean, and I'm fucking terrified of giving birth. Orvos isn't helping by getting all pissy when I ask him how many babies he's birthed." She pats her stomach. "No putting off the inevitable though. This one's coming out when it's time and whether I like it or not." Tears hover in her eyes.

"I'm sure it'll be fine, Viv. Orvos does know what he's doing, honestly." I have an overwhelming desire to hug her, but I'm awkward about touching and instead I hold a hand over her arm, hesitating before giving her a slight squeeze and moving away.

"Hormones." She gives me a watery smile. "I cried when I dropped a shoe this morning, just ignore me." She sniffs and brushes at her eyes. "Anyway I was looking for you."

"Oh?"

"Have you seen Fyn much lately?"

I let out a bark of laughter. "I had a run in with him this morning, does that count?"

"A run in?" She crunches up her face quizzically.

"He was following me, and when I called him out, he told me not to go skulking around the lair if I knew what was good for me. So if I don't see him again, it'll be too soon." I spit out the words, trying to sound like I don't care.

That I don't care he was mean to me and had no reason to be. That I don't care a hulking gorgeous male that could make a Hollywood heartthrob book in with his plastic surgeon in an instant basically told me he hates me.

He doesn't even know me.

"Okay—" Viv seems a bit taken aback by the ferocity in my statement. "I was only wondering because..." Her sentence is cut off by Jyr thumping down next to us.

He is immediately draped over Viv, as if I'm not even there. His dark wings enclosing them both. I contemplate clearing my throat, but they're not that interested in me, and I already feel awkward enough. I creep back a few steps and turn to head back to the surgery. Maybe Orvos needs a hand after all.

“Lucy!” Viv calls after me, I look over my shoulder to see her pushing one of Jyr's wings aside. “We're having a celebration soon, after the baby arrives. Say you'll come? Please?”

I wave at her. “I'll think about it.” I smile as I call back.

I won't. Parties are not my thing. It's a definite no.

FYN



I'm still trying to work out what Viv is going to tell Jyr as I make my way to the patrol landing platform. I'm hoping I didn't sound too suspicious and that she didn't see anything she shouldn't have. But I can't be sure.

What concerns me more is if she says something to Lucy. If my mate finds out I have been following her. And spying on her. I'm finished. My chance at mating over before it can even begin.

I've had ample opportunity to mate with other species. The Mochi females will easily sell their bodies for pleasure. I've never had much I could pay with. I don't bet on fights like other warriors, although I've had plenty bet on me. I've never accumulated anything that could pass for currency. Not that I would have spent any on such a sordid thing as a night with any female.

My foolish heart believed in Nisis, our mother goddess and that she had a plan for us, a mate for us. A future for us.

After all Proto put me through, I still believed. Each night I'm tortured by the nightmares, I still believe.

My mate is a tiny, puny human with hair the color of the flaming second sun. Nisis is always right, the way my body reacts, she is my mate. She could be nothing else.

My mind is elsewhere, contemplating the strangeness of the universe as I circle the landing platform, not even bothering to take in the patrols lined up for my inspection. I drop down and grab my weapons.

“Move out!” I bellow at the mercs, holding back as one by one, they take off in formation.

Normally I’d be all over them if any dared break their lines, but for today, I want them gone. The sooner they leave, the sooner we’ll be back, and I will, once again, be in the lair close to my *eregri*.

I’m working with a young patrol tonight. Six of the more recent intake and six mercs who recently came of age. The younger ones jostle for my attention, and I glare at them.

“Keep quiet, do everything I tell you to do, without question and we’ll get through this.” I grind out, as I lift my hands to indicate they need to get in the air. Their formation is poor, but I correct it as we head out into the dim afternoon light and take a turn towards the Mochi lands. They have a trading post that requires protection for a few hours, and it should be a relatively easy duty for the young ones first time out.

My head is full of thoughts of Lucy as we skim over the ruined city and out towards the borderlands. I’m wondering if she will be in the surgery when I return, giving me the opportunity to watch her, or if I will have to fight with the mercs for a view in the food hall.

Or perhaps I should try to speak to her again.

The lone joykill bot has already hit a merc before I’m brought to my senses. It’s missed anything vital, and he shoots upwards as fast as his wings can carry him, just like I trained him.

The problem is that the other four mercs decide that they are going to take on the bot and pile in with everything they have. Despite all their training, they think they can take the bot and the outcome is predictable. The mercs are zapped off immediately by the shielding the bot uses, one of whom is knocked cold by the blast.

“Vrex it!” I swear to myself as I dive after him. “Remember your vrexing training!” I yell up at the remainder of my patrol that surrounds the bot. “Disable it!”

I've no time to waste, the unconscious merc is not rousing, and I fold my wings up to drop as quickly as possible, pumping hard to catch him. I don't want his death on my conscience. It's hard enough to close my eyes at night.

With one last burst of speed, I manage to get beneath him just before he hits the ground. His weight knocks me off balance, and I skim past the remains of a building, catching against it with my wing. As I gain height again, I can see that the remaining mercs have mastered the bot and send it crashing to the ground, just as the one in my arms comes around with a start.

“You are all a bunch of vrexing waste of space.”

I calculate whether we have enough mercs back at the lair to send out instead. My patrol are clearly rattled by their run in with the bot, and it would be foolish to continue to the Mochi with them in this state. Having checked the one in my arms has wits enough to fly, I indicate that we are to return to the lair.

It's only then I spot it, the telltale whipping of something badly wrong. My third primary feather sticking up at an angle. It's only when I land, I can take in the full damage. Running my hand through my wing, the feather comes away, broken off halfway down.

It's not the mercs fault.

It's not the mercs fault.

It's not the mercs fault.

I keep repeating the phrase over and over as I stare at the broken flight feather in my hands.

All my years fighting Proto, first in the camps, and more recently as part of the lair, I've never so much as bent a feather, let alone broken one.

Sure, like all Gryn, my feathers look tatty before the moult, but I shed them, and I am renewed. Never broken, never damaged.

Which means I only have one option.

I'm going to have to face my mate and fall on her mercy.

LUCY



I'm packing up for the night when I hear the sound of boots and feathers entering the surgery.

It's been a long day. There were no casualties from the patrols, but someone has been telling the younger mercs to come and see me about feather care, presumably one of the senior Gryn, and I've had a steady stream of males that don't really want to see me but feel obliged.

Eventually a couple of warriors appeared from the afternoon patrols, nothing more than a few bumps and scrapes, but the youngest was very subdued and shaking from head to foot. His color must have concerned Orvos as he let him stay and suggested I help him with some preening to settle him down, which seemed to take forever.

So, right now, I'd just like some alone time and the last thing I need is to be confronted by the one Gryn I don't want to see.

But, like a dark angel, Fyn stands in front of me, bristling with repressed anger.

"You fix feathers, right?" He demands, his voice raised.

"I do my best." There's something about his demeanor that makes me want to shake him. He's no right to treat me like something he just found under his boot. Whatever he might think about humans, I'm helping the Gryn, not harming them. "Do you need help?"

Fyn shifts from foot to foot, as if trying to make up his mind. Then his hand shoots out from behind his back, broken flight feather clutched in it. He extends his left wing and the gap is immediately obvious.

“I need it fixed.” He states, eyes flashing dangerously. “Before the next patrol.” He adds, his voice softer.

“Sit.” I tell him, pointing to one of the ledges. “I’ll get everything ready.” I hold out my hand for the feather, and he hesitates. “I’m going to need it to measure up. But if you don’t want my help...” I leave the threat hanging there.

“I want your help.” He admits begrudgingly and hands over the feather.

I take it over to my workstation and begin to prepare it. He must have hit something very hard to break the shaft, which is like steel.

“What did you do?” I ask him over my shoulder. Breaking the frosty silence coming from him.

“Merc patrol vrexed up.” He grunts. I shoot him a glance.

As I’ve prepared the broken half of the feather, he’s made himself comfortable, settled back on the ledge, feet propped up and head resting on an arm bend behind him against the wall. He looks all day gorgeous, and my lady parts go into overdrive.

“Thought that was your job.” I walk back over to him with the tools I need to complete the imp. “Sorting out the merc patrols that is.”

He gets off the ledge as I approach and drops down next to it, extending his wing across the smooth surface in preparation for me. I don’t remember him being in the surgery when I’ve worked on broken feathers before, but he must have been, given that he knows what to do.

“I’m preparing the shaft to take the imping needle.” I explain as I clean up the break, scraping away the small splinters on the shaft with a small sharp knife.

Fyn's feathers smell divine. A scent of warm baking with a hint of all spice. Being this close to him, touching him, it's doing funny things to my stomach and, yet again, causing the area between my thighs to ache.

"I'm fixing the feather now. Don't move until I say." I slide in the feather, twisting gently until it aligns with the rest and then carefully apply the adhesive over the break until it looks like new.

Fyn inhales deeply but keeps perfectly still. I try not to think that I have him at my mercy, kneeling at my feet. Instead I rub the preening oil over my hands as I wait for the adhesive to dry.

"What's that?" He eyes my actions suspiciously. Since when did this male have such a downer on humans?

"The oils in my hands can strip the waterproofing off your feathers. This will replace it." I begin to stroke my hands through his wings.

His feathers are like nothing else I've ever touched. Soft and steely, they are the raw power of the air. I can't help thinking what it would be like to be entwined in his arms and fly with him, somewhere secret and secluded where I could get a better view of all of him, up close and personal. My core floods with heat and need.

And Fyn groans. His eyes flickering closed for an instant.

"Are you okay? Do I need to get Orvos?" I ask, worried that he might have been hiding an injury from me.

"I don't need Orvos. I never need Orvos." Fyn replies. "I'm fine. Please, continue with your work." His voice is slightly strangled, but he isn't shouting at me, so I'm taking that as a win.

I work my way over the wing, making sure I've covered all the areas I might have touched. For good measure, I also make my way up the shoulder, massaging into the short feathers before smoothing out over his secondary flights. I check my imp and feel a pang of regret that it's holding well.

It might just be the best I've ever done. Looks like I'm going to have to let my feathered god go.

"You're done." I stand back and his beautiful blue eyes flutter open.

It's not uncommon for the Gryn I work with to enjoy being preened and to, on occasion, nod off. Orvos has told me that mutual preening for comfort is common between males as it was between unmated males and females when the Gryn actually had any females.

Fyn stands and towers over me as he inspects my work.

"It should hold until your next moult." I want to fill the silence. "I can do your other wing if you want?"

His head lifts, and he fixes me with those eyes. "Do my other wing?"

I drip some more oil onto my hands and hold them up.

"I need to do your other wing." I say, trying to put some authority into my voice.

Trying to be brave where bravery doesn't come easily to me. What I should be doing is something normal, like asking him to come to the food hall with me for a cup of that weird savory drink the Gryn call cala. Instead I'm offering to touch him up.

Smooth, Lucy. Real smooth.

FYN



She combs through my feathers, and her touch is like nothing I've ever experienced. Light, easy, it burns like fire through me. I'm struggling to control my body. When she asked to preen my other wing, I couldn't refuse. There was no control left. My cocks strain at my pants, and I prop up a knee to try to hide my arousal from her.

I've scared this pretty mate more than enough. I can't possibly make things any worse between us. Can I?

"How did you do it? Break your flight feather that is?" She asks, her voice soft as she continues her magic preening.

"Stupid merc." I snarl out, my voice gruff. She pauses for an instant and then, thankfully resumes, discovering a knot of feathers I didn't know I had.

It feels so good as she gently works away at freeing them. My cocks throb, straining for her and I keep talking to distract myself.

"They overreacted to a joykill. Everything went to gak, and I had to catch one of them when he was knocked out. I probably damaged it when I hit the building." I can't help myself but inch closer. She settles back on the ledge and, without hesitation, I'm resting against her, uninvited. "It was supposed to be a routine patrol. I had to bring them back and go out with another patrol to ensure we performed our duties. That's why I'm late back." I continue.

I can't remember a time when I talked so much about nothing. In her arms, under her care, I'm relaxed and talking

comes easy.

“How do you know how to look after Gryn feathers?” I twist slightly to look at her, not wanting to disturb her work but wanting to see her sweet face.

She smiles at me, and my heart stops. It stutters and flips. I’m struggling not to give away how she makes me feel.

Because she does make me feel something. More than just the desire to mate. She makes me feel like I’m back among the living, not just existing for existence’s sake.

“On Earth, I care for creatures that have feathers like you and are predatory, like the Gryn.”

“You have another mate on Earth?” I can’t help myself, but I growl deep in my chest. My female is mine alone. I don’t want to hear of her other mates, who had the opportunity for her to serve them as she serves me.

“No, silly,” she pats me lightly on the shoulder before returning to her work. “The creatures on Earth are called birds of prey. I looked after them. They hunted for me. Handling them was called falconry, which made me a falconer. It’s a very old profession stretching back thousands of years in our history.”

“These creatures were not your mates?”

“They were absolutely not mates.” She says, her voice serious “They were what humans considered to be pets. A bit like your maraha, except we didn’t eat them.”

“Companions in the hunt?” That I can relate to. “I believe that the Gryn once had similar assistance animals. Before the great reckoning and the devastation that followed.” There is so much more to my female than meets the eye, and what I see pleases me.

I nestle into her as she continues to preen me. Her scent surrounds me, all fresh rain and heady sweetness.

“I like that you have experience of flying beings.” My tongue trips over the words and my eyelids are heavier than ever. “Tell me more about your *birds of prey*.”

I'm greedy for her and not just to bury myself inside her glorious body, but to know everything about my mate. I want to absorb her, every part of her. I could listen to her voice for hours. So much better than the silence I normally prefer.

I find I'm in a meadow of waving grasses, the like of which I have only heard about in tales from other Gryn. The sky overhead is a perfect blue. I'm lying on my back, wings spread to catch the warmth of the sun and the scent of the fragrant breeze in my nostrils. This is not Ustokos but I don't care. I like it and I want to stay. I hear someone calling my name, and, although I don't want to leave my spot in the sun, I can't ignore the call. Getting to my feet, I see my *eregri* in the distance.

She waves to me and calls my name again. I launch myself into the clean, warm air. I've not flown in anything like it, and I rise higher, faster and easier than I have ever done before. I laugh out loud at the joy of simply being alive. Below me the grasslands stretch towards mountains worn by the passage of time, a patch work of smooth crags and undulating vegetation that hugs the curves of the hills. This place is beautiful, and I want to remain here forever.

The sound of my mate's voice draws me back. She's below me, shading her eyes as she tracks my flight. I drop towards her, wanting to gather her in my arms, to hold her close and to make her mine.

"Fyn?" The voice is in my ear. Warm breath tickling my neck as I open my eyes to stare into the depths of green pools that hold everything. "I've finished. You're good to go."

Her delicious scent surrounds me, and I find I can't speak. My sleep is always full of the dark, of violence and pain. But under her touch, it was something completely different. I'm refreshed and relaxed, better than a long soak in the healing pool.

Her face hovers over mine, her intelligent eyes studying me.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" She breathes.

I can think of a million things that I would like to do to her and have her do to me, but my vocal cords seem to have been cut and all I can do is release a slow moan at her closeness. I should be enclosing her in my arms, drinking in her closeness, whispering in her ear what she makes me feel.

Except I don't know what she makes me feel. I can't articulate it and my tongue remains tied.

LUCY



I've not had a Gryn relax whilst I helped preen him in the same way as Fyn. He dropped into a stupor of pleasure as soon as I started to work on his second wing. He settled into me, sliding down my body until his head came to rest in my lap, and I extended his wing in order to continue.

God, he smells good. Cinnamon spice from his feathers and his natural musk rise from him. Like all Gryn he only bothers with clothing on his bottom half. The skin on his shoulders and chest is leathery and strong, it seems to give them a natural form of protection from most of the elements. Plus, it never seems to get cold here.

Of course, that means I get an up close and personal look at the monster Gryn. His feathers extend over his shoulders and down his back, descending below the waistline of his leather trousers. He is an impressive, fearsome specimen of a male. Black claws tip his fingers, and his muscles are enormous.

One muscle in particular that is. He tried to hide his arousal and failed because something that big is going to be noticeable.

What I can't quite fathom is why he is getting aroused around me. I'm nothing special after all. Fyn's already indicated he's not happy about having humans in the lair and that clearly includes me.

But he sought me out when he had a problem and now I have him, snuggled in my lap and at the mercy of my

fingertips, something he clearly enjoys, given the little whimpers that escape him from time to time. He tried to make conversation, then simply dozed off.

And he is gorgeous when he's asleep. His aquiline features are strong, his face almost kind. His full lips beg to be kissed. He squirms against me in his slumber as I complete the preen. I want to keep going, to have him like this, all sweetness and sleepy, forever. This is a Fyn I like, one that isn't all glower and anger. However, I'm out of oil and any more touching will undo all my good work.

"Fyn? I've finished. You're good to go." I say, leaning close to his ear and speaking quietly so as not to startle him.

His glorious blue eyes flicker open, and it's as if he has been reborn. The look of peace replacing ferocity is intense and beautiful. He doesn't move, doesn't reply, just stares up at my face, taking me in. My stomach squirms and my heart starts to beat double time to be this close to such a perfect being.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

I've never been this forward with a human man, so why does this Gryn bring out the naughty tiger in me? I can't draw back from his handsome face, his pillowy lips that I could touch with mine. His cheek that I want to run my hand over, to find out if his skin is soft or smooth. My core pulses with a need I didn't know I had.

My lips brush his.

Electricity sparks between us.

I see a glimpse of pain, fear and longing until I spring back, just as footsteps sound in the corridor to the surgery. Fyn's warmth is gone from my lap, and he stands over me, inspecting his wing.

"Fyn." Orvos's voice rumbles behind us. "Surprised to see you here."

"The human female was assisting me with a damaged feather." Fyn replies, his eyes not leaving mine. "She might be

some use after all.”

He inclines his head and, with his back still to Orvos, he winks.

I’m lost for words and scramble to my feet, tidying my equipment as Fyn leaves with a swish of feathers.

“He didn’t upset you, did he?” Orvos asks me.

“No.” I don’t trust my voice not to tremble by giving a longer answer.

“Fyn is more troubled than most Gryn. What Proto did to him, I’m surprised he survived.” He says with his regular gruffness and complete lack of a bedside manner. “But he endures, more than the other seniors. It was the best thing for him when Jyr made him Command.” I see his eyes soften slightly as he thinks about the two males.

I’m only half-listening, still trying to process what happened seconds ago, when I had the biggest predator in the lair nestled in my lap, his warmth seeping into my bones and his beautiful eyes concentrated on me and me alone.

“But if he’s bothering you, I’ll speak to Jyr about him.” Orvos says, his expression grim.

“Fyn isn’t bothering me. He’s fine and I’m fine.” I say, keeping my voice even. “Thank you anyway for looking out for me.” I smile at the grizzled older Gryn. “It’s been a long day and I just want to get some rest.”

“Thank you, sweet Lucy.” Orvos gives me his now customary bow. “Your service is appreciated.”

I need some time on my own to work out what just happened between Fyn and me. If there was anything at all. After all, I could be imagining that the big warrior was in my arms and at my mercy.

I’m walking slowly back towards the room I share with the other women and imagining their reaction to what just happened or didn’t happen between me and Fyn. None of them would believe it, and I’m beginning to think that perhaps my

fevered imagination dreamt it all up. His reaction to me, the touch of our lips.

The electric charge.

It's as if that jolt has jump started my heart. I can still feel it, tingling through me.

I didn't imagine that, did I?

But a fearsome warrior like Fyn doesn't want a little mouse like me. I don't get the guy. I never did. Men found my job weird and off putting. Even when I did attract a boyfriend, they didn't stay long, not understanding that the birds had to come first, rain or shine. Inevitably they found someone prettier, more outgoing. Less tied down.

What Fyn wants is a free spirit to soar with him in the dark clouds of this planet. Not a human female that will anchor him to the ground.

And my heart aches as I plod through the lair, hoping to find solace in some forgotten corner away from it all.

FYN



I make my way back to the quarters I share with the other seniors before my absence is noted. I'd have preferred to spend more time in my nest. It took a whole hour of seeing to myself before my erections had subsided enough to get my cocks back into my pants. As I make my way through the lair, they are threatening again.

As is my desire to seek out my little mate, to be close to her. I know she won't be in the surgery anymore and that, at this late hour, she is most probably in the human's quarters.

Maybe naked, wrapped only in a blanket, her tiny lush form soft like it was when I woke earlier.

Nisis be damned, my members are as hard as rock. Again. How did Gryn anywhere manage to function at all when there were females everywhere?

I don't remember females, and I have only one remembrance of my mother, soft and warm. The rest of my memories were erased by Proto. Seared out of my brain as it attempted to put in new ones. Memories that would make me fight. Memories that would make me fearsome. And angry.

There is always the anger, hovering around the edges of everything I do.

"Fyn." Kyt greets me and looks up from his work as I enter our quarters and fling myself down on my ledge. "Want some?" He nods towards a flask of lynk.

I've not touched a drop since Lucy slid into my life. Lynk used to be the only way I could sleep, but now I imagine her face and it's not needed. I shake my head at him.

"Just want to rest." I mutter, turning onto my back and kicking off my boots.

"Suit yourself." Kyt takes a long pull on the flask. From the smell and the slur to his words, he's been drinking for a while.

He can't help it. None of us can. Proto made us to be dependent on something, anything to stop the pain from overwhelming our minds. But the other seniors make being a Gryn seem easy. They have a poise and a grace to them, even the silent Myk who instills other warriors with calm and obedience. I want Lucy more than ever, and not just because she makes my shafts pulse with need. It means I have to stroke them over and over. I want her, all of her.

Yet I can't tell if she wants me. Why would she want me? I'm broken beyond repair, not capable of anything but functioning. I don't even do that well.

"You okay, Fyn?" Kyt asks.

The last thing I want is a conversation with him. The self-assured Gryn who has an answer for everything and charms all with whom he comes into contact.

"Yep." I turn my back to him and close my eyes. Attempting to conjure up Lucy's beautiful face and ignoring the throbbing in my pants.

The lair is on fire. Heat licks at my wings and smoke fills my lungs. My hands and arms are covered in blood that is not my own. All around me are bodies of my brothers, my fellow warriors young and old, whom I fought alongside. Their feathers tattered and twisting in the flames. I have done this.

I have killed them.

I am burning them.

I am a monster.

Fear me.

The cry wakes me, and I half-tumble off my ledge, batting at the non-existent flames. Kyt is asleep on his desk, snoring in his lynk induced slumber. I stagger over to him and grab at the flask, tipping it into my mouth, desperate to taste the alcohol, to numb the horror of my nightmare. It's empty.

Pulling my boots back on, I'm in the air in seconds, heading down to the brewery. I'm sure Kyt said we'd recently gotten more lynk from the Kijg, and my need is great.

This is why Lucy doesn't need a Gryn like me. I'm weak and pathetic. In the grip of my nightmares, I cannot protect her. And if I can't protect my mate, she deserves better.

A scent hits me. At once familiar and delicious. My cocks rise. It is my *eregri*. She is near. I swoop around the central shaft, searching for her tiny form.

Just because I'm no good for her, it doesn't mean I can't see her, be near her, look at her. If that's all I can do, I'll take it over drowning myself in lynk.

It's then I see her, she's walking aimlessly up the ramps towards her quarters. I look for the best place to land in order to observe her progress. With a huge effort, I manage to find a ledge that will allow me to see her without being seen, and I land with as minimal noise as possible.

Lucy hugs herself as she slowly walks ever upward. My mind is gripped by the image of calmness. Of green all around and a weight, sat easy on my left fist. Dark eyes turn on me, not those of the Gryn, but a creature, one that has an ancient soul. It eases my chaotic thoughts as it eases those of my *eregri*.

The thoughtbond! It shouldn't be working this way. I shouldn't be able to read her like this. She is not Gryn, and we have not mated. Up until now, the only other Gryn I have shared a thoughtbond with have been the other seniors, and I have become adept at hiding mine. But it seems so right to share my emotions with Lucy in this way. I know I shouldn't,

but I tune in again, wanting to be in her head as much as she is in mine.

Her chin jerks up, and she comes to a sudden halt, staring up into the gloom, straight at me.

She knows I'm here. I take flight, hoping it's dark enough that she can't really tell which Gryn has been watching her. Without looking back, I retreat to my quarters.

“Command!” The merc bursts in, unannounced as usual. “Prime requires you in his quarters immediately.”

The entire lair has been skating on hot coals for the last turn waiting for Jyr's mate to give birth. This summons must be that the youngling has finally arrived.

My head feels as heavy as my boots as I make my way up to the Prime's level, situated in an eyrie at the top of the lair. Ever since I heard that Viv had gone into labor, something has been sitting on my heart, and I don't know what.

A wild-eyed Prime greets me as I enter his outer chamber.

“She's here, Fyn! She's finally here!” He claps his wing to mine in an uncharacteristic display of emotion.

“My Prime, I am delighted.” I dredge up a smile from somewhere, hoping it doesn't look false.

“Please, Fyn, you have to meet her.” Jyr's enthusiasm is infectious, and I enter his inner chamber with less trepidation.

His mate is sitting propped up on the furs. In her arm is a tiny bundle. I find my heart stills to be near the youngling. I already feel fiercely protective of the life that Jyr and Viv have brought to the lair, and something clenches deep inside me.

I want it for myself. I want to look at my mate the way Jyr does at Viv.

And I want her to look back at me the same way.

Viv holds out her hand. “Fyn, come and meet her.” She smiles, tiredness etched over her face as I approach, taking her hand and kneeling next to the bed.

The youngling is the very embodiment of Viv, with Jyr’s dark eyes. She yawns and gurgles, mashing her little clawed hand at Viv’s breast.

“She is perfect, Lady Prime.”

Viv’s eyes fill with tears. “Thank you, Fyn. That means a lot.”

“Come, Command!” Jyr grips my shoulder, hauling me to my feet. “I want a celebration to end all celebrations. Tonight!” He orders. An angry noise behind us, has him turning to look at his mate. “In a turn—” The noise comes again. “In two turns?” There is silence, which he takes as assent. “Tell Kyt I want everything and everyone there.”

“Now that’s settled, oh great Prime, any chance I could feed your daughter in peace?” Viv calls out as a little wailing cry starts from the youngling.

Jyr grins as he slings his arm around my shoulder, steering me towards the door. I don’t think I’ve ever seen the huge Prime look quite so giddy with joy, even at his mating ceremony.

“And you, Fyn, you are to ask that little female with the hair like flames to accompany you. She is called Lucy, I believe.”

“What? Why?” I stumble over the words.

“She’s been watching you, so I hear. If I’m mated, I want more of my warriors to mate. We need to fill this lair with younglings and you, my dear Command, need to get your dicks wet.”

I’m not sure what to say.

My mate’s been watching me?

LUCY



He's there, in the shadows. He's always there. If not staring down at me, he's glowering from across the food hall, or waiting for me as I take the long walk down the central shaft to the surgery. Has he tried to make himself known to me this time? I don't think he moved, up there in the dark, but I felt him.

Oh, come on, Lucy! You *felt* him? You sound like a madwoman. He's a big, angry, gorgeous predator, and you'd like to find out what he keeps in his pants, that's all.

I would? I duck my head and hurry on as I hear wings beating away from me. Obviously Gryn and humans can have relationships. Viv is the living embodiment of that possibility. Except that part of me thought that it might have been a one off.

Except for Fyn. I can't get his stunning blue eyes out of my head, full of fear and desire. I did feel him. I felt his uncertainty as sure as my own. I'd be a fool to say his proximity doesn't awake something in me.

The thing that wants to rip his clothing off.

Down girl!

I scuttle through the lair up to the human quarters. Only Sophie is there, and she's hunched up on her ledge fiddling with something that she shoves furtively under the furs when I enter.

“Had a good day?” She trills, far too brightly. I’ve already decided I don’t want to know what she’s up to and I’ve got enough on my mind.

“Busy.” I mock yawn, hoping she takes the hint. “Going to hit the sack.”

“Did you hear Viv’s had her baby?” Sophie says.

“No - is everything okay?” I wasn’t exactly faking tiredness completely, but now I am awake.

“Emma and Bianca have gone to pay her a visit, but according to Ryak, everything’s fine, other than Jyr refusing to let Orvos near for most of the day. These guys can be such dicks.” She spits.

I don’t know what her problem is, but Sophie has a downer on the Gryn, even more than I do.

“I’ll go and see her in the morning. She’ll be wanting some peace and quiet.” I remove my boots and trousers then clamber under my furs, turning my back on Sophie.

I need to close my eyes and try not to think about a certain big Gryn warrior and what I could do to him.

This was the bit I’ve been dreading. The visitation. I’m rubbish with children, even more so with babies, but as one of the only five humans in the Gryn lair, I couldn’t put off going to see Viv and the baby any longer.

But Viv was amazing and the sweet little one slept the entire time I was there. Such a pretty girl too, especially as most babies look either like Winston Churchill or a raisin, whatever their parents tell you. So instead of slouching out of the Prime’s quarters, I actually exit with a spring in my step. Maybe new life does that to you.

“Where have you been, female?” A deep voice growls at me from the gloom of a seemingly disused corridor.

A pair of azure eyes loom out at me.

“I’ve been to visit Viv and her baby, which I’m sure you already know.” I retort. “You’ve been spying on me enough.”

A clawed hand shoots out, and I’m dragged into the darkness until I’m pressed against a warm body and smooth skin that smells of spice and musk. I try very hard not to inhale too deeply.

“You’ve been watching me.” Fyn rumbles from up above me.

This close, I can really notice the height difference. He rises over me, probably close to seven feet to my five foot two. One arm is wrapped around my waist, not tight, but tight enough.

“What do you expect? You never leave me alone.” I stare up at his strong jaw, a muscle ticks. “I can’t help it. Why are you following me?”

Fyn exhales, his eyes closing and his muscles tensing against me.

All of his muscles.

Including the very hard length that is stretching the fabric of his pants and which lies heavy against my stomach.

Holy crap, this warrior isn’t just built, he’s packing, and it’s enormous!

Unbelievably, in the presence of this alpha predator, my core clenches, and my knickers dampen with my arousal.

Fyn inhales deeply and groans, his arm clutching at me.

“How can I not follow you, sweet female. You do things to me, things I don’t understand.” He looks down at me, his brow furrowed, but his eyes soft.

Those gorgeous eyes.

I put my hand on his chest. He vibrates, his wings opening then closing again.

“I don’t mean to do anything to you.” I hesitate for an instant. “But I don’t mind you following me.” I trace a finger over his incredibly defined abs, marveling at their hardness.

Fyn sways on his feet. “I can’t help myself, Lucy.” My knickers get another drenching when he says my name. “You make me always want to be near you.” His words are strained, like he has to dredge them up from somewhere. “I want to be with you, to taste you. To have you.”

I pant a short breath. No one has ever said anything like that to me. Sure, I’ve had my share of bedroom fun, but Fyn’s intensity is something else entirely. He closes his beautiful, confused eyes again, and I run my hand around the waistband of his trousers, wondering if I’m daring enough to dip lower and find out exactly what type of sports he’s hiding down there.

Fyn gives out another groan, and I’m lifted off the ground, spun until I come to rest on a ledge of wall and my head is the same height as his, my legs dangling as he pushes his body between my thighs. I run my hand around the back of his neck, reveling in his proximity to me, touching his feathers and the hard armored skin on his shoulders. I press my lips onto his mouth, gently probing with my tongue. He hesitates, pulling back from me.

“Is this a kiss?” He asks, eyes wide.

“It’s a kiss, yes.” I’m confused. He said he wanted me, and now he’s querying what we are doing. “If you don’t want to, that’s fine.” The mouse says.

“I’ve seen Jyr kiss his mate.” Fyn gazes at my lips as if he wants to devour them. “It’s not something Gryn do.”

“Does Jyr like it?”

“He does it often with his mate.”

“That’s a yes, then?”

Fyn nods.

“Would you like to try it?”

He nods again, this time with more confidence. He pushes his face to mine, eyes closed and luscious lips parted. It is utterly gorgeous, and my core throbs for him. I touch his lips, keeping my eyes open to see his reaction. His eyebrows lift as

I run my tongue over his bottom lip and suck it into my mouth. A low moan escapes him as I gently explore his sharp teeth.

“How was that?” I ask, withdrawing from him.

“Want more!” He snarls, feral and dangerous, slamming his lips into mine.

His tongue is everywhere, and I’m heating up even more as he grasps my shoulders, unwilling to let me go. For a creature that has never kissed, he is making good work of learning. When he finally releases me, I’m gasping for air.

His cock is straining to be free of the confines of his trousers, hard up against my stomach, and I gently run my fingers over the enormous length. He stares at me for a second, before dropping his head over mine and capturing my lips once again, moaning into my mouth as I slip my hand into his pants, reaching for his length.

As I touch the very tip of what seems to be broad and slippery, Fyn puts his hand up my top and toys with a tight nipple using only the end of his claw.

“You will be my undoing, female.” He rasps, his mouth moving to my neck, lapping at my skin, and I shudder beneath him, this huge predator that wants to eat me up.

His hands continue to wander, one of them skating my waistband before he pushes his way inside, exploring me until he ends up between my legs and a pointed claw parts my folds, even as his mouth takes mine in the most demanding way.

“Oh! God! Fyn!” I cry out in a hoarse whisper as he slips a thick finger into my pussy. I sheath it completely, pulsing over him.

“So wet.” He murmurs, hardly pausing in his work as he begins to pump at me.

“Wet for you.” I breathe, attempting to wrap my hand around his hard member, but Fyn pulls away.

“I need you, I need to be inside you.” His words are feral, unhinged and he adds a second finger, even as he presses his cock up against my thigh, redoubling his efforts to plunder me.

I can't speak, can't reply to him because he has me teetering on the very edge of orgasm. I imagine what it would be like to have his cock inside me. That thick, solid muscle that I'm not sure would even fit. Fyn hums with delight, and I'm convulsing, my back arching as I milk his wide digits and explode with everything I have, unable to do anything but gasp out his name, over and over again.

When I finally come to my senses, Fyn is still curled over me, his breath ragged. I want to help him deal with the massive bulge in his pants that hasn't subsided, and I reach for him, just as there is the sound of voices in the corridor near ours.

Fyn withdraws from my body, lifting his fingers to his lips, he laps up the evidence of my orgasm with an expression of delight.

"Sweet, like ambrosia." He hums. "Just like I thought you would taste." His sapphire eyes are concentrated on me. "I want more."

The voices are louder, and I adjust my clothing, expecting discovery. I'm not ashamed of what Fyn just did to me, I just don't want to be the subject of lair gossip, any more than I think he would.

"Why were you following me?" It's all I can think of saying. It's hardly the best response to a male who has just given me the best orgasm of my life.

"I wanted to ask you something." Fyn moves closer, his wings enveloping both of us, his spicy, warm scent intoxicating.

"What?"

"Will you—" He hesitates, one hand on the back of his neck.

I cock my head to one side and look pointedly at the floor which is a good five foot drop. He puts two huge hands around my waist and gently lowers me down, remaining close to me, his dark form imposing.

“Will you come to the celebration with me? The one tomorrow night for the youngling’s birth?”

FYN



Her taste is heady in my mouth and nostrils. It's as intoxicating as lynk and as pleasurable as a pot of ambrosia. My cocks ache to be in her, but seeing her come undone at my bidding was all the pleasure I needed.

"You want me to come to the celebration with you, like a date?" Lucy stares up at me, her tiny clawless hands against my chest. Her skin whisper soft against mine.

"I don't know what a 'date' is," I reply, probably too roughly as her hands tense. "I just want you to come with me."

"Parties are not really my thing," Lucy bites down on her bottom lip, and all I can think of is her mouth on mine. And her mouth elsewhere on my body. "But if you want me to go with you, I'll go."

"You will?" My voice is a little more high pitched than I intended. "I mean, I'm pleased you will accompany me." I add with exaggerated gruffness.

"I'm needed in the surgery." She says, but doesn't move away. "Orvos will miss me."

I'm unable to help myself, and a low growl grumbles through my chest at the thought of her being with another Gryn male. She doesn't seem perturbed by my response, instead she stretches up and presses her kiss on my cheek before slipping away from me. I hear her footsteps disappearing out into the lair.

I put my hand to my face. A kiss, even the word is soft and gentle like her. I don't know what possessed me to touch her, pleasure her, taste her because all I want is more of her, every single inch. I need to sheath myself in her, plunge deep into that glorious hole and fill her with my seed. I lean against the roughened wall behind me and palm my hard cocks through my pants.

She said yes!

Now all I have to do is make it through until tomorrow night, when she will be by my side, like she's supposed to be.

I wait on my perch just outside the human quarters, up in the dark where I can keep a protective eye on my mate. She hasn't done much other than go to the surgery since yesterday. When I wasn't trying to sort out patrols around the celebration that Jyr has insisted everyone attend, I ate in the hall, hoping she might come in.

But she didn't. Which meant I resorted to waiting and watching. Now I'm waiting for her to take her to the celebration and my hands are sweating, which is the oddest sensation. I've faced down Proto on numerous occasions, taken on phalanx of joykills, and the thought of meeting my mate has my stomach squirming in fear.

What if she's changed her mind?

What if another Gryn has asked her?

I stifle a rumbling growl. If someone else has asked her, I'll rip him from bowel to gizzard. No one else touches my mate. Only I get to hear her mewling cry as she's pleased. She will expose her pretty cunt only to me.

My dark and dirty thoughts are interrupted by the door to the human quarters rolling open and three of the other females stepping out.

"Are you coming, Lucy?" The one with the streaked hair calls inside.

“In a minute.” My mate’s voice carries to me, softening my heart and hardening my cocks.

If I’m going to be taking her to the celebration, I’m going to have to get a grip on my arousal. I waste precious seconds thinking about patrol rotas watching the other humans walk down the levels towards the great hall.

My Lucy appears at the door to her quarters. She looks out, peering after the other females, then she turns her beautiful gaze on the exact spot where I wait as she steps out into the light.

She’s wearing a long green gown that clings to her every curve and sweeps the floor. It perfectly complements her flaming hair and her creamy skin. She couldn’t look more beautiful to me, but in this moment she is the most spellbinding thing I have ever seen. I can’t move, frozen like stone as I take in every inch of her.

My limbs fire into life and with a couple of strong beats I’m landing in front of her.

“Fyn.” She looks up at me. “I wasn’t sure you’d come.”

“I’ll always be there for you.”

She gives me a shy, glorious smile and slips her little hand in mine, her thumb stroking over the top of my claws. I hold down a groan at her touch, soft and silky. I imagine how her hands will feel on my body and immediately regret it.

“Thank you for inviting me.” She offers. “I’ve not been to a Gryn party yet. I hear they are really something.”

“Fight hard, party hard, vrex the rest.” I say before I remember myself. “It’s a Gryn saying, at least in this lair. It just means we don’t know what tomorrow will bring, so it’s best to live life to the full.”

She inclines her head to one side. “It’s not been easy for you, here on Ustokos, has it?”

Inside my head a flicker of something that is not mine. A thread of an emotion that aches to be free.

“This is my home. Whatever else it may be.”

“You know, though, don’t you?” Her deep green eyes haven’t left my face. “You know what it’s been like to be torn from everything you know.” Her voice is low, and her hand squeezes mine.

“I don’t like to think about it.” My reply is gruff and harsh.

“You don’t have to.” The eyes again, like the deepest healing pool. I could drown and be happy. “Shall we go?” She asks when I don’t reply.

“Yes.” I scoop her up into my arms and leap from the edge as she lets out a short squeal of surprise, throwing her arms around my neck and allowing me to bury my head deep in her hair as we descend to the great hall level.

Kyt has possibly surpassed himself this time. The lighting in the hall looks like it’s suspended in midair and casts a flickering, glowing light on everything. Tables at the far end are groaning with food and, in anticipation of a celebration to end all celebrations, he has ten enormous barrels of var beer installed near the door, which the mercs are already getting stuck into.

“Wow.” Lucy says as I lower her to her feet, and she links her arm with mine. “I’ve not been in here before. It’s big.” She stifles a giggle as a merc circles the hall, whooping. “Understatement of the year. Everything here is big to me.” She tilts her head up and her eyes glitter.

I want nothing more than to spirit her away to my nest and lose myself in her.

“Fyn!” Kyt claps me on the shoulder and wing bumps without invitation. “You came, and you brought this little beauty.” He bows to Lucy, taking her free hand and pressing his mouth on the back of it.

I snarl, snatching it away from him. He takes a step back, hands held up in apology.

“I’m going to get something to eat.” Lucy says, also taking a step away from me and removing her hand from mine. “Perhaps you could get me something to drink, Fyn?” She walks off without a backwards look.

“You’re really bad at this, aren’t you?” Kyt is grinning at her progress across the hall.

“What do you mean?” My claws are extended because I want to grab him by the throat and choke the vrexer until he goes blue.

“Mating. It doesn’t come naturally, does it?”

“Vrex you, Kyt. If you touch my *eregri* again I swear I’ll ___”

“For vrex sake, Fyn. I’ve no interest in your mate. But if you keep behaving like that, she’ll not come back.”

Kyt is still looking in the direction of Lucy, who is winding her way around the mercs that are thronging the hall to get to the food.

“If you’re so good at it, what do you suggest I do?” I say through gritted teeth. “I am who I am.”

“By Nisis! Never was a truer word spoken! You’re going to have to be a little less like you and more like a Gryn who cares about his female. Try not to kill anyone for looking at her tonight, and I think you stand a great chance of mating before long.” Kyt says, mirth dancing across his face. “Because if you don’t mate with her tonight, I’m going to lock you both in a cellar until you do. The lair isn’t going to survive much more of your sexual frustration.”

I stare at him.

“The lair needs more younglings, Fyn. The mere fact that she isn’t running for Mochi territory means you’re in with a chance. Don’t vrex it up.”

Kyt slams into my side in a gesture that is both insolent and friendly, then he disappears into the crowd at the same time as a huge roar of approval fills the hall. I turn to see Jyr and Viv walking in, tiny bundle in her arms.

Instantly I’m in the air, whistling.

“ALL HAIL PRIME! ALL HAIL LADY PRIME! ALL HAIL PRIME YOUNGLING!”

My announcement is accompanied by drumming so loud it would wake the dead. Beneath me, Lucy stands, taking in the lair in full celebration, her head tilts, and she looks up, her eyes not leaving me for an instant, even as Jyr introduces his youngling to the lair.

I land next to her.

“I want to show you something. Do you trust me?” I take her hand in mine again.

LUCY



Sometimes it's good being a tiny mouse that everyone ignores.

Sometimes it's not.

The noise in the great hall was tremendous as I wound my way through the throng looking for Fyn, which meant I was stood just behind Bianca when she leaned over and shouted into Sophie's ear.

"That warrior needs a mate that's strong, like him, resourceful and devastatingly beautiful." She smiles to herself, tossing her ice blond hair over her shoulder.

Sophie said something back that I couldn't hear, but Bianca carried on speaking at the same volume.

"It doesn't matter, I have plans for him." Her perfect lips are pulled back in a grimace that turns into a predatory smile as she looks up.

A loud whistle above me, and Fyn is in the air, announcing Jyr, Viv, and their new baby. I can't take my eyes off him. His huge wings shining in the glittering lights, beating strongly as he circles the room, almost stopping to hover on occasions. The noise around me pales into the background. He becomes the center of my world, of me. And when his pale eyes meet mine, I know he is my everything.

He drops to the ground and takes my hand.

"I want to show you something. Do you trust me?" He asks, his face so serious.

I only cared about my birds and without them I thought I was I'm nothing. I'm not going to let the bitchiness of women change my desires. Whatever Bianca's plans, Fyn wants me. For once in my life I will defy what has come to identify me, my ability to merge into the background. I have nothing now, but him and I should grasp that with every atom of my being.

"I trust you." I breathe.

He grasps my hand in his and tows me through the rowdy gaggle of Gryn, all clamoring to get a glimpse of their Prime. Within seconds, we're outside the hall and I'm in his arms.

"Will you fly with me?" He murmurs in my ear.

I don't think I've ever wanted anything more than to be with him, in the air, his great wings beating as he carries me. I wrap my arms around his neck, burrowing against him as he lifts off the ground.

Being in the air with him is something else entirely. I watch as the ground distances itself from my feet and we spiral up the central shaft. With all the other Gryn occupied, the lair is eerily empty of other feathered warriors, and it feels like we have the place to ourselves.

Fyn spins and I'm clutched to his muscular chest as he shoots down a corridor, wings pumping hard, taking us outside of the lair. The night air is cool and smells of metal, contrasting with the spicy musk coming from my Gryn warrior. He beats up into the sky and the wind whips through my clothes and hair. Both of Ustokos' moons are bright tonight, there's hardly a cloud to be seen for a change and the whole of the ruined city that was once the beating heart of this world is spread out below us. I wonder for an instant if this is what Fyn wanted me to see, until he folds his wings and we drop suddenly and terrifyingly back towards the ground. At the last minute he unfurls them, slowing our progress as I make a short, sharp 'eep' sound and the night sky winks out as we dive back inside the lair, but not via any of the normal entrances.

It's like being on a rollercoaster, and I was never very good on those things. I hide my face against Fyn's fragrant skin and

wait until the heavy rowing sound of air through steel shafted feathers alerts me to our landing, which is incredibly gentle.

“My *eregri*?” Fyn runs a hand over my mussed up hair. I don’t recognize the word, but from the look in his pale blue eyes, it means something special to him.

I look around us. We’re in a small cavern-like part of the building that I’ve never come across. In one corner is a healing pool that steams slightly, the warm water providing heat to the rest of the cave.

In the opposite corner is a large pile of furs, which is, somewhat incomprehensibly, surrounded by all sorts of random objects. Pieces of fabric hang from the ceiling of the cave, along with what look like ribbons of metal. They tinkle pleasantly in the slight breeze caused by our movement, as well as sparkling in the bioluminescent lights that the Gryn cultivate everywhere. It is both confusing and beautiful at the same time.

“What is this place?” I ask, spellbound.

“It is for you, my mate. It is our nest.” Fyn isn’t taking his eyes off me as he cups my upper arms in his warm clawed hands. “Do you like it?” His usually strong voice is hesitant.

My heart melts at the huge warrior, who dwarfs me. Who no one wants me to have.

“I love it! It’s perfect.” I raise myself on tiptoes to press a kiss on his chin. His eyes flutter closed at my touch and his wings open slightly, his breath hot on my face.

“I’ve thought about this moment for a long time.” He fixes me with a piercing gaze that heats me from within.

“What is an *eregri*?” I ask him, as I begin to explore the cave, checking the temperature of the pool as he shifts uncomfortably from foot to foot.

“It means fated mate. The correct translation is ‘my boundless flight’.” His voice is gruff with need, even in the slightly humid atmosphere of the cave.

“How many *eregri* have you brought to your nest, Fyn?” I ask, not looking at him, wanting to tease him as much as I am enjoying his discomfort for a change.

I’m picked off my feet and in seconds I’m on my back on the bed of furs, with a huge Gryn, his face twisted into a snarl, caging me. “No one, male or female has ever set foot in here but you and me. My *eregri*. We are to mate over and over again until my seed takes root and we become one.” He grinds out, almost as if he’s unable to stop what he says.

My core throbs. Heat flows through me. I should be running from this mountain of muscle and feathers, this predator that could tear into me, gobbling me up in a bite or two. Who has caressed me to the best climax I’ve had in my entire life. There’s no way I’m running from him, despite what he says about his seed.

My lady parts want some fun and after what I overheard, this fun is most definitely going to be with the big growly predator that is vibrating with anger in the bed. I’m fed up with being the doormat. The shy one. The girl who is always overlooked for prettier, more outgoing women. Fyn wants me. I’m on an alien planet, and I’m never going home. Why can’t I be someone else? Why can’t I have some fun for a change? This mouse is finally going to roar.

I deserve to be his mate, and I won’t let anyone else tell me otherwise.

I run my hand from his shoulder, down over his sculpted chest and abs before hooking a finger in his waistband. I bite my lip as he shudders at my touch.

“Is that a promise?” I whisper, and he groans out loud.

FYN



To have my *eregri* in my arms, close and protected, at my mercy should be everything.

It would be everything if I knew what I was doing. Her touch is like fire over my skin, and when her small hand reaches my pants, my cocks feel like they are about to explode. I want her. All of her. Immediately.

But I can't frighten her. I can't hurt her. She's small, delicate, beautiful. She is to be worshipped, then mated.

I think.

"I—" The words stick in my throat. How to explain what I want to do, but that I don't know how?

Lucy unbuckles my belt and her hand snakes in, grasping my main cock and delivering a slow, dangerous stroke. I'm unable to stop my hips from firing forward, jerking myself out of her grasp.

"Hey, we can take it slow, big guy." She says in a hoarse whisper. Her green eyes bright with something I hope is want for me. "Because you really are *big*," she breathes with her hand on my crotch, and my hips snap at her again.

She scoots out from under me in a movement I wasn't anticipating, causing me to fall forward. When I lift my head, she is unpeeling the gown from her curves and exposing her delicious creamy skin to me. Underneath, she wears more clothing. Something covering her breasts and her sweet, tasty

pussy. I'm not sure what turns me on more, that she's not entirely naked, or that she soon will be.

Lucy stares at me for a beat, before coming to sit beside me and winding an arm around my waist.

"If we're going to do this, you're going to have to take your boots off." She stretches up and her lips brush my chin.

"Yes—" It's the only word I can articulate as I quickly divest myself of my footwear. My cocks are rock solid and being constrained by the fabric of my trousers is extraordinarily painful, but Lucy hasn't yet taken off the rest of her clothing.

I might have lost control when I touched her the other day, but there's so much more at stake. My heart aches to be mated to this female, and I want it to be right, if it's the only thing I do right in my entire life.

She deserves nothing less.

But none of this helps with my lack of experience.

"Fyn?" Lucy stares up at me. "You do want this, don't you?" She asks, gently combing her fingers through my feathers and extracting a low moan that comes from the bottom of my belly.

"I want nothing else but you." I trace the back of my hand down the side of her cheek. "It's just—" I have to find the words. I have to admit my weakness, bare my soul. "I've not mated before." My voice is low, desperate, and needy. "I only ever wanted to mate with my *eregri*."

"You're a virgin?" Lucy asks.

"I don't understand." Lust and confusion war within me. I'm so close to her, her scent of arousal surrounds me, driving me on. Blood thunders in my ears.

"You've never had sex - I mean mated? With anyone?" A slow smile spreads across her pretty face as I shake my head. "Then we definitely need to take things slow. You need to enjoy your first time." She takes my hand, her other works at the strings that hold her top on. It slips free and drops away.

I nearly spill my seed in my pants. Her breasts are glorious heavy globes of cream, tipped with ruby red nipples that jut out for my pleasure. She sees me appraising her, and her confidence falters, one arm sliding in front of her breasts, covering them from my sight. I growl in frustration and push at my pants, kicking them free so that my mate can see my arousal.

“Oh, Fyn!” She gasps, her arm falling away. “You’ve got two cocks.”

I put my hands on my hips, looking down at my erections. “Yes.” I feel a smile tug at the corners of my mouth.

“Human men only have one.” She chokes out.

“Gryn are better than humans.” I announce. Lucy licks her lips, and my cocks jerk hard, weeping pre-cum at her action.

“I’ll say!” Lucy reaches for my shafts, she separates them out, her soft hands running over both cocks, eyeing them appreciatively. “What do you do with the second one?”

My cover is blown, I drop my hands by my sides. “My secondary cock hasn’t swelled before.”

Lucy looks up at me, biting her bottom lip. “I guess we’ll have to find out.” My head is filled with the sounds of pleasure, of what it is like to mate, to ‘make love’ and it’s as if Ustokos has burst into color.

She pulls me to her, using my cocks as leverage, before hooking her other hand around my neck, her lips on mine as she pumps at my members. I close my eyes and melt into her touch.

LUCY



My supremely powerful and masterful alien male is a virgin. After the way he fingered me to a climax, I'd never have guessed. All of which makes me think that the Gryn have to be naturals at 'mating'.

The two cocks threw me more than his admission about his lack of experience. Obviously, Fyn is an alien, the massive wings and leather like skin on his shoulders being a giveaway. I just hadn't expected him to be alien *down there*.

And not only does he have two cocks, but they are very large, one larger than the other. Large as in 'I can't quite get my hand around them' large. As I run my fingers over the solid muscle, I can feel the raised ridge that runs the full length of each member, underneath they are both segmented like a crocodile's belly. The slightly smaller cock fits neatly into a groove on the underside of the bigger one.

So it looks like they can go in one place. Or in two...

My pussy flutters at the thought of what he can do when he impales me...on both. Fyn inhales deeply.

"I'm not sure I can do slow, my *eregri*. I have to be with you. To be inside you. Your arousal, it drives me wild."

I kiss him deeply, sweeping my tongue around his mouth, attempting to calm his desperation. It works, and he relaxes as I straddle his waist, cocks ridged against my stomach, slippery with pearly pre-cum. He releases me long enough to dip his head and capture a nipple between his teeth, looking at me with eyes that sparkle, he laps at the tight peak and it's my turn

to come undone, pushing my breast into his mouth to take more of what he can give.

Inexperience or no, Fyn has fired something in me, more than lust, more than desire. I have to consume him, to take him all, gruffness, anger issues and the Fyn that just admitted he was a virgin to a tiny human female. Each and every part of him is perfection. I peel him off me, and with a hand on his chest, I push him down onto the bed of furs. His eyes almost glow with lust.

I want to take this slow too, not because I'm a stranger to intimacy. I've done my time with fumbblings in the dark, but because Fyn is a big male, big all over, and I'm not sure he knows his own strength. I shimmy out of my distinctly unsexy gray knickers. That's one positive, if he's never been with a female, he won't be judging my underwear.

"Do you want to mate me?" I growl at him.

"Vrex it, female. I have to mate you. I have to do it now!" He snarls back, his enormous hands around my waist.

I slide myself over his abs, I'm absolutely soaking, but even so, I'm not sure he's going to fit. Lifting myself up, I grasp both of his cocks, stroking them together as Fyn groans out loud, I notch them both at my dripping entrance.

With one thrust, Fyn buries himself inside me. The pain of the initial stretch is brief as the ridged upper of his cock slams into my g-spot and I see stars on top of stars. He circles his hips with his cocks seated deep in me. His eyes are wide, beautiful, sparkling with desire as he holds my waist gazing at my breasts as I plant my hands on his hard chest.

"Delicious female, you are wetter than before." He withdraws a little way before slamming himself back into me. I pulse, squeezing at him. "Oh!" He exclaims with a harsh pant of breath. "But just as tight." He grits his teeth.

He is so fucking gorgeous laid in front of me, clearly wanting to enjoy and not wanting it to end prematurely. I roll my hips which elicits a whine of pleasure. I have my predator at my mercy, and it feels amazing. He feels amazing.

In a movement that's so quick, I don't even know it's happening, Fyn has flipped me onto my back, his cocks still buried and now I'm caged by the beast.

"Beautiful, Lucy." He murmurs, tracing a finger over my lips.

I open them and allow him to dip his finger into my mouth. I bite down and he starts to thrust into me, setting up a demanding rhythm that is just right. He doesn't take his eyes off mine. His stare as intense as the rest of him, and what a turn on!

He twists himself and his ridges hit the spot inside me. I convulse over him, arching my back as my climax hits. A hard and fast shuddering of every muscle in my body. I cry out, the pleasure overwhelming. Fyn matches my cry with a low growl of his own, plunging his cocks hard and deep. There is a feeling of pressure followed by his hot cum filling me. Both members exploding at the same time. His hips buck again and again, taking me with him as he continues to orgasm. With each movement, he sparks me to pulse with aftershocks that wrack my body. Finally he lowers himself over me, gently rolling so that I'm on top of him again.

"My *eregri*," he pants, sweat sheening his skin. He kisses me on the lips, long and lingering, more than enough to cause further clenching.

"Fyn, that was so good." I say as I come up for breath. I shift slightly over him and find we are locked together, both his cocks still inside me and they seem to have swelled. "What the-?"

Fyn looks down at where we join together, a frown crossing his face.

"I think my secondary cock swells during mating." He says.

"You don't know?" It's not uncomfortable, and I like being in his arms.

"My secondary cock has never arisen before I met you. It is for my *eregri*, and I've not seen any Gryn with both cocks

angry, given we have no females.”

My mind boggles. I have questions.

“I believe Gryn lock to ensure their seed takes root.” He pushes into me a little way and it sends a shiver down my spine. “And to ensure that the mated pair mate again.” He grins at me and his entire face lights up.

My predator is happy. My Fyn is happy. It radiates from him.

I can sense him. He’s in my head as well as in my pussy. But tonight is the night of revelations, and this is not the oddest one, not by a long shot.

FYN



“Fyn?” Lucy looks at me with eyes that hover between lust and fear. “I can hear you?”

“Thoughtbond.” I murmur. She took all of my seed from both cocks and with my secondary cock still swollen inside her, all I want to do is sleep.

And then mate. And mate some more.

Taking care of myself absolutely doesn't come anywhere close to what I just experienced with my *eregri*.

“Thoughtbond?” Lucy queries, although her voice is muzzy with my desire to sleep.

“We have mated. We share our thoughts.”

“Sounds good.” A smile lifts the corner of her perfect mouth, and she burrows against me. “I like your thoughts.”

I pull the furs over us and nuzzle my face into her fragrant hair. Her mind swirls in a myriad of colors, she is confident, elated and best of all, she is satisfied. I drift off into a dreamless sleep with her in my arms.

My slumber might have only been short, but I feel more refreshed than the longest tranqed sleep I've had, either at the lair or with Proto. It beats passing out with a bellyful of lynk. It beats anything I can remember for a long time.

Lucy's sweet scent swirls in my nostrils, her skin soft against my chest and her curly hair like flame tickling my nose. Her breathing is deep and even. I take some time to admire her. My beautiful mate. Her body is curvy, fitting against my muscular form perfectly, one leg thrown over mine. Her skin pale, almost translucent in places, is unmarked, unlike my hide. I toy with her curls, fingering the slippery, silky strands. My mate is the finest thing I've ever touched. So delicate that she looks like she might break, but so strong she stood up to me, and took my cocks in their entirety.

I already know I will kill for her.

I already can't wait until she swells with our youngling.

Then I will kill for them both.

The thought of making a youngling is causing parts of me to swell. My cocks twitch and press up against Lucy's thigh.

"Hello, Fyn." She says without opening her eyes.

She presses one of her kisses to my chest and then stretches out luxuriously. Her breasts exposed mounds that are begging to be tasted. I oblige, lapping at one tight red peak as she squirms in pleasure next to me, her hands grasping at my head.

Mating is the best thing I've done. Giving myself to this female was the best thing I've done, and I'm going to ensure she wants to stay with me forever. Having spent enough time preparing her sweet nipples, I descend down her body, licking at her slightly salty skin over her abdomen and down to the mound with a wisp of red hair that guards her perfect entrance.

She's slippery with my seed and her own juices and I begin to taste her, and myself from my previous spill. I pay special attention to the hooded nub that glistens like a jewel and causes her to mewl and wriggle. My cocks are fully awake and throbbing. I have to mate her, but only when she's ready to take me again.

In a gush of moisture, Lucy presses herself against my mouth and I can drink down her ambrosia, whilst spreading out the rest to cover her sweet pussy and the tight little pucker

that my secondary cock needs to penetrate. I lift myself over her body and stare down at the female who has captured this warrior in a way that nothing else ever has.

“I want you. I need you, my Lucy.” My voice is low and guttural. She reaches up to me and cups my face in her hands.

“You have me, Fyn. Always.” The softness in her eyes only makes me harder.

I press up against her entrances, my main cock burying itself in her hot channel. The tip of my secondary cock, soaked with pre-cum, slides inside her bottom hole. Her eyes widen. “Oh Fyn!” I breach the ring of muscle as she groans out loud. “So full!”

“Do you like it, my *eregri*? Being full of your mate’s cocks.” I lean into her. “Cocks that are hard for you and only you.”

“Oh god!” Her back arches up as I dip deeper. Her legs wrap around my waist and her hands scrabble at my shoulders. “Harder!” She yells.

I don’t need any encouragement. I’ve spent too much time in my nest imagining my *eregri* beneath me to take mating any slower. Not yet anyway. She’s far too delicious impaled on both my cocks. I can feel them through the thin skin that separates both channels.

“Harder?” I withdraw and pound into her.

“Yes! Oh!”

I pull out almost to my entire length before giving her both shafts in a smooth and strong movement, pinning her to the furs by her shoulders, I circle my hips making sure she is filled to the brim with my members, making sure she knows just who is mating her, scraping her wetness with my ridges. My orgasm is rising within me, and as much as I have to take her, I don’t want to come just yet. I have to have her come undone beneath me first.

Hooking my hands under the globes of her perfect ass, I lift her from the furs and shove her up against the wall of my nest, thrusting at her as she drapes her body over me.

“Do you like being mated rough?” I bounce her on my cocks. “Mated like my ancestors used to. Dirty and fast.”

Lucy throws her head back, grabs the shoulders of my wings and howls. Her pussy fluttering and clenching over me. I’m unable to hold, firing my seed deep inside both channels, the dark and the light, thumping into her until I’m sure she’s filled to the brim.

Only then do I lower her to the furs again, as gently as I can whilst we both gasp for breath, our minds flooded with the white heat of our collective climax and our bond beginning to lock into place.

We sleep a little again, before waking to mate, this time at the edge of the healing pool after we have cleansed and where Lucy introduces me to the delight that is something she calls ‘doggy’. Watching her ass jiggle as I fill her with my cocks is highly erotic. So much so that I insist we try it again. And she agrees.

“What time do you think it is?” Lucy lies in my arms, her hair still damp from the pool. “Do you think anyone noticed we left?”

“I only attended the celebration because it was a direct order from Jyr. No one expects me to hang around for long.” I have my hands in her long hair, the touch soothes me, along with the feel of her breath on my chest.

She snorts out a harsh laugh. “I doubt anyone would notice if I was there or not.”

“I don’t want any other males to notice you, my *eregri*.” I don’t mean to snarl but the mere thought of a warrior looking in her direction makes my blood boil. “You are mine.”

“Good enough for me.” She cuddles into my side with a sigh. “I prefer my lone wolf all to myself too.”

“Lone wolf?”

“It’s a predator on Earth. A canine. Deadly in packs but just as deadly on their own, maybe more so.” She looks up at me from under long eyelashes. “It was also the name of my

favorite falcon when I was on Earth. Wolf was something special.”

Water sits in her eyes, ready to spill down her cheeks and my heart nearly stops. I can taste her terror at being abducted by Proto and her grief for the life she left behind. She hurts, and I hurt, too.

I can't stand it.

“I can't take you back to your home. But I'd like it if you'd stay in mine.”

“This is home, as long as you are here.” One single droplet escapes, running down her face as she brushes at it with the back of her hand. A blue calmness descends as she resumes her position by my side.

Lucy's stomach growls.

“Vrex it, my *eregri*! Why did you not tell me you hungered?” I can't believe I'm already neglecting my mate's needs. She requires sustenance, and that's the one thing I haven't brought to my nest.

Can't deny that I'm ravenous too. I need maraha if I'm to continue mating. Bloody, rare maraha. My stomach joins hers in sympathy, and she laughs, it tinkles like the brightest stars.

“I will go and get food for us both. I don't want you to leave our nest. Not for a long time.”

Lucy raises her hands over her head on the bed of furs. “I'm not going anywhere. But you'd better hurry before I fade away.” She squashes up her face in such an adorable way, I have no option but to capture her lips in a kiss.

The lair is relatively quiet when I land on the nearest platform to the food hall. It usually is after the blow out of a celebration that Jyr will have held last night. I can't imagine the state of the patrols this morning and I don't want to. I left it all to the squadron leaders to decide who should go, and it was up to them to ensure they got off on time.

As if I planned to spend my night enjoying every inch of my *eregri*'s body.

I make my way though to find that one maraha roasting and half a dozen severely hungover mercs staring green faced at what's on their platters. In a couple of long strides I'm by the carcass and have torn off several large portions, one of which I gulp down greedily before I pile up a platter with the meat. I pause by the long serving table, glancing at the hoilic, a blue and red vegetable which seems popular amongst the other seniors and the humans. I add a couple of the brightly colored items to the platter in case my mate prefers vegetation. Although, she is small and could do with more maraha to make her strong enough to carry my young.

“Command?” I turn to see one of my squadron leaders stood behind me. He has blood running off one wing and a long gash on his face.

“What the vrex?”

“My patrol. It was ambushed by Proto. I managed to get away, but they're pinned down.”

The platter in my hand is forgotten.

“Where?”

“At the Kijg border, near the old water pits.”

“Get my weapon and take me there.” The warrior turns to leave. “Wait.” I sigh. “You're in no condition to fly again, go to Orvos. I'll get to the patrol.”

LUCY



It's blissfully quiet in Fyn's nest. The room he found in the lair and decorated just for me. There's no sounds of noisy young warriors, or the occasional fart from the girls. If I close my eyes, I could almost be back in my mews, listening to nothing but the occasional tinkle of a bell as a hawk shifted position.

The only thing that's missing is him.

My big warrior. Big in many ways as my sore lady bits can attest. He was a demanding lover. For a male who was a virgin up until a few hours ago, sex clearly comes naturally to him. I've never come as much, or as hard.

And when he returns, I'm going to take him again. I wince slightly as I shift position. Maybe after a bath.

Once in the warm waters of our en-suite pool, which is thankfully Gryn sized, I can relax. Or at least try to. My main problem is the flashbacks as to what Fyn and I last did in this pool. I can't help smiling to myself.

Fyn wants me. He wants little mouse Lucy. In fact, he doesn't care who or what I am. It's glorious.

I float around for a while, allowing the bubbling water to push me from side to side, but then my fingers start to go pruny so I decide to get out and have a closer look at Fyn's nest. The atmosphere is warm, and the place seems secluded so I stay naked as I inspect the furs and the hanging items. It seems like he's been everywhere in the lair to locate anything shiny and glittery. I recognize swarf from the forge, and a

couple of daggers, their blades polished so I can see my face in them. The furs have been gathered from everywhere, the ones on the bottom of the ledge are thin, but they increase in thickness and furriness over several layers.

It must have taken him forever to put it all together, along with all his other duties and the general scowling that he used to have to do around the lair. My heart beats just a little faster at the thought of the big, growly Gryn fitting this place out with me in his mind.

The more I inspect the cave, the more it becomes clear that it was originally part of the lair building and, as I look closely, it's a bit like an apartment. All open plan as that seems to be how the Gryn like to live, but there's an area in one corner that could have been a kitchen, with what looks like a sink.

The Gryn once had a life, family. Females. Now all they can do is scratch a living on this ruined planet. No wonder Fyn spends half his time glowering. It's a hard life.

And it's my life now.

My stomach grumbles at me. It's been ages since Fyn left. I've no idea how long it's been but it has to be an hour at least. I hope he hasn't been waylaid by a predatory Bianca. In my poking around mode, I have found a dark corridor that appears to lead back into the lair, and I decide that I will probably have to make the walk of shame.

Having slipped back into my clothes from last night, I pluck a couple of the bioluminescent plants from the walls and nestle them in my hand like a weird glowing torch as I begin to navigate the passages that twist and turn back into the lair. It's with some relief that I spot some natural light up ahead and find that I have come out right at the very top of the central shaft, higher up than even Jyr and Viv's quarters. The ceiling height is unnaturally low for the Gryn, which is presumably why this area isn't used much.

I head down towards the main living areas, hoping that I can sneak into the human quarters without anyone causing a fuss. It's about mid-morning and the lair seems unusually quiet. There are only a couple of warriors flying around the

atrium, and I make it down to my level without anyone seeing me.

I push the heavy door back as quietly as I can. Emma is sitting on her ledge, her head snaps up as soon as she hears the noise.

“Oh, thank God! You’re here!” She says with somewhat unnecessary emotion. “We were worried about you.”

Given that there’s no sign of the others, that seems unlikely, but Emma is only trying to be kind.

“I think I drank a little too much of their var beer last night. Woke up in a part of the lair I didn’t recognize, and it took me a while to find my way back.” I lie smoothly.

It’s not that I’m ashamed of what I did with Fyn, I just want him by my side when we do tell everyone that we are together. Because he makes me stronger.

Emma stares at me for a second, and I think she’s going to call me out on my lie. I turn my back on her and rummage through my limited clothing to get changed.

“Yeah, it was some party. There’s a bunch of Gryn with pretty sore heads this morning.” She says, and I carefully exhale the breath I’ve been holding. “Might be why that patrol went missing.” She adds with a shrug.

“What patrol?” I stop part way through pulling on a pair of trousers.

“I don’t know much about it. All I know is one warrior came back injured and that big angry Gryn, Jyr’s second in command, had to go after them.”

“Fyn?” I’m struggling to keep a lid on my rising panic.

“Yeah, that’s him. The one who’s always creeping around here.” She makes a sour face.

“He - they - only want to make sure we’re safe.” I fire out with far more force than I intended. Emma looks taken aback, but her attention is drawn by shouts from outside the door. I pull on a jacket.

“I’d better go and see if Orvos wants any help.”

Emma sighs. “Lucky you. I’m dying of boredom.”

I don’t reply because I’m racing out of our quarters and down the levels towards the surgery. Gryn warriors are dropping like stones out of the air, carrying blood covered males between them. I run as fast as I can, because I can’t see Fyn.

By the time I reach the surgery, it’s chaos. Orvos is roaring at every Gryn within earshot to get out of his way.

“What can I do to help?” I ask him, craning my neck to look around the ledges for Fyn.

“Get the healing gel, the tranq sponges and as many bandages as you can find.” Orvos says, his voice softer when he sees me.

I don’t know how long we work on the injured warriors, but given that there are ten of them with injuries that start at broken feathers and end with serious wounds that look life threatening, it’s getting dark by the time they are all suitably settled, sedated if necessary. I ache all over, and I’m dead on my feet. There’s no sign of Fyn and I haven’t had the chance to ask anyone if he has returned.

I know he mentioned something about a thoughtbond last night. I never got the opportunity to find out more. It was something about telepathy, which I can’t quite believe.

Then again, I didn’t believe in aliens until I was abducted and left on this planet.

“I know you’re tired, Lucy, and I can’t thank you enough for your assistance today, but can you see to the merc on the far ledge. He needs help cleaning up his feathers and he’s good to go. I’d like as few mercs as possible cluttering up my surgery with these injured ones.”

He gives an exhausted wave at the five ledges closest to his desk. Each one occupied by a pale looking merc. One of them whimpers in his sedated sleep.

“Are they going to be okay?” I ask in a hoarse whisper. Any of them could be Fyn, and I’m not sure my heart could take it if he was so badly injured.

Orvos runs his clawed hand over his face. “Probably.” I can see from the look in his eyes that he’s worried. He likes to make out to others like he doesn’t care. But I know he does.

“I’ll sort the merc out. If you need me to stay after, I can stay.” I say with my hand on his arm.

“Thank you, my dear.” Orvos pats me in a fatherly way. “You need your rest, too. Once you’ve finished with him, you go.”

I know not to argue with the doctor, and I load up with some warm water, clean cloths and my oils before making my way to the young merc sitting, hunched, on a ledge at the far end of the room.

“Hey,” He lifts his head at my approach, his eyes haunted. “I’m going to help you clean up a bit, then Orvos says you can go back to your barracks. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

If there’s one thing I’ve discovered it’s that the young ones take comfort in each other and prefer not to spend time alone. The merc doesn’t say anything, he goes back to studying his claws. I start to gently wipe away the crusted blood from his feathers, separating out each one as I clean them. Eventually, the merc lets out a long breath.

“I won’t have to go back out on patrol, will I?” He says, his voice shaky. “I’m not sure I can, after today.”

“Not straight away, I’m sure.” I say kindly, dropping oil onto my fingers and starting to rub it through his cleansed feathers. “I’m sure your Command will talk to you about it.”

“Proto took him.” The merc says, his voice dull. “It took Fyn and four mercs.”

“What?” I don’t recognize my voice.

“Command is gone. Captured by Proto.”

The only sound is the bottle of oil smashing on the floor.

FYN



I contemplate the smooth metal bars of my cage. They're red with my blood as I spent far too long tearing at them when I woke from my tranqued sleep. I imagined that they were a bot, and I could slice through its innards. Not that bots die, but the feeling of destroying one is one that is unmatched.

Except for mating with my *eregri*.

I have no idea where I am or how far I am from her. Our thoughtbond was too new for me to be able to feel her, even if we were in the lair. It would come with time, time we haven't had.

Time I no longer have, because I'm a captive of Proto again.

I cursed the patrol for setting off half cut all the way out to the Kijg border. I cursed them for dragging me away from my warm nest and even warmer mate. I cursed them for not following orders and drinking too much at the celebration. Then I cursed myself for not being there to stop them.

When I arrived it was a massacre. All twelve of the mercs were on the ground, two of whom were clearly dead. Joykill bots were circling, penning them in. Out on the horizon, I could see the phalanx of capturebots making rapid progress towards the downed warriors.

Proto wasn't going to take them. Not on my watch.

I drew my sword and cut a way through the surrounding joykills to create a gap for the mercs that could fly to leave. Bellowing at the top of my lungs, I stooped towards the terrified patrol to spur them into action. My appearance seemed to galvanize most of them and they took to the air.

“Get back to the lair, send reinforcements.” I yelled at the closest survivor as he flew past me, a flurry of feathers and blood.

Once I was on the ground, I could see that the remaining four mercs aren't going anywhere. Our best chance was to find somewhere to hide, before the capturebots arrived and hope that they wouldn't find us before more warriors arrived.

Apart from a shell of a building, only three walls remaining, there was nothing. It was all I could do to keep the mercs alive until the capturebots screeched overhead. If Proto wanted us, it would want living organics, and that was the mercs best chance for survival.

I can only see a blank white wall from my cage. A tiny box that has me curled up, with my back and wings against the smooth metal roof. Three walls and the floor are the same dense material. The only light and air come from the bars in front of me. This is how I woke after the capturebots zapped us all with their nets, stuffed into this hole like a piece of rag. Other than to rage at the bars, I'm unable to move.

Which is how Proto wants me. At its mercy. It's more likely to gain cooperation if it keeps me in pain and in the box. I've no doubt it has located me in its databanks and is planning something excruciating for me.

I don't care.

I care that I've left my mate back at the lair. That she doesn't know where I am. That she is unprotected and alone.

That she is in a lair full of other males who may wish to mate her.

I shake my head, that's the tranq talking. Lucy cares for me. I know, I felt her through our thread of a thoughtbond. She wanted to be with me. I have to hold onto that thought, onto

her image. It's the only way I'm going to get through what Proto has in store for me until I can escape and be with her once again.

A low hum and whirring sound reaches my ears, and my cage is shaken violently, my skin and feathers scraping off the sides. It spins around until it's placed facing a large vidscreen. I remember these from my time in the camps. Sometimes they were used to show how Proto was watching us. As a youngling I delighted in poking my tongue out and seeing my twin doing the same on the screen.

'Fyn. Command of the Rogue Gryn Warriors. Male. Mated.' Proto's voice intones.

It's suppose to be soothing, but to me all I hear is the same voice questioning, berating and ordering me.

"Vrex you. Let me out of this thing." I throw weight from side to side, trying to unbalance the box. It's useless but it makes me feel better. Anger makes me feel better.

'If you wish your warriors to be healed, you will comply.' The vidscreen flickers into life and four prone bodies, covered in silver blankets, lie side by side. Medbots hover next to them.

"Comply with what, you vrexing machine?"

I'm stuck in this cage, Proto can get me to do whatever it wants, with or without my compliance.

'Our testing program.'

That.

I stare at the screen. The mercs are as good as dead in the camps. But I can't watch my fellow warriors die. They were my responsibility. I should have ensured their safety.

And I want to get back to my mate. A show of cooperation might buy me some time.

"Whatever you vrexing want. Heal them." I say, my voice low.

'Your choice is wise, Fyn, Command of the Gryn.'

The box starts to fill with a white gas, and I cough, not wanting to breathe it in, but it's cloying, it clings to me, tendrils winding around me. It penetrates my head, my vision wavering. As consciousness deserts me, I see the medbots attending to the downed mercs.

They will be healed, and I will be Proto's new plaything. Until I can get back to my mate.

LUCY



I finish gasping up the pathetic remnants of my last meal. I've been struggling to keep food down for a couple of weeks. Not that my appetite has been up to much, not since Fyn disappeared, presumably captured by Proto.

The lair has been subdued ever since. Fyn was well liked by the mercs and the seniors. I know Jyr has been out every day searching for him, even though he has a baby waiting for him. I've been keeping my distance from the other women as much as I can since the night of the celebration. I always seem to be on the verge of tears, and I don't want them to know that there's anything wrong.

Instead I help Orvos in the surgery, sleeping in the back room, when I can sleep. Because when I close my eyes, I imagine Fyn suffering. I see him alone, in pain and it wrecks me. But I put on a front for Orvos, who seems to appreciate me being around and hasn't asked any questions about my move from the human quarters. At least being in the surgery gives me the chance to speak to the mercs that return from patrol with injuries, to find out any tiny snippet of information.

No one else has noticed me, and I prefer it that way. If there's no Fyn, there's nothing for me here. The patrols and the seniors have all drawn a blank. It's as if he disappeared into thin air.

Unhelpfully, my mind dwells on the Gryn's lack of access to technology. My birds all carried tiny radio trackers when I flew them free, so even if they disappeared, I could track them

down. But any tech on Ustokos attracts Proto. The Gryn are entirely in the Dark Ages. And I'm without the one being who made me feel alive.

Despite my lack of appetite and constant nausea, I'm putting on weight, or at least my clothes aren't fitting as well as they did. I tug at the waistband that's digging in uncomfortably over my swollen stomach. Maybe I'm bloating because I'm not eating?

I grab a drinking vessel and scoop up some water from the small basin in the tiny room that passes for a bathroom at the back of the surgery. I swill out my mouth and then sip some of the water. It's the only thing that seems to settle my stomach these days.

It's always a knot of stress and fear. If Fyn never returns, what do I do? The lair was hard enough to contend with when he was here, without him I just see him everywhere. He's in the feathers of every merc I treat. He's the name on their lips. I long to see his blue eyes one more time. I long to feel him in my head.

A sob chokes its way out. More tears. They aren't going to help the situation and I'm tired of crying.

"Lucy?" It's Orvos. I sweep the water from my cheeks and pull my hair away from my face before I walk through to see what he wants.

"Did you leave this here?" He asks, pointing to a mess of imping equipment that I left in my haste to throw up. "I've asked you to keep the surgery tidy." He adds.

Anger I didn't know I was capable of boils up inside me, adding to the sour taste in my mouth. The unappreciated mouse is on the back foot again.

"I know you did, Orvos. I'm sorry. I'll clear it up now. It won't happen again." I stoop to begin picking up the rubbish I've left, wincing at the pain in my stomach from my too tight trousers.

"Thank you, Lucy." Orvos turns on his heel, walking away in a swish of feathers.

I stare at his back, seething at my failure to stand up to the older Gryn and at my lack of any status in the lair. I'm just the help. On Earth I was more than that and I'm damned if I'm going to let myself become a doormat here.

"Sweet Lucy!" Kyt's bright voice has me looking up from my grovel on the floor.

He has his customary grin on his face, and I wonder how he can be so cheerful with one of his own missing.

"Hey, Kyt. Do you need Orvos?" I reply.

"I have no desire to see the old buzzard. It's you I came to see." Kyt replies, flopping onto one of the ledges.

"Me?"

"Emma said you were normally down here. I've got a Mochi trader coming to the lair tomorrow, she normally trades in furs, but has agreed to bring some clothing for you humans." Kyt says.

This has to be Viv's doing. She made sure we all got new clothes when we arrived. Normally I wouldn't be interested. The two pairs of leather like trousers and three tops I have are fine, as I was never that bothered about fashion. But the burning on my skin from the tight waistband means I could really do with something new.

"That would be great, Kyt. Thanks." I finish gathering up my debris and stand up.

"She'll be at the supply depot tomorrow, all day if I know the Mochi, they love the hard sell." Kyt laughs and is gone.

I've hung on for most of the day before making my way down to the level where the Gryn receive and store their supplies, whether procured from the Mochi or Kijg or the foodstuffs they 'liberate' from Proto, destined for the capture camps. I didn't want to run into any of the women after I spent most of

the night in tears and I spent most of the morning struggling to hold onto the small amount of food I've managed to consume.

Once inside the massive cave that houses everything from the weird six legged, three eyed live maraha to crates of unidentifiable items, I spot Kyt speaking with a Mochi female. The lithe feline's tail twitches as she converses with him. Mochi are very much like lions, all golden fur, ears and tail. I saw a pair of male Mochi once, bringing in maraha and they had huge manes as well as bulging muscles.

Kyt spots me and motions me over.

"Jesic was just about to leave," he says as I reach the pair, "but you'll stay for this female, won't you?" He asks her.

"For you." She trails a clawed hand over Kyt's chest. "I'll see you later, yes?" It doesn't sound like a request.

"Maybe." Kyt grins.

I think he might see himself as some kind of charmer, despite the lack of Gryn females, which I would find kind of sweet if I didn't still feel so bilious and the thought of relationships turns my stomach.

The Mochi turns her amber gaze on me, and her eyes soften. She exposes an impressive set of double canines that more than rival that of the Gryn. "What a lovely female. What is your name, my dear?"

For the first time since Fyn was captured, the knot in my stomach eases. "It's Lucy." I reply.

"I am Jesic. I think we are going to be great friends, come with me." She slings a furry arm around my shoulders and leads me away from a bemused Kyt behind a wall of supply cases, a mixture of rough wood and the strange plastic substance that Proto uses.

I can't help but gasp out loud at what I see. She's set it out almost like an old fashioned salon. Brightly colored rugs on the floor, a comfortable looking sofa covered in luxurious furs and several tables piled with clothing.

"You like?" She asks.

I'm unable to help myself. My tears start to flow, and I can't stop them. It reminds me of Fyn's nest, the one he made for me and the one I've been unable to find since I left it on the day he disappeared.

I want him, to feel his strong arms around me, to breathe in the scent of his feathers. The longing I have makes all of me ache.

Jesic makes a clucking sound and steers me to the sofa, sitting me down and drawing me to her. Normally I'd hate being this close to anyone, but my despair is such that I cling to her, long gasping sobs escaping from my lips. She stays silent as I wet her silky fur in a storm of my own making.

"You are mated?" Jesic asks as she strokes my hair and the worst of my crying has ceased. I nod my head, not prepared to trust my voice. "To a Gryn?" I nod again. "To Kyt?"

"No, not to Kyt."

"Thank the Mother, I thought for a parsec I was the cause of your distress." Jesic huffs out a breath in what must be the Mochi equivalent of a sigh of relief. "Kyt and I are friends, but that's as far as it goes. Mochi females prefer more than one male for our pride and I have plenty of mates."

"Sounds complicated." I sniffle.

"Not as complicated as your mating appears to be. You are with young, yes?" Jesic asks, her hand spanning my stomach. "Your Gryn mate must be very happy. The Gryn need younglings."

"What?" I push myself away from her in shock, ice dripping down my spine. "I'm not pregnant, that can't be possible?" I stutter out.

Jesic chuckles out a rich laugh and taps the side of her head. "The Gryn are not the only species on Ustokos that can see what can't be seen. You are with young, my dear. Gryn young."

Unconsciously I have put my hands over my stomach, and I stare down as reality slams me like a brick wall. The nausea,

the weight gain even whilst I wasn't eating much, the fact I haven't had a period since...

We had one night together. Fyn knocked me up.

And left.

FYN



A blast of cold air and water wakes me. She was there in my dreams. Lucy. The only thing keeping me alive.

‘Again!’ Proto demands.

It has spent the last multiple turns attempting to test my body to destruction. I still heal, but my feathers are ragged, the inevitable outcome of the tortures it subjects me to.

A robot arm curls out of the low ceiling, and I’m jabbed with a needle. My veins set on fire as whatever I’m given floods my system, making me believe I’m faster, better, stronger.

That I can defeat what’s behind the door in front of me.

I’m only doing it for her. For my mate. Because when I close my eyes it’s only her I see.

The door slams open and I leap out into the light. Five guardbots stand ready as another door whips open and a disheveled merc is thrust out into the arena.

He’s young and clearly from the camps. His clothes are Proto’s design, and his shoulder skin is pale from the nutri-slop that Proto provides. In the center of the arena are two swords. This is the moment I’ve been dreading. The narcotics swimming in my bloodstream make me want to fight more than anything. Fight or mate, given that my main cock has swollen. Proto removed my clothing many turns ago, and I’ve been reduced to a naked savage in this arena.

A savage beast that can smell blood, piss, and fear. A beast that wants to kill.

The Gryn attempts to get back through the door once he sees me, but there's no escape. I leap for the swords and get to both before him. He unsheathes his claws, and I see the fight left in him.

Perfect.

I've enough wings left I can get airborne, and I make a circuit of the arena, keeping the merc in sight. He stares back at me, defiant. It's something I can use.

The first guardbot goes crashing down as I sever its propulsion unit with a single sword slice to the middle of its triangular body. Within seconds I've done the same to a second bot.

"Here!" I toss the second sword to the stunned merc. "Stab them like I just did!"

The bots wheel around to face me, their laser weapons charging as they await their orders. Proto put them here to make sure we fought. It hasn't anticipated that after my weeks of co-operation, I would change my mind.

It doesn't know I saw what it did to my patrol long before the gas knocked me out. I saw each of the mercs terminated in turn. It holds nothing over me. And all I have to lose is getting back to the arms of my *eregri*. The one thing Proto got right was that I am a mated male. It failed to calculate what that meant, because it's algos can never understand what having a fated mate is.

A third guardbot falls and the merc manages to take out the fourth, leaving just the one, with a fully charged laser. I whip around it, diverting its attention in the hope the merc understands he has to be the one to disable it. A laser blast burns my skin and I duck, just as the bot lets out a metallic groan and slams to the arena floor.

The merc stands, staring at the destruction, his sword point on the ground.

“I thought you were going to kill me.” He says, eyes still fearful.

“We’re Gryn.” I begin stabbing my sword at the exit door, the one Proto uses to drag out the bodies. “We don’t kill each other.” I look over my shoulder at him. “You want to get out of here?” He nods. “Then give me a vrexing hand, will you?” I laugh.

I’m still pumped up with Proto’s vrexing narcotics, but that can only work in my favor as the merc joins me in prizing the door open.

“How are we going to get out?” He asks as the metal buckles gives, and finally opens.

“Leave that to me.” I reply. I stoop to pick up some discarded fabric that I wrap around my waist like the Mochi males do, covering my cocks.

I’m so close to being back with my mate, I can almost taste her. I know I’ll not let her leave my nest for a very, very long time once I’m back in the lair. We’ve got far too much lost time to make up for.

“We’re not far from the lair now,” I tell the young merc, who’s name is Vync. He’s struggling with the long bouts of flying we’ve done since escaping from Proto’s base, and he’s exhausted. “Then we can both have a good rest.” I put my hand on his shoulder as his breath heaves in his chest.

I’ve not found the flying any easier given the state of my feathers. But my mate will fix them all for me, just as soon as we get there.

“And you can see your *eregri*.” Vync pants, a smile hitching the corners of his mouth. Ever since I told him about Lucy, he’s been entranced by the idea that the *eregri* is not a myth.

“I can see her and mate her.” I grin at him. He laughs through the exhaustion, managing to straighten up as his

breathing eases.

“If you think you can, we should get going.” There are darker clouds following us from behind, and we’re out in the hinterlands, beyond the destroyed city of Kos. Those clouds could easily hide joykills. I’m anxious to avoid them as I’m desperate to get back to the lair. He grunts his agreement, and we take off.

Proto did something to me, during my confinement. I became a mindless killing creature, although I’m not sure what it made me kill. But it also made me understand that anger doesn’t solve anything. I can manage my life if I’m determined.

And I’m determined to get back to my *eregri*. I’m determined to be the best mate for her.

The lair comes into view, and I push out my thoughtbond, hoping, beyond hope that she will feel me. We land just outside of the great hall, and I have to support my young merc friend as we head inside.

“Fyn?” One of my squadron leaders spots me. “It’s Fyn! He’s here!” He yells at a deafening volume and the hall rapidly fills with mercs.

“I need to get Vync to Orvos. And bring some maraha, rare.” I order and several mercs race away. “Let Jyr know I’m back.” I tip Vync into my arms. He’s dead on his feet and can’t go another step.

In a couple of wing beats, I’m on the surgery level and heading through to Orvos, and my mate. A returning hero.

The surgery is empty, save for the grumpy healer who rises to his feet as I enter.

“Back again, Fyn.” He eyes the merc in my arms. “And with more for me to do. Will you ever change?” He says.

I lower Vync carefully onto a ledge.

“Where is Lucy?” I demand. “Where is my mate?”

I still can’t feel her and it’s worrying me.

“Lucy left the lair nearly thirty turns ago, Fyn. She went with the Mochi.” Orvos bends over Vync to examine him before he neatly tranqs the hapless merc. “She was your mate?”

I stalk the big healer until I have him pressed against the wall of his own surgery. “She was my mate, and I want to know where she is. Now.” I snarl, I can feel the beast rising inside me, desperate to get out and to kill. My chest heaving with the attempt to repress the urge to destroy.

“That will have to wait, Command.” Orvos shoves a sponge under my nose, and I slam it away.

“Vrex off with your tranqs, Orvos! Don’t you think Proto gave me enough? I have to see Jyr.”

“I’m here, Fyn.” The voice of our Prime comes from behind me, and I whirl around, my vision sheeting red as I leap for him.

He bats me out of the air as if I’m a youngling and places a heavy foot on my chest.

“You let her go!” I reach for his leg, and he growls low in his chest. “You let my mate leave the lair!” I jerk at his foot, and he presses harder.

“No one knew she was your mate. She asked to leave, and she’s not a prisoner.” Jyr says, from the look in his eye, I know I’m only getting away with my behavior because I’m Command, or at least I was.

I don’t care. He let Lucy leave the lair and all I want to do is get to her. If I have to fight Jyr to find her, I will.

“I don’t want you leaving until we know it’s safe for you. Let Orvos check you over, and we’ll organize a search party for your mate.” Jyr says, tapping into my thoughtbond.

“No!” I wrench away his foot and scramble to my feet. “She’s my *eregri*, and I’m going for her. Don’t try and stop me.”

As if he could.

LUCY



I stretch my arms above my head and shift my butt cheeks as I take in a long breath just how Jesic showed me. It takes some of the pressure off my lower back, but it still aches. My belly protrudes over my waistband, and I swirl my hands over the bump.

Fyn's baby.

The one he left me with when he chose to go racing away to fulfill his duty to the lair. Leaving me behind without a thought. I'm trying to believe that I'm going through the grief stage, but I'm just so angry all the time.

"Loosy?" Jesic has come into the small caravan where I'm working. With her big canines, she struggles to pronounce my name, but it's kind of cute, and I don't mind.

"Hey Jesic, I've finished that belt you asked me to do." I pick up the carved and studded leather belt. It's probably one of the finest things I've ever made.

Jesic takes it carefully in her paw, the fingers slowly extending to make it a hand, and then unfurling into long wicked claws.

"That is exquisite, my sweet. My client is going to be very happy." She gives me a toothy smile.

"Who knew that my leather working skills would ever come in useful for anything other than falconry equipment." I say, partly to myself, as I stifle a yawn. I'm lucky it is useful that I had honed my skills making equipment, or furniture as

falconers call the leather jesses, leashes, hoods, bags and gloves they use with their birds, because it's meant I've been able to repay Jesic's kindness in keeping a roof over my head and food in my belly.

"Your Earth skills are very much in demand, Lucy. It helps your work is stunning, but everyone wants something made by a hooman."

Another word she struggles to get her lips around and it makes me smile. Not much else does these days.

"It's nice to be appreciated, Jesic." I shift in my chair, one hand rubbing over my belly.

"You are tired, sweetness. You should rest, both of you." Jesic adds her paw to my stomach and begins to purr.

She had to do a lot of purring when I first left the lair. Until I grew a thicker skin and accepted I had no option but to get on with my life.

"Actually, there's a cave with some hot healing waters near here. Let me take you and you can enjoy." Jesic knows how much I love bathing, even though it's something that quite repels her. The Mochi are more cat than I'm prepared to admit, and the fact they groom with their tongues takes some getting used to.

"Don't you have customers?" I ask, knowing it's only midafternoon.

"I can drop your latest creation to my buyer on the way, which will more than make up for closing up early." She carefully stows the belt in the pocket of her coat. "Besides, the trading post will be open in the evening, and I'm sure we can increase our takings."

"Thanks Jesic, I appreciate it." I lever myself to my feet.

I'm only two months pregnant at the most, but I'm big, my stomach already obscures my feet. If I'm this pregnant now, I hate to think what size I'm going to be in the next few months. To add insult to injury, Gryn babies only gestate for five months.

I'm going to be enormous.

Having emptied my poor bladder, I pull on my coat and boots. It's much colder where we are, on the edge of the known habitable areas of Ustokos, than the plains where the lair was situated. Once we exit the warm caravan, my breath fogs in the afternoon twilight. All around us are stalls selling food and clothing. There's the scent of roasting meat and spice that is reminiscent of Fyn and tears prick at the back of my eyes.

"Are you good, sweetness?" Jesic looks at me with concern.

"I'm fine, it's just colder than I thought out here." I brush at my cheeks and try to look happy. Or at least not miserable.

Jesic takes my arm, and we make our way through the trading post, one of many that pop up on the route that, by the sounds of things, is like the old Silk Road that wound its way through Europe and Asia hundreds of years ago on Earth.

"Wait here," Jesic says, pausing outside of a large and ornate caravan. Like the one I live in, it's made of scraps of metal and plastic salvaged from the blasted wastelands that cover most of Ustokos. Unlike mine, this caravan's owner has gone to some great lengths to make the outside ornate. Patterns carved into every part of the structure. Strange, alien patterns.

Jesic slips inside, and I remain out in the cold, pleased that she doesn't want to show off the pregnant human to another Mochi or Kijg client. The reptilian Kijg have a weird way of flicking their forked tongues like a snake that sends a shiver up my spine. There is also another species that I've yet to encounter, the Zio. But the way Jesic talks about them, as some sort of insect, makes me damn sure I never want to meet one.

Another shiver runs through me, not from the cold this time, but from the feeling I'm being watched. I wrap my arms around my expanded form and stare around. The traders and buyers are seemingly uninterested in me, I get the occasional quizzical glance, but then they get on with their business, so that's not why I feel eyes upon me.

“Now we go!” Jesic’s voice startles me, and I jump. “Hey!” She exclaims. “Not good for baby.”

“You’re too stealthy! Sneaking up on me like that.” I try to quell my racing heart. “Did your customer like the belt?”

“Very much,” Jesic pats her coat pocket, and it jingles with the sound of the coin that seems to be the common currency on Ustokos. A light, titanium colored metal that is streaked through with green. “Let’s get you warmed up.”

We walk to the outskirts of the trading post, which is set into a semi-circular canyon, some of which looks like it’s natural, some that looks like it has been created. A cave mouth is set all around with bioluminescent lights, and it’s very pretty.

“Come.” Jesic beckons me forward and we enter the cave system. It opens up into a large bathing pool that is already being enjoyed by a couple of Kijg and, a striped Mochi. A Kijg female stands inside the entrance and Jesic drops a coin into her hand. The Kijg’s eyes widen, and she motions us through a rough curtain next to her, rather than into the main area.

It’s a private bathing pool, and I breathe a sigh of relief. The heat emanating from the water is already permeating my bones and I want nothing more than to shed my clothing and jump right in.

“The attendant says you can have this pool for as long as you want. I’ll see you back at the stall when you’re finished. You remember the way back, okay?” Jesic says, hovering by the entrance.

“You’re not staying?” I ask, not entirely unhappy that I get this magnificent pool to myself.

Jesic laughs. “I am not Mochi-ka,” she says, referencing the striped versions of the Mochi that are more tiger to her lion. “I can keep myself clean. You enjoy, my sweet, and I will see you later.”

As soon as she’s gone, I’m naked and in the pool, sighing with pleasure as the hot waters bubble around me, the

buoyancy lifting the pressure from baby on my aching body. I'm finally beginning to relax when there's a sound, somewhere in the small cave. I'm acutely aware of my vulnerability and beginning to wonder if I should have insisted that Jesic stay.

The pool's been set up with bioluminescent lights that illuminate the water but nothing else. I thought it was tranquil when I first came in, now I'm not so sure. I swish about into the center of the pool, peering at the fabric that hangs over the door. It doesn't seem to have moved and it's too dark in the rest of the cave for me to see if anything lurks there.

"Hello?" I call out, attempting to sound confident but failing miserably. "Is there anyone there?"

I spin around again when I see a shadow move. At least if I'm in the middle of the pool, I'll have some warning if whatever is out there tries to come for me. Not that a nude, pregnant human could do much to protect herself.

"I have a friend who's coming back for me. A Mochi warrior." I say into the gloom.

"The only warrior that is coming for you is me." A voice growls out of the darkness. A voice I recognize immediately.

Fyn steps into the light, and I accidentally gulp down a mouthful of water at the sight of him, coughing and spluttering alarmingly.

He seems even bigger than before, wings darker, more heavily muscled, and his eyes almost glowing blue in the eerie light of the cave. He is everything that stalked my dreams since I left the lair.

And he looks very, very angry.

FYN



I followed them from the trading post. My *eregri* and the female Mochi who dared to steal her away from me. I will deal with the treacherous female later. For now I just want to lay my eyes on my mate, to be in her presence and to take her in my arms again.

I'm even more angry when I find that she has been left to bathe by herself in this dangerous area. It's too far from the Gryn for us to offer protection and is far too close to the territories Proto has full control over.

"You should not be alone here, it is not safe." I walk towards the pool, my cocks stiffening with the thought of her naked body, and what we did last time we shared a bath.

"I've managed to take care of myself just fine, Fyn." She replies, still floating in the center of the water and making no attempt to swim over to me.

I attempt to reach her through the thoughtbond, but I get nothing. It's as if it's broken and I curl my hands up, claws digging into my flesh in frustration. All I endured at Proto's hands only for it all to go to gk when I finally get free.

Lucy still eyes me from the pool warily, and I'm doing my very best not to let my temper explode.

"You shouldn't have had to take care of yourself. You shouldn't have left the lair."

She swims over to the edge and the delicate beauty of her features floors me. She is even more beautiful than I

remember, although my memories got hazy while I was with Proto. I want nothing more than to take her in my arms.

“I couldn’t stay. There was nothing for me without you.” She states, her voice dull. “I thought you were dead.” The strain is apparent, although she stares at me with defiant eyes.

“I’m not dead.”

“I can see that.”

I ache for her, every fiber of my being needing to be close to her, and she isn’t getting out of the vrexing water.

“I’m going to get out, turn around.” She says.

“What?”

“I need to get dressed, turn around.” Lucy repeats. I stare at her. All I remember is her creamy skin and the way she delighted in my cocks. Now she doesn’t want me to see her?

“I’m not getting out unless you turn around.” She says through gritted teeth.

I have no desire to turn my back on my mate, but I want her out of the water so I can show her what she means to me. So I can experience one of her kisses and enjoy her once again. With a huff of breath, I turn my back, and I can hear splashing sounds, followed by heavy breathing, which is presumably her dressing.

“Okay.” She says and I turn, eager to taste her.

She stands next to the pool, dressed in a simple long shift and pants, her wet hair hanging long around her shoulders and her arms crossed over her chest.

And her swollen stomach.

“You’re—” I hesitate, not entirely sure what I’m seeing. “Are you—?”

“I’m pregnant, Fyn. It’s what happens when you mate,” she snaps. “This is what you left behind when you fucked off into the great blue yonder.”

“You shouldn’t have left the lair.” I grind out. “I came back.”

“You shouldn’t have left me.”

I don’t know what to think, my mind is both full of questions and blank at the same time with the shock of what I’m seeing.

My mate. My pregnant mate. She will birth young. My young.

I’m going to be a father.

After what I saw at Proto’s mercy, I’m not sure I want to be.

Lucy takes advantage of my silence to shrug on her coat and heads towards the exit.

“Where are you going?” I ask, striding after her.

“Back to my caravan. I’m tired and hungry.” She walks out without a backwards glance, and it takes me too many seconds to work out she is leaving me behind.

By the time I catch up with her, she’s walking through the trading post, heading back to the Mochi area. I fall in beside her, wanting to touch but not quite able to. Her oversized heavy coat hides her baby bump, which is why I didn’t notice anything when I was watching her earlier.

“You need to come back to the lair with me.”

“I don’t need to do anything, Fyn. I’ve got by so far without needing to go back to the lair.” She replies, not even looking at me as she carries on walking.

We reach the smallest caravan I’ve ever seen, and she opens the door. I follow, having to fold my wings close to my body and enter sideways into the tiny space. It’s warm and comfortable, but it’s not my nest and that’s where she should be.

Lucy removes her coat and sinks onto a tiny bed, rubbing at her stomach absently. She looks up at me, tears hovering in her eyes.

“You can’t just walk back into my life as if nothing has happened, Fyn. Everything’s changed. It’s not about you and me anymore.”

“I didn’t ask for this, for any of this.” The words are out of my mouth before I’ve even thought about them.

Lucy recoils, horror streaking across her gorgeous face, before it’s replaced by a mask of determination.

“Then there’s nothing more for us, is there.” She replies, her voice taking on the same dull tone from earlier.

The voice that says she’s shut down to me. The voice that is devoid of any emotion, any desire, any want. A voice that is tired of everything, including me.

There’s still no thoughtbond. I’ve blown my one chance at being happy and anger roils in my bloodstream at everything. At Proto, at Jyr and at the Gryn. At her.

“No, there’s nothing for us.” I batter my way out of the caravan, slamming the door behind me and stalk away from it, back towards the healing pools.

My wings are shot for the time being and the journey to find Lucy has taken the best part of twenty turns. I need time to process everything, and I need to warm my aching bones. Anger burns at me as I head towards the healing pools where I found her. My feathers itch. It’s been too long since I had the opportunity to bathe and preen, concentrated as I was on finding her.

Perhaps I should have paid more attention to what I would do and say when I found her, because I don’t think I did it right.

The Kijg attendant eyes me warily.

“You want more bathing, Gryn?” She demands.

“Why, you going to charge me more again?” I snap and she takes a step away. She’s already charged to let me in to see Lucy.

“Gryn always welcome here.” Her tongue flickers out, tasting my mood. “Only one coin more if you want private

bathing?” She inclines her head to one side.

I dig out the token she wants. I was able to make some coin on my travels across the blasted ground that is Ustokos, providing various Mochi and Kijg with my muscle power to keep me in maraha and shelter. Although I spent enough time alone, sometimes waking and not knowing who or where I was.

“You want an assistant?” She asks.

“What for?”

“Bathing. You are a big male.”

“I just want to be left alone.” I growl, my patience just about to break.

The Kijg takes my coin and ushers me through to a different pool than the one my *eregri* occupied not so long ago.

Annoying though the Kijg was, the waters in the pool are warm, and I’m able to clear away much of the dirt that has soaked into my skin and feathers. Usually it would be soothing, but with my mate so close, I can’t settle. My external itch has invaded my heart.

I should be the mate she wants. She carries my child. She is mine.

I groan out loud and close my eyes. I can see the look of pain on her face as I was unable to process her changed form. Yet she was as beautiful as the day I saw her in Proto’s base. More beautiful now she will have my young.

Could I have been more of a fool?

“Gryn?” A female voice has me on edge. I spin at the waters edge and see a naked Mochi female with striped fur and nothing else covering her. “I heard you required assistance.”

“Then you heard wrong. Leave, female.” I growl, climbing out of the pool and grabbing a piece of drying cloth to cover myself.

Normally I wouldn't bother, but I don't want this female seeing any more of me than is strictly necessary. There's something about her that feels wrong, and I can't put my claw on it.

No sooner am I out of the water, but the female comes in far too close, her roughened tongue lapping at the water that beads on my skin. I shudder.

"Vrex off! What do you want?" The drying cloth is too small to wrap around my waist and the female is in between me and my clothes.

I try to get past her, but she blocks me, draping her furry body over mine. I don't want to hurt her, but I don't want her this close.

"I want a Gryn warrior. I hear that you are as sweet as ambrosia and easy to please." She purrs at me.

I put my arm around her waist and, fighting the urge not to retch, put my mouth next to her ear.

"You want my coin or you want to rob me. You will get the opportunity at neither." I murmur.

A noise next to the entrance has me looking up, expecting to see the Mochi's accomplices in whatever game she's playing.

"Lucy!" She is the last female I was expecting to see, especially after I walked out on her. In my attempt to free myself from the Mochi, I drop the drying cloth.

LUCY



Fyn slams out of the caravan with a finality that is devastating. When I saw him standing in the gloom of the pool lights, it was as if my dreams had come true. But his distinct lack of reaction to me and our baby, other than to snarl in anger like he always did, tore my heart from my chest.

I thought we had a connection, but his rejection has destroyed my hopes that there was something.

That the little mouse could have a lion to protect her, care for her, fight alongside her.

I sob and sob, harder than I've ever sobbed before. If I had never been taken, I'd still be living my quiet life as a falconer with my hawks for company. I'd be content with my daily routine which meant I only ever spoke to my employer and sometimes his guests.

And I wouldn't have met Fyn, and my heart wouldn't be broken in pieces because he was horrified that I was pregnant. And I wouldn't have to admit that guilt has gnawed at me from the moment I left the lair.

He was right. I should have stayed put. I should have believed in him, that he would return. The guilt sours my mouth and settles in my stomach like a concrete block.

This is the reason I made my life among the birds. I was never any good at emotions, and even worse at relationships. My painful shyness kept me from being loved. Most of my sexual experience born of one night stands so I could feel

close to something, when actually I felt nothing at all. Then the one night where I felt something, where there was a spark, a connection that resulted in a new life, I go and ruin it all.

“Lucy?” Jesic is standing in the doorway to my caravan, her face a mask of horror. “I heard a Gryn warrior had been seen at the trading post. Are you okay?” She is immediately beside me as I attempt to get my emotions under control and fail. “I will get my mates to chase him away if you need me to.”

Her golden brow is furrowed with worry as she wraps her arms around me, and I sink into her soft fur. Her two mates are powerful males, but I doubt they could compete with Fyn, and I certainly wouldn’t want them to get hurt.

“It was Fyn.” I gasp out with shuddering breaths punctuated by snot.

“The father of your youngling? The one that didn’t come back?”

“Yes, but he’s back. He’s so angry with me that I left the lair, and I don’t think he wants the baby either!” I bawl. “I fucked it all up, Jesic. He hates me.” I collapse into her again, absolutely certain of myself.

“Now my sweet.” Jesic pushes me back so she can look at me. “You left the lair for your own reasons. He was not there, and he cannot know how much it pained you to stay.”

“I shouldn’t have left. When he came back I wasn’t there.” The truth comes out in a harsh whisper.

He wanted me to be waiting, and I wasn’t.

“Pssst!” Jesic hisses out. “He tracked you down, do you think a little thing like you not being where he thought you would be stops a mated Gryn?” She laughs, something between a hiss and a growl. “Gryn don’t just mate for life. They mate with their soul and their mind. He would find you wherever you were. And as for your youngling, like any male, he needs time to get used to the idea.”

I sniffle pathetically, using my sleeve to clean up my face. “You don’t understand—“

“I understand the Gryn far better than you.” Jesic sits up, laps at her paw and wipes it over my face as I make disgusted sounds, and she ignores me. “You think they are just big - what do you call them? Birds of prey? They are not. You cannot tame a Gryn unless you mate one.”

“I don’t want to tame Fyn.” I mutter.

“No true mate does. For him, you are everything. The thoughtbond? It is already there, is it not?”

“Thoughtbond?”

“You feel him.” She taps her head. “Here and.” She taps her chest. “Here.”

I ache. I ache with crying, I ache with the child I carry but there is a bigger pain, one that goes deeper than my bones. One that has a color. An azure blue. My Fyn.

“Back in the lair. Maybe.”

Jesic grins, her white teeth sharp. “He is your true mate. Nothing you can do will ever hurt him. He is angry at himself, not you. The Gryn cannot be parted from their fated mate.”

“I sent him away!” I wail as his loss slams me in my chest with all the force of a truck.

“Then you must find him.” She says, helping me to my feet and into my coat. “He will want you, whatever was said.”

I’m not sure I believe her. Fyn and I had such a brief relationship that I’m not sure about anything, especially what we are to each other. But I do remember a calm and relaxed warrior, one who dozed under my fingers and made love to me like I was the only creature in the universe. And I know that it was me who soothed the angry beast he had become, because I felt it, like Jesic said, in my heart and in my head.

Jesic puts a hand in the small of my back and propels me out of my caravan before I can protest.

“I believe I may have seen him heading back to the waters. You two have that in common.” She laughs at me as I scowl at her.

“Don’t see why I have to go after him.” I grumble as she follows me out, spinning me to face back towards the hot springs. My protests fall on deaf ears as I’m nudged through the crowds thronging the trading post, until we reach the outskirts, and Jesic decides she needs to get back to the stall. Again.

“You make up with your mate. From what I’ve seen of him, you’ll make the cutest mated span that the Gryn lair has ever seen.” She snorts, using the Mochi reference to a couple. Apart from Hisi and Yiric, her constant male attendants, I’ve lost count of how many mates she has had.

“That’s hardly difficult, given they don’t have any females.” I retort, trying to buy time. The closer we got to where Fyn is, the more ice forms in my stomach.

I can almost hear my aunt telling me I won’t amount to anything and that I don’t deserve to be happy. It’s hard to go forward when everything inside you wants to go back.

Jesic hisses at me and I hold up my hands. “Okay, I’m going!” I say, backing away from her. My aunt might have been a dragon, but she’s nothing compared to a pissed off Mochi female.

“If you don’t come back with him, I’ll hunt him down and make him pay.” She gives me an impromptu hug, one paw on my rounded belly. “Then you and me will raise this little one together.”

It turns out that I had to travel billions of miles against my will to an alien planet to find my first and only true friend. I try not to snifle as I cover her hand with mine. “Might just take you up on that.”

Yet again, I’m given a pointed shove in the direction of the pools and with a longing look back at Jesic, I head inside.

The attendant looks up as I enter and her eyes twinkle with interest.

“Did a Gryn warrior come in here?” I ask. “Tall, with wings.” I add.

“I am aware of what the Gryn look like. Don’t get many this far out,” she replies.

“Okay, well, is there one in here?”

The Kijg cocks her head on one side, and I know what she wants, but I’m not paying her to find Fyn. I’ll wait outside for him if I have to.

“Yes,” she says, finally. “Do you wish to bathe again?”

“No, I just want to talk to him.”

She looks me up and down. I attempt to look intimidating, which is pointless given that I’m a round ball of pregnant human.

“He went in there, but he has company.” Her eyes glitter unpleasantly as she points to an entrance to what must be another private pool.

I brush past her and duck under the curtain covering the door.

To be confronted by a virtually naked Fyn and a completely naked Mochi female draped all over him, his arm around her waist.

“Fyn?” I don’t want to say anything, but it seems that my mouth has taken over. The sound that spews out is pathetic and needy.

“Lucy!” He exclaims as he sees me, dropping the towel, which is the only thing that covers his modesty. The female licks her lips and stares straight at me.

I’m sure there’s an entirely rational explanation, but my cheeks burn with the humiliation of finding Fyn like this. Of being the second woman in this triangle, or whatever it is. Of making a complete fool of myself.

I’m done with being the doormat, and I’m not going to be treated like this by him or anyone else.

Not anymore.

Without a word, I turn and leave. Before he sees my tears and feels my pain.

FYN



My mate huffs out an angry breath, her cheeks flushing in a gorgeous way as her skin colors. She does an immediate about turn, marching out of the room.

The thoughtbond flares into life. Her anger, her pain and her...love? It swirls like a cloud of confused mist in her wake.

I'm too stunned to move immediately. It allows the Mochi to wrap herself around me once more, her hand snaking down to my cocks.

"What about it, warrior? You don't need that strange creature, you have me." She murmurs.

I fling her off me with a growl and grab my clothing, pulling on my pants and boots as I head for the exit. The bond is alive, and I was stupid, or naive enough to think otherwise.

I know next to nothing about mating and the one Gryn who could help is too far away for any assistance. What I wouldn't give to be able to speak to Jyr, providing he'd let me back into the lair after the way I behaved. Instead I did my usual and thought I knew best when I took off with my only intent to find Lucy.

I glower at the Kijg attendant, who I'm sure sent in the Mochi female to try to take more of my coin. She shrinks back into her little alcove as I stride out of the cavern, hoping that I can catch up with my little mate, who presumably can't have gotten that far, given how tiny and pregnant she is.

Outside there is no sign of her. Only a handful of Kijg and Mochi that are heading to the pools. I snort in frustration as I head back towards her tiny caravan. A place that's not fit for a mate of a Gryn warrior.

"Warrior!" A strong female voice rings out, halting my in my progress. I turn to see yet another Mochi female that is seemingly interested in presenting her body for my payment.

"Vrex off, female. I don't want whatever it is you are selling." I turn my back on her, ready to stomp away.

"You couldn't afford me, Fyn." I whip around at the sound of my name and recognize the female as the one that was with Lucy earlier. "But you will hear what I have to say."

In two paces and one wingbeat, I have her by her throat.

"You will not keep me from my mate. Not you, not any other Mochi. She is mine by right and by bond. She is my boundless flight and my ever after." My voice is gravelly with my emotion, and with the effort it is taking not to do some serious damage to this irritating female.

"Oh, is she? Doesn't seem that way to me." The female replies, unperturbed by my claws at her throat.

I drop her.

"Seems to me that you're doing all you can to drive her away."

"What do you know? Lucy is my mate and that is the end of it." I fold my arms across my chest, shaking out my wings to make myself look bigger.

"You really are that clueless, aren't you?" The Mochi looks me up and down unimpressed with my display. Her lips curl into a smile, her eyes dancing with mirth.

"My patience, such as it is, is spread very thin." I rattle my feathers in irritation, although her words have spiked at me. How does she know about my lack of experience? "I want my mate. Get out of my way." I push her to one side.

"Your patience could do with a refresher, Fyn." The Mochi calls out. "As could your attitude. You're going to be a father

as well as a mate. You need to grow up and face it like a warrior and not a youngling. You can't be of any use to her if you continue to fly into every situation as if it's your next battle with Proto."

A snarl rises in my throat, then it hesitates. This female knows my *eregri*. I've already vrexed things up, multiple times with Lucy, and I don't want to do it again. The mention of Proto brings a metallic taste to my mouth and sounds to my ears that I don't want.

I close my eyes and place the heels of my hands against them. Lucy deserves better, and if I can't be the mate she needs, she deserves my respect and understanding. I've been blinded by my desires and choked by my anger. The Gryn might live by the fight, the party and to forget, but that was without females.

Lucy has to be my all.

"You are a good warrior." The female places a paw on my arm. "I can see that, but Lucy, she needs more than a warrior. She needs you, all of you." She prods at my chest. "What's in here is what counts." Before I can move she slaps me around my head. "What's in there needs work."

"You don't know me." I push her away. Meddling female. "I'll do what I see fit." I stride off, confident that I'll find Lucy at her caravan, given the Mochi tried to stop me.

Anger burns at my veins that any creature could be so presumptions to claim to see into me. Only Gryn or my *eregri* can do that. Not some mangy Mochi. But the closer I get to the caravan, the more her words haunt me. They were an echo of my fears and I refused to listen because I didn't want to be weak.

What Proto did to me. It made me weak. When it caught me again...A shudder runs over my body. The only thing that kept me sane was thoughts of Lucy. Without her, I am nothing.

As I approach her caravan, I can hear something that stops me in my tracks. It's something I've not heard in a long time, a female voice singing. High and beautiful, it's coming from

inside the tiny mobile dwelling. As I approach and look through the single small window, holding back to stay in shadow.

My *eregri* sits, one hand rubbing a soft circle on her belly as she sings a song of wandering, of planets and of breezes that blow. My mind fills with the scent of clean air and something called heather. Blue skies, the type I've never seen rise high above me and the sound of bells drifts in on the air. The place is at once home and a vast open area that makes me feel small. When I blink and bring her back into focus, I see the tears that flow down her cheeks.

I did that to her.

And I have to make this right.

LUCY



The door opens with a swish of cold, tangy night air, and I stop singing, expecting to see Jesic, ready to tell me off for being such a wuss.

Instead my titchy caravan is filled with enormous Gryn warrior. One that doesn't look happy in the least.

As usual.

“Fyn, I'm tired. I don't want to do this now.” I sigh, wiping at the stupid tears I couldn't stop. He visibly bristles at my words.

“You didn't give me time to explain.” He says, teeth gritted.

“I'm sure it was completely innocent, but can you come back tomorrow to tell me your tale of woe? I'd just like to get some sleep.”

“I crossed the wildernesses for you. I did things for Mochi that no self-respecting Gryn would ever do, so that I could find you. I escaped from Proto for you. Do you not think you could hear me out?” He half snarls, claws extending.

“I didn't ask you to do any of that!” I snap. “All I wanted was to get to know you better, and you left me without a word.”

Fyn exhales a breath and seems to visibly deflate. His feathers drawing into his wings, holding themselves sleek against him. His blue eyes become bluer, pools of sapphires in the soft light of my home.

“I know. I messed up. I spent so long escaping who I am that sometimes I get confused as to what the right thing is to do.” He rubs at the back of his neck, staring at the floor. He looks smaller, younger, and the only danger he poses is to my heart. “I have to prove myself, every step of the way. From being a warrior despite my eye color to being the best Command the lair has ever seen.”

He drops to his knees in front of me in an action that takes me entirely by surprise and I shuffle back a little on the sofa that also doubles as my bed. Having this enormous, gorgeous male at my feet is not helping my resolve, or the state of my knickers.

A lady as pregnant as me shouldn't be having the sort of thoughts I am, even with such a delicious male devilishly close to my lady bits.

“Can you ever forgive me, Lucy? I meant what I said, you are my *eregri*. I can't imagine life without you, or our child.” His hand hovers over my bump, not quite making contact. “I want to get to know you better too. I—” His breath hiccups in his chest. “I want you to know me, too.” His voice breaks, and I go with it. Tears, stupid pregnancy tears streaming down my face.

Fyn is what he is. A predator to be feared, but he's here, on his knees begging to be part of my life, regardless of the mate bond that Jesic told me about, which, by the sound of it, most Gryn believe gives them ownership of a female.

“Why don't we start again?” He lifts up his head and fixes me with his azure eyes. The crinkles at the corners are part hope and part worry. I cup his chin in my hand, and he closes his eyes briefly at my touch.

Such a sensual predator.

“It's not like we can pretend we don't know each other,” I put my hand over his and press it to my stomach. “Not with this one on board, but we can get to know each other properly, if that's what you want?”

Fyn nods, slowly and with purpose. I guess my one night stand might turn out to give me more than just the baby in my belly. I push myself back onto my bed.

“First things first, let me have a look at your wings.” Fyn doesn’t need any more of an invitation and prostrates himself on the bed, as far as his big form will allow him in this tiny space, while I close the curtains.

I may need to rethink the living arrangements if he’s going to stay. I reach into my small bag, the one I brought from the lair. It contains some of the oil I used on the Gryn feathers, along with imping equipment that I thought might come in handy.

Or perhaps I believed I would see Fyn again. This planet has to be fucking with my head if I’m going to believe in telepathy and precognition.

Having covered my fingers in the oils, I begin to comb through his feathers, working my way over the shoulder of his wing. A couple of his flight feathers are bent and not in good shape. Some of the thick, mahogany skin on his back holds fresh pink scars.

“What happened to you?” I whisper hoarsely.

“Proto captured me. Put in a camp. Made to fight.” Fyn’s voice is a deep, sleepy burr. “Made to kill. Made to forget.” He adds after a beat. Somehow, I can tell he wants to be honest with me.

I don’t know what to say to him. I ache for his hardships, and there doesn’t seem to be words that would soothe him more than my fingers. Instead I begin to hum. He turns his head so he can look at me. Eyes half-lidded.

“You sound good. I’ve not heard anything like that before.”

“Just some old Earth songs.”

“Songs?”

And I remember that in the lair, there was never music or singing, only the beating of wings or of feet.

“Do Gryn not have songs?”

Fyn snuggles a bit deeper into my bed, and a bit closer to me, his musky spicy scent drifting in waves over me.

“Maybe, once, a long time ago. Not now, no females.” He says, voice muffled.

I find a knot and begin to work at it, and he lets out a groan. “Shit! Did that hurt?” I withdraw my hands, and he lifts his head immediately.

“Proto did what it could to stop me healing, on occasion, it worked. Most of the time it didn’t.” His eyes drill into me, the pain buried deep down. “You didn’t hurt me, my *eregri*. You could never hurt me.”

He really wants to make this work. It all depends on whether I want to risk my heart.

FYN



I know that I have never seen anything more beautiful than my mate at this moment. Her stomach bulging out from under a top that is slightly too tight for her, the creamy skin begging to be licked and tasted. Her green eyes, flecked with gold, shine with unshed water. Her sweet little nose is red at the tip, and her lips glisten as she runs her naughty tongue over them.

My cocks react with alarming speed, so much so that I can't continue to lie on my front. I turn towards her, knowing my arousal will be obvious, but she is so vrexing gorgeous, I'm not going to hide it. I want her to know how she makes me feel.

Her eyes widen as she sees the bulge my members create in the tight maraha hide pants I was given by one of my employers. I reach out a hand and gently touch her stomach, feeling her soft skin against my calloused fingers.

"We don't have to do anything you don't want to." My voice is hoarse with need.

Her scent, her arousal is intoxicating. Her skin so pale underneath mine as I run my hands under her top, reveling in the roundness of her stomach, filled with a new life we created. I lower my head to lap at her belly, tasting her, as sweet as I remember.

"I want you, Fyn." She breathes, her hand in my hair. "I know I shouldn't, but I do." She arches her back, pushing

herself at me as I remove her top, freeing her breasts that are ripe for a tonguing.

“And I want you, my *eregri*, more than anything, but this is your choice, always your choice.” I fasten my lips around one tight, perfect peak and suck, slowly at first but steadily increasing my suction and nibbling. “You say if you want me to stop.” I murmur with my mouth and hands full.

Her newly pregnant form is like the softest hide I’ve ever touched. Silky beneath my touch, I swirl my hands over her, taking in every new inch as she writhes, moaning, and whimpering, while I tend to her sensitive nipples.

I might have been new to mating when I last saw her, but as a mated male, I want nothing more than to bring her pleasure and the knowledge of how to do so comes from deep within me. More than anything, I know that this female requires plenty of teasing, whether she likes it or not. I want her begging for me, and then I will beg her to allow me to enter her warm, wet body. My shafts jerk hard inside my pants. If I don’t contain my thoughts, I’ll be spilling my seed far too early.

Lucy pulls my head up so our faces are close together. She presses one of her delicious kisses to my lips, her tongue sweeping through my mouth so I am in no doubt of what she wants. The explosion of her in my mouth reminds me of where else exactly I want to taste her.

Her hands are at my pants, tugging at the catch, trying to release my cocks.

“Not yet, my love. I have more work to do.” I trail my lips down her neck, lingering over her nipples as I gently pull at her lower garments, quickly freeing her from their restrictions. “Let me check what I have been missing.” I run my hand over her glorious belly and through the little wisp of fur that guards the entrance to where I can find her ambrosia. My finger finds her soaking folds, wet for me and I dip my head lower, luxuriating in her arousal.

“My darling Fyn, I want you so very much but there’s no rush.” Her voice is strangled with lust as she echoes my earlier

desire.

“My only rush is to pleasure you, my beautiful *eregri*. To worship you as I should have done from the start.”

“We have all the time on Ustokos.” Lucy says and then cries out as I run my tongue over her slick entrance, ending at the little bundle of nerves, so neatly hidden and such a delight.

Her hips raise her sweetness further to my mouth, and I grasp at her stomach, sliding my hands under her buttocks to keep her in exactly the right place. She weeps with moisture, and I eagerly lap up the tasty fluid, shifting my hand so that I can continue to hold her as well as toy with her, slipping a digit into her silken heat. She pulses over me, her tight sheath grasping at my finger.

“Oh! Fyn! Take me, please!” She groans, panting at me, her green eyes bright.

“Only one climax? That will not do.” I redouble my efforts on her delicious pussy. Tongue and fingers working at her until I wring yet another orgasm out of my mate.

All this time thinking about her in my arms, imagining what I would do to her, with her and here she is, under my claw tips and at my mercy.

“Fyn!”

“What my *eregri*?” I smile up at her, my mouth smeared with her juices.

“You know what!” She stares at me, eyes bright.

“Is that a demand? From the tiniest female on Ustokos? Does she demand something from this Gryn warrior?”

“I do! I want your cocks in me, right now!” She flings her head back wantonly.

I have no choice but to oblige, because if I do not, I will spill my seed elsewhere than inside her. Pressing my main cock at her little entrance, I have her spread before me, undone, her legs splayed, her thighs wide and her stomach swollen with our child. She has never been more perfect. She could never be more perfect. I push harder, slipping easily

inside her sweet channel as my secondary cock, already slick with pre-cum breaches her tight bottom hole.

“Fyn!” She cries out as I thrust myself into her, all at once she is convulsing on me, her pussy fluttering over my cock, and her dark channel pulsing.

“Lucy, oh, my Lucy,” I gather her to me as I continue to plunder her, inch by beautiful inch.

LUCY



The moment Fyn breaches both my tight ring and my pussy, my body fires into life. If I thought the earlier orgasms he wrenched from me using only his tongue and fingers were intense, they have nothing on the one that spasms through me once he spears me in both holes.

All my muscles clench around him, drawing him into me. We become one as I meld to him, drink him in, every single predatory part of him. His wings cover us both, knocking everything in the small place flying. His handsome face is strained as he attempts to hold himself back. I can feel he wants more, wants to let go, to be entirely free but he's concerned I don't want that.

I want you.

With a roar that shakes the caravan, and can surely be heard back at the lair, Fyn climaxes. His cocks fill me in both channels as my orgasm rolls through me yet again, my pregnant body shaking uncontrollably as he pulses his hot cum inside me. I'm gasping for every breath and wanting even more. With every aftershock, I can feel his spill leaking out of me. When he finally is able to withdraw, there is a little pain but nothing that doesn't dissipate with the soothing afterglow of my multiple climaxes. Fyn shifts me to nestle into his side and nuzzles in my hair.

"You smell so good." He murmurs. "I want to mate you again."

“Whilst I agree we need to make up for lost time, I need to do a little recovering, big guy, and you’ve got some explaining to do.” I pat him playfully on his chest.

An expression of confusion, loss and then, amusingly, embarrassment spreads over his handsome face. His cheeks color, and my heart skips a beat.

“She came in while I was bathing. The *kijg* must have sent her in, I didn’t ask for her - for any female!” He rushes out. I could stop him. I could tell him that I knew he wasn’t doing the nasty with the cat lady but watching him squirm is adorable. “I got out of the pool, meaning to chase her away, then you were there and then I dropped my drying cloth.” He scrubs his hand over his face. “I know it looked bad, but honestly, my *eregri*, it just looked bad, that’s all.”

His worry and concern hangs in the air above us like a swirling cloud of grey and blue. I have a metallic taste on my tongue.

“Hey,” I cup his head in my hands, drawing him closer so I can kiss his lips, drawing out the touch until the colors calm and the taste is only of us both. “I believe you, and I didn’t think you were up to no good.”

Fyn hums, his icy blue eyes studying my face, one corner of his mouth quirked up to reveal a sharp fang. He covers us both with a wing, and we are entirely alone together. “And how did you know that, my mate?” A single claw swirls around my sensitive nipple. He leans in for another lengthy kiss and my core clenches.

“I just knew.” I breathe.

Fyn inhales deeply.

“You are the only female I want, Lucy. The only female I’ve ever wanted. Maybe the thoughtbond will help.”

The kiss he gives me tingles on my lips, like the buzz from electricity. I don’t want it to end, and I never want to be out from under his wings. He makes me feel safe in ways I didn’t think I could ever imagine.

“And I’m sorry I left the lair. I should have waited.” I take his hand and put it on my stomach. “I didn’t know what to do about the baby and I panicked. I couldn’t face telling the others, not when you weren’t there.”

Fyn studies my face.

“Who hurt you?” He demands.

“No one.” I stutter out.

“Not here. Who hurt you?” His eyes are hard blue crystals. “I want to know who made my *eregri* fear so much she couldn’t be truthful about our youngling.” His hand is warm on my bare flesh. He adds another and caresses me.

“My parents died when I was young, and my aunt raised me. She didn’t get on with my mother and so she didn’t care for me. Instead she spent most of her time telling me what a waste of space I was. Eventually I believed it. I found the best way through life was to be as small and insignificant as possible.” The words come out of me in a rush. “I’ve never told anyone that before.” I add as Fyn stays silent.

“Nobody,” his voice is a low growl. “Nobody, human, Gryn, Mochi or Kijg will ever consider my mate to be insignificant. You are the most perfect, bravest and beautiful creature I’ve ever encountered. You are not insignificant.” His gaze is so intense I almost want to look away. But I can’t. I feel his fierceness like a spear of fire down my spine and it makes me feel strong.

And something else. Loved. A sensation that’s weird and wonderful at the same time because I’ve never felt it before.

“Thank you.” I return his kiss because I want more of him, more of his life force, his electricity, more of everything. Fyn’s hands slide under me and as the kiss deepens. His hard lengths press up against my thigh, and I can’t help but giggle as he kisses his way over my stomach and descends down towards my soaking pussy.

Looks like it’s going to be a long night, but not because I’ll spend it wondering where he is. Fyn is back and he’s fully intending making up for lost time.

I'm not sure what drew me out of my deep sleep, but something isn't right. There's a pressure on my chest and pain in my shoulders. I open my eyes to a dark, winged shape looming over me. It pins me to the bed as it lets out a low, menacing growl.

My breath hitches in my chest. Why would there be another Gryn warrior here, one that would risk his own life to do harm to mine?

"Fyn?" I hiss out, hoping he's nearby.

The growling increases as does the pain in my shoulders. This Gryn has his claws sunk into my flesh and I can feel my hot blood running. I let out a cry of pain.

"Fyn! Help!"

The Gryn thrusts his head at me and into the low light. It is Fyn. His eyes almost black and his sharp teeth bared in a rictus grin that drips blood onto my chest. His mouth smeared with red.

"Fyn." I whisper, half paralyzed by the horror above me. "Fyn, my darling. It's me, Lucy."

He snarls, dropping his head to sniff at my jugular, his roughened tongue sweeping over my pulse and the deep growl continuing to roll through his chest. His sharp teeth graze my skin.

"Fyn, please..." I gasp, not daring to struggle against him. He's far too strong and his claws are buried in my shoulders.

My mind is blank. He is going to rip my throat out. He wants blood. He wants violence. He wants a kill. In a flash it comes to me out of my panic, and I reach up as slowly as I can to touch his wings. The feathers are hard, slicked back, but I run my fingers through them and begin to hum my favorite song, trying to make my thoughts as calm as possible.

Trying to get through whatever it is that has a hold on him. I see a chink of light as I continue to stroke his wing. Fyn is still there, underneath this dark monster that wants nothing but death. Against every atom of my being, I close my eyes and try to reach him. He wants to be with me, his conscious mind desperate to reassert itself over the thing that has entered him. I reach out, curling the tendrils of my thoughts around his, gently, carefully grasping for the Fyn that I know.

The proud warrior that carried me away to his nest, to pleasure and to mate. To worship and adore.

“Lucy?” The voice is gravelly, almost as if unused. The entity, the program that had taken my Fyn is receding, and he is coming back to me.

“Shhhh.” I run a trembling hand over his face. The dark eyes have returned to their normal blue, and he looks terrified. “You were somewhere else, you’re back now.”

His eyes close, and he slumps next to me, claws retracting. My shoulders burn where they have broken the skin. I shuffle out from underneath him, grabbing a piece of clean cloth to stem the blood.

When I look in the mirror, I have a fine set of puncture marks that run over my shoulder and collarbone like a necklace of terrible jewels.

Fyn snores softly behind me, flat out and without a care on Ustokos. I let out a shaky breath and put my hand protectively over my stomach.

He’s everything I wanted, everything I longed for.

But he’s a killer, and he just tried to kill me. My injuries throb, and I attempt to keep the tears under control as I creep back beside him, because I’ve no other option.

Fyn is part of my life, whatever he may be.

FYN



I'm not keen on the metallic taste in my mouth. Smacking my lips, I stretch out my limbs and wings, reaching for my *eregri*.

“Hey.” She says and I open my eyes. She’s fully dressed and sitting across from me on the smallest chair I’ve ever seen. “How did you sleep?”

“I—” I’m not sure how to answer that. “Okay, better now I’m awake next to you, my *eregri*.” I reach out for her, but she moves just out of my way.

The feeling of calm that sweeps through me at her presence is unexpected but welcome. I’m not sure I’ve felt as good or as sated as I do in this moment.

“Do you know anything about that?” Lucy points behind us to the small area at the rear of her caravan that appears to contain a food preparation area and some sort of cleansing facilities.

I roll over to see where she is pointing. In the very center of the floor is a large, bloody maraha hindquarter. It takes up most of the space. The flesh seems to have been torn from the carcass and some of it is missing. The limb sits in a dark pool of blood that is slowly congealing.

I look down at my hands. They are covered in dark blood. So is my torso. The taste in my mouth becomes familiar.

The thing is I can’t remember the last time I ate anything raw.

Or maybe I can. Horrific images fill my mind, sounds and smells I don't want to remember crowd in, and the pain is excruciating. I'm vaguely aware of falling to my knees, my head clutched in my hands. There are screams that may be mine.

"Fyn? Fyn? It's okay. Concentrate on me, on my voice." Lucy is humming that beautiful tune and I am wrapped around her like a youngling.

"What did I do?" I look up at her.

"I'm not sure, my darling. I'm sure we can sort it out. Don't worry." She pulls me into her ripe, warm body and her incredible scent fills my nostrils, the smell of her skin, mingled with something else.

I place my face into her body and inhale deeply. My mind settles, and I can feel her thoughts, gentle pinks and blues as she rocks me and sings.

"Lucy!" The door to her caravan flies open, and the Mochi female from yesterday is standing in the doorway. I'm on my feet immediately, tucking my mate behind me and opening my wings at this intruder.

"Jesus, Fyn!" Lucy pushes past me, shoving a pair of trousers at my crotch. I look down. Naked in front of a Mochi female. Again.

"Sorry, Lucy."

"Are you okay?" The Mochi asks Lucy, as I turn to pull on my pants. "There's been an attack in the trading post and—" She falls silent and as I look back at them, I see she has spotted the dismembered piece of maraha.

Both females look at me.

"Midnight snack?" I suggest.

"You don't do funny, Fyn." Lucy says, pulling at the neckline of her top.

"I don't know what happened." I rub at the back of my neck, acutely aware of the fact I seem to be soaked in blood.

“He’s telling the truth, Jesic.” Lucy addresses the Mochi female. “Fyn had a bad dream last night which woke me up. It’s possible that he might have sleepwalked after I fell asleep again.”

Jesic grabs Lucy by her upper arms and causing me to growl involuntarily. “Are you safe?” She looks at me. “With him?”

“I trust Fyn with my life. He didn’t do anything, I would know.”

My head is pounding. I didn’t hurt anyone, I don’t think. But the piece of maraha says otherwise. The pain in my head is making it hard to think straight.

“I don’t know, Lucy.” I struggle out. “I don’t know what happened, or why this,” I gesture to the body parts that litter her tiny caravan, “is here.”

“It’s not just the maraha. A Kijg female was attacked last night too. Claw marks on her body.” Jesic says, eyeing me warily. “The one from the pools.” She adds, starting to tuck Lucy behind her.

“It wasn’t Fyn!” Lucy pushes her to one side and is in front of me, hand on my chest, her brilliant green eyes staring into mine. “It wasn’t, was it?” She half-whispers to me.

I shake my head, but the pain makes me wince. Her hand claws against my chest and her concern slices through me like a knife.

“You should go,” Jesic is looking at the mangled maraha again. “Everyone knows there was a rogue Gryn warrior here yesterday. The Gryn do not travel alone.” She turns her amber gaze on me. “There will be questions, retribution.”

She doesn’t say this as a threat, but I growl anyway. “I might not remember doing that.” I point at the maraha, “But I didn’t hurt the Kijg. She meant nothing to me, and Gryn don’t attack for no reason.”

“But Gryn can kill.” Jesic’s voice is low. “That’s what you’re for.” She lifts her lips, exposing her sharp double teeth. “I’m not leaving Lucy with you.”

“My mate will be by my side if we leave here. You will not stop me.” I take a step towards Jesic as she takes a step towards me.

“Woah! Hold up!” Lucy moves in between us, hands outstretched. She looks up at me.

“I said I believed you didn’t hurt anyone, and I meant it, so stop being an angry alpha arsehole.” Her entire gorgeous tiny body is vibrating with anger and fear. I have no desire to cause her any pain, any more than I already have, so, with a snort of annoyance, I back away from the Mochi.

“Jesic, I’m safe with Fyn. Like he says, I’m his mate, and I’m carrying his child. I really appreciate everything you’ve done for me, you know I do, but my place is with him and back at the lair. They have a doctor who has already overseen the birth of one Gryn/human hybrid, and it makes sense for me to go back.”

Jesic whimpers and embraces my mate, whispering in her ear something I can’t quite catch, given that my headache is causing a loud rushing sound in my ears. I close my eyes and find I’m off balance.

“Fyn!” Lucy cries out as I drop to a knee. Her arms are around me and her soft scent fills my nostrils.

“I’m fine. Get what you need, and we’ll go.” My voice is gruff and she immediately recoils, leaving me empty.

Lucy grabs a bag and begins to stuff it with items of clothing and food, while neatly sidestepping the bits of maraha.

“Here, Gryn.” Jesic shoves a container of water at me along with a cloth. “You’d better clean yourself up and try to look like you didn’t perform a massacre last night.” This time her mouth is hitched in a tight smile.

I dampen the cloth with the water and do my best to wipe myself down. My claws are caked in dried maraha blood and I’m going to need a bath to do any real justice to my feathers which are dirty as well as tattered. By the time I’m finished,

Lucy has a bulging bag, and she's pulling on her coat and boots.

"I suggest you take the back route out of the trading post," Jesic says, embracing my mate once again. "I'll do what I can to put the others off and clean this place up."

"Don't put yourself in danger, Jesic." Lucy says, her eyes shining with unshed water.

"I'd do anything for my little kitten, you know that." Jesic rubs the side of her head against my mate's cheek, and I can scent her marking. "Take care of her, and your young, or I will find you and I will hurt you." She fires at me fiercely.

"Of that you can have no doubt." I reply, taking Lucy's hand. We step out into the early dawn light. The air smells of metal and burning, causing yet another bolt of pain to sear behind my eyes.

I just have to get my mate and myself to safety. Then we can work out exactly what's going on, and I can prove to her that fate has chosen correctly.

That she belongs to me.

LUCY



Fyn's hand is comfortingly warm in mine as we quickly and quietly pick our way out of the trading post and into the derelict town that borders the safe area. With my big warrior by my side, I feel safe, even if my mind has yet to completely catch up with the events of yesterday and this morning.

“How far are we from the lair?” I ask Fyn. We came here by a meandering route, our caravans drawn by tame maraha bulls. Traveling made me sick, so I spent most of my time trying to hold onto my stomach, with my head buried in a pile of furs.

“We're at the borderlands.” Fyn says, on high alert. “Not a good place and a long way from the lair.”

My breath stutters as I hear sounds behind us. Fyn grasps me around the waist and pulls me behind a crumbling wall, his lips descending onto mine and I'm lost in his kiss. Despite everything that has happened, my big, growly, angry alien makes my lady parts tingle and throb.

He releases me, and the look in his eyes is one of passion and confusion.

“My *eregri*,” he sighs.

My heart does a funny squeeze in my chest. I want everything to be alright. I want it so much it physically hurts. I let Fyn get away from me once, and I can't let that happen again.

“What are we going to do?”

“I can fly you some of the way, but it’ll take us a couple of days. My feathers aren’t in a great condition.” He admits, hanging his head a little and looking like a youngster.

“Let’s get away from the trading post. I brought my imping equipment, and I can take a look. Is that okay?” I also think we should also talk about the body parts in my caravan this morning, but the strain on Fyn circles in my mind like a dark red cloud. He doesn’t understand it either.

“Not sure there’s much you can do. Proto seemed to be doing its best to damage me as much as it could. At least I’m due to shed soon.” As Fyn talks, all of the feathers on the shoulders of his wings begin to prick up and he suddenly shakes himself hard, like a dog, each feather twirling back into place.

Once he’s finished, he looks rather shellshocked.

“Proto-?” He shakes his head.

“Haven’t you roused before?” I ask.

“Roused?”

“Yes, all your feathers shifting like that? Doesn’t it feel better?”

Fyn rolls his shoulders and shakes his wings. “Yes, I suppose it does.”

“My falcons used to always do that before they flew. It settled them.”

“Never happened before. Think I might have seen other Gryn doing it.” Fyn says as we begin to pick our way through the blasted ruins again.

He seems to have closed his mind down to me and, even though the whole thoughtbond thing is new to me, I’m annoyed and disappointed he doesn’t want to let me in, despite considering me his fated mate.

We make reasonable progress over the next hour or so and put a decent distance between us and the trading post.

Eventually Fyn locates a building that is less damaged than the rest on the outskirts of the destroyed town.

“You should rest for a while, my *eregri*. You need to have something to eat, too.” He lifts the bag from his shoulder as I set about cleaning off something that might have once been a bench.

“Am I really your *eregri*?” I ask as we chew on some strips of dried maraha.

“You are my fated mate, my boundless flight.” Fyn replies absently, staring out over the wasteland that sits beyond the town.

“What does that mean?”

Fyn blinks his azure eyes. “I’m not sure. I just know that’s what you are to me.”

“When I was traveling with the Mochi, all I could think about was you. Now you’re here, I’m not sure what to think.”

I don’t even see him move, but I’m caged in his arms, my rounded stomach pressing up against his rock hard abs.

“You are mine, Lucy. Mine.” His eyes glow with something that isn’t quite Fyn, but is him at the same time. “I can’t explain it, I don’t have to explain it. I have filled your belly with young, and I will do it over and over again.”

I really shouldn’t be turned on by his words, but to be desired in this way, it calls to my tiny soul. Little mouse Lucy and her enormous alien predator. It’s how I always felt with a killer on my fist. Alive.

Fyn traces an unsheathed claw down my cheek and onto my neck. His breath is hot on my skin, and I’m reminded of last night, except this time, all I see in his eyes is lust and want. His claw trails lower, flicking apart my coat in order to delve further.

“*Eregri*?” His voice shakes with emotion. He is staring down at me with horror.

And I remember the claw wounds.

“It’s nothing, Fyn.” I pull at my coat, trying to hide the marks from him. He bats my hands aside.

“Did I- did I do that? To you?” His voice is hoarse.

“What did this wasn’t you. Once we get to the lair, we can sort it all out.” I gabble. Fyn continues to stare at my neck. I put my hand on his face and lift it until he’s looking into mine. “We can sort it out. That wasn’t you, I know it.”

He leans into my touch for an instant, his beautiful eyes closing.

“No.” His voice is so quiet I’m not entirely sure what I heard. “Jesic was right, you’re not safe around me.”

I scramble back from him, out from under his warm wings and warmer body.

“Well it’s too late now. We can’t go back, and I’m not leaving you. I’m a damn sight safer with you than I am out there on my own.” I begin to dig in my bag. “So you’d better let me look at your feathers, and we can get on.”

If I don’t do something, I know my world will collapse. I’m good at fixing things. I’m good at being practical. But my heart is too fragile to consider Fyn leaving me, not now. I’d only just begun to stand on my feet, to make decision without hearing my aunt’s voice in my head telling me what a waste of space I was. But now there’s a new voice in my head. It’s the one telling me that he is a dangerous predator. It wars with the one telling me that I have to fight for him, and for the new life that grows within me.

I can’t lose my dark angel. The electricity that passes between us, my visceral response to his touch, it’s more than special. It is as if we were meant to be. Fyn knows I’m his fated mate. But what happens if I find I’ve fallen for him, and I can’t have him?

I know I couldn’t survive that, any more than I could survive without him.

FYN



I stare at my *eregri*'s back as she delves into her bag. I hurt her. The ring of puncture wounds on her glorious creamy skin are red and livid. She didn't tell me what I had done, and now I want to kill something. To inflict violence on something to make me feel better.

Gryn warriors revere females. From my hazy childhood I remember how females were treated in the camps. Mated pairs caring for each other, preening and always together. A wave of anguish floods over me when I recall how my mother was when my father was taken from her. Not long after, she was taken from me, too.

And after that. Only pain.

"My wings will survive for a few hours more without your attention." I say gruffly. "We need to cross this wasteland before nightfall. There are some caves where we can find shelter, you can attend to me then."

"Oh. Okay." Lucy tucks something back into her bag and closes it up as she stands, hesitating for an instant, and then she turns towards me.

She really is quite pregnant.

And completely beautiful. How could I possibly hurt something as fine as her? My heart rattles against my chest, pounding at my behavior, at what I did when I wasn't...there. I have to find a way of making this better, or else I will have no option. I cannot put her in danger and our journey is full of danger, without adding whatever it is that caused me to injure

her. If we can get close enough to the lair, I can try and fall on Jyr's mercy and request he takes in my mate and my young.

Even if I have to leave her there, banished to the wastelands as is befitting a Gryn warrior that has abandoned his kind.

"Come." I beckon her to me, using the bag that she carries as a sling, I fold her ripe body to my chest. Her scent is overwhelming and calming. "Are you ready, my *eregri*? I will be as gentle as I can." I don't wait for her response, knowing we can't waste any more time, I launch myself into the air as she squeaks with alarm and my cocks jerk awake at the sound.

She is light, despite the child she carries within and, even with my damaged feathers, I'm easily able to carry her up until I'm able to set my wings and fly with the minimum of effort, catching the winds that travel in the direction of the lair.

"Want to open your eyes?" I say into her ear. She's clutched to my chest, eyes screwed shut and I can taste the beat of her heart down the thoughtbond.

Lucy opens first one eye, hesitantly, then the other, staring up at me, her green gaze intense. It's my turn to calm her. To let her know she can trust me. That I won't hurt her again. I fill my mind with the only thought that has ever brought me peace before I met her. My mother. I can no longer remember her face, but I do remember her love, and it's this I give to my *eregri*. A soft smile plays over her lips and her eyes do not leave mine, not for an instant.

"That's beautiful, Fyn." Her words echo in my head, even as they are carried away on the wind. "That is the most beautiful thing anyone has ever given to me." She snuggles herself against my chest and relaxes completely.

I can't let her trust me. Not until I work out what happened at the trading post.

We fly on as the light begins to fade, and my Lucy dozes in my arms. By rights I should be tiring by now, but I put it down to having my *eregri* tucked against me that my flight remains strong, and I know I'll make our next stop. If all of our

progress is as good as today, we could be back at the lair within three turns. The only reason it took me so long to find Lucy was that the Mochi were unforthcoming with information, sending me on various chases and making me work for them for far longer than was necessary.

I know that Lucy valued Jesic, but I'm not sure I'll ever want to see another Mochi.

"We're here, my sweet mate." I drop into a stoop to lose height, causing her to let out a short scream and for me to laugh as our hearts beat as one.

We land, just outside the cave complex, and I lower her to the ground.

"Fyn!" She slaps my chest. "That was completely unnecessary! I am pregnant, if you hadn't already noticed!" She admonishes me, her eyes bright.

"I have noticed." I run my hands over her rounded stomach, evidence of our mating that is unmistakable and very arousing.

She hums with desire, then bats my hands away, attempting to maintain her air of annoyance. With one final defiant look at me, she flicks her hair over her shoulder and walks away from me towards the caves. She is undeniably tempting. A delicious morsel I want to eat.

Huffing to myself at my strange thoughts I hurry after her.

"Wait." I put my arm in front of her, "I need to check it's safe before we go in."

"Safe? What do you think will be in there?" She asks, incredulous. "I've got the biggest predator on this planet right here next to me." She adds.

"Is that all I am to you? A predator?"

"No," she dips her gaze from mine. "You're more than that. But it's complicated, Fyn. You know that." She runs a hand over her stomach. "We don't even know each other. I don't know what you are."

Her concerns resonate down the thoughtbond. A familiar spike of anger flows through me. Not at her, but frustration at myself for failing, yet again, to come up to scratch.

Lucy places her hand on my arm, drawing me out of my brooding.

“We’ve got time to get to know each other.” She pats her abdomen and laughs. The sound makes my heart sing. “Not a lot of time, but some.”

I wish I could believe her. But with darkness falling, there’s something else that’s in my head, and it’s not my *eregri*. I scent the air coming out of the cave. It’s flavored with the smell of the hot water that bubbles up from under the surface of Ustokos, and nothing else. A further inhale has my nostrils full of my mate, and she is something I cannot ignore.

“It’s safe. We can get comfortable, and you can tell me about your planet.” I usher her forward, and she digs in her bag, pulling out a small bioluminescent plant that emits a soft glow.

I can see as well in the dark as the light, despite what other Gryn say about the color of my eyes, but my mate obviously cannot. She walks forward carefully, and I wrap my arm around her waist. Once we’re inside the system, there are a number of chambers lit by naturally growing plants.

“Oh,” she makes a sweet sound. “It’s pretty!” Her pleasure runs through my head, and I never want to be parted from her. “Are there any pools in here? I could do with a wash and so could you.”

I snort out a breath. “Thanks.”

“You love a bath. That’s one thing I know about you.” Her smile is genuine, and I have a very sudden urge to find a pool for us both.

It wasn’t hard to find a pool that was large enough. Lucy insisted on cleaning me up first, her preening nearly sending

me to oblivion. She also wouldn't cleanse until she had fixed my bent and snapped feathers. Once I was repaired, she stripped and lowered her naked form into the pool, her glorious body making my cocks wake instantly.

"Not yet." She wags her finger at me. "I want to enjoy this, it's been a long day." She sinks under the surface and comes back up, her long flame colored hair plastered to her head. She comes over to lean against the side of the pool, in between my legs dangling in the water, her back to me. I run my hand over her shoulders. "That's good."

"Not as good as when you preen me."

"You like that?"

"You know I do. It's one of the things you do best of all."

"Best of all?" Her tone is full of mirth, her eyes dancing. "I forgot—" She hesitates.

"You forgot what?" I prompt her, luxuriating in her happiness, something I've had so little of.

"I forgot I was your first." She laughs softly, and the sound warms my soul. "Gryn are sensual males, aren't you?"

"I don't know." I say, truthfully. "I like being with you, does that make me sensual?" Lucy, climbs out of the water, wrapping herself in a drying cloth and sitting on the furs I have prepared. I wriggle myself until I have my head in her lap and she can reach my wings. "Being with you makes everything better."

Lucy runs a hand over my cheek. "You're adorable when you're not being angry Fyn." She says, following up her comment by finding a knot in my feathers that has me seeing stars of delight.

"I'm not angry."

"You so are. All the time. The first time you spoke to me it was to shout at me."

"Is that what you thought?"

Lucy sighs. “I’m no good at reading people, or Gryn. My aunt was always angry, and I got used to hiding away. The less time I spent around people, the better. That’s why I ended up becoming a falconer. Birds of prey are simple creatures. It’s all action and reaction. No need to read emotion.”

I close my eyes and allow my face to press into the swell of her stomach.

“I find being around other Gryn hard too. I like to get on with things, not think too much about what I have to say. I always say the wrong thing.”

“But you have respect. The other warriors look up to you.” Lucy combs through my flight feathers, checking on her handiwork.

“They do?” I shift position to look at her. “I thought they did what I said because I was Command.”

She laughs. “Believe me, Fyn. Believe a little mouse who never had anyone give her a second glance. Your warriors look to you because you are a strong and powerful Gryn, not because of some title.”

Her assurance feeds down the thoughtbond. It would be calming, if it wasn’t for the fact that I woke up covered in blood this morning with half a maraha carcass clinging to me.

LUCY



“**W**hat’s a mouse?” Fyn asks, nestled in my lap. He smells of warm cat in the sun and the half-smile that lights up his handsome face as I work at his feathers is balm after the day we’ve just had.

“It’s a small rodent that’s scared of everything because everything wants to eat it.”

“I like to eat you, but I don’t think that makes you a mouse.” Fyn opens one eye, his lips hitched up enough to show a sharp canine. I give him a slap on his leathery shoulder, and he mock winces. “You are my mate, and my mate is not a mouse.”

“I had no idea it worked like that.” I smile at him. “If you say so.” He is adorable in his confidence.

“I do say so. You’re a clever and resourceful female.” He hums in pleasure as I comb his feathers.

“You’re only saying that to get more preening.” I laugh.

Fyn joins in, a delicious rumbling in his chest. “Do you blame me when you’re so good at it?”

I feel his exhaustion as a deep blue cloud. He’s caught between pleasure and sleep. “When I was captured, all I thought of was you.”

“When you were captured, all I thought of was you.” I shift so I can lean down to kiss his cheek. His eyes are half-closed. “My gorgeous alien angel.”

“I dream of you, my sweet *eregri*.” He wraps strong arms around me, flopping a half-dried wing over our legs. “Proto gave me bad dreams.”

My heart squeezes at his words.

“It was bad, wasn’t it?” The last thing I want is for Fyn to have to relive what happened to him, but I want to take some of the burden that has a hold of him.

Not just from his most recent capture, but from everything that has gone before. It weighs on him like a cloak of lead.

“You can tell?” His voice is suddenly tired.

“On my planet, when two humans get together, they try to work like a team, sharing both the good and the bad. I want to share with you, Fyn.” I rest my head on his strong chest. He’s a huge contradiction. Angry, alpha, difficult, and yet a bundle of fears, pain and raw nerves.

“There was more torture. More killing, I think. I can’t remember. Proto vrexed with my head, again.” Fyn grinds out. “I hate it. I hate not knowing.” He lifts his head and gently strokes my wet hair away from my face. “I hate being a danger to you and our youngling.”

“I’m not in danger, not from you.” I get closer to him. “All I could think about since I left the lair was you, Fyn. You kept me going, through my early pregnancy. I had to believe you were out there somewhere. That’s one of the reasons I left. I couldn’t stay still. I couldn’t not be looking for you.” The words come tumbling out, my reasons, my guilt. “I’ve never felt like this about anyone but you. I’ve never dared and I’m not giving up on you. Not now, not in the future.”

Fyn takes in a shuddering breath.

“I thought I’d lost you. I turned against Jyr. He saved me from Proto. He believed in me, gave me Command. His trust and respect meant everything to me, and I threw it all away because I couldn’t admit to myself that I needed help. I have nothing left but you, my *eregri*. I cannot lose you again.”

I can’t breathe. I can’t even think. The overwhelming flood of emotion from the warrior that became my shadow fills my

mind, and I'm crying without even thinking.

If I thought I was worthless, it was because others told me I was. Fyn made himself believe he was nothing all on his own.

"I'm sorry, my *eregri* to cause you such pain." Fyn swipes a clawed thumb over my wet cheek. "I never wanted to hurt you."

I capture his hand in mine. "You didn't hurt me. You can't hurt me unless you leave me again. I've spent my entire life trying not to be noticed, so I didn't get close to anyone. If I let you in, it has to be on my terms."

His mind resonates with everything that the Gryn hold in their hearts about their mates. Some of which he knows and some that is hidden, even from him. It is at once fascinating and terrifying that I can have this incredible connection with a being as powerful as Fyn.

"You can see," he whispers, nuzzling his head into my neck. "You know." It's a statement of fact. "Please be mine, Lucy. My fated mate, my *eregri*, my boundless flight."

All at once my thoughts are swept into the air, riding on the wind and thermals, only instead of watching my falcons wait on above me, I'm up there with them, with Fyn, and it's the best feeling, of flight, of feathers and of being free. Our minds entwined, we fall asleep in each other's arms.

This time, I know exactly what woke me. There's no Fyn being my muscular pillow, I'm alone on the soft moss.

But there's something else in the cave with me. Something watching.

Something waiting.

The noise that reverberates around the walls is deeply unpleasant as the something stalks out of the shadows. A

huge-winged predator, face twisted, eyes black and claws unsheathed.

My bladder pulses with the fear that this apparition instills in me. The naked creature that is not Fyn halts and scents the air. His low growl tells me exactly what I need to know.

“Fyn? My mate? It’s me, it’s Lucy.” I do not move, not at all.

I don’t want to engage his prey drive. In this form, if he’s anything like the goshawks I used to handle, one wrong move, and I’ll be on the receiving end of those viciously long black claws. They react to movement instantaneously, ensuring their prey is caught, ensnared, and killed.

And I’m not going to be his prey.

His dark eyes track over me as he takes a step forward. God! He is huge! Muscles ripple under his skin that I’m sure were not there earlier. He is a veritable powerhouse of a warrior and one who would consider me a small snack.

There’s something alien beautiful about him, and even as he advances towards me, a frisson of arousal runs over my skin. I might be about to die, but Fyn is still utterly gorgeous, completely handsome, and a delicious monster.

This really isn’t the way I should be going to meet my maker, with my thighs slippery and my clit pulsing.

Fyn halts again in his stalk towards me, he tests the air and this time, instead of a growl, there is a low groan.

“I’m your *eregri*,” I say, softly. “Your mate, remember?”

“No mate.” The words are hardly recognizable through fangs that appear to have grown longer. “Mate not allowed.” He closes his eyes and lifts his head. “But—” He moans. “Scent of mate.” His eyes flash open, fixed on me. “Need to mate.” This is a growl. Intentional and direct. His cocks are fully erect, his eyes still dark.

This situation is not getting any better. I’m incredibly turned on by Fyn, but I’d be taking advantage of him in this state.

That is absolutely not what he is thinking, if he's thinking at all. His enhanced form towers over me, cocks weeping precum, and he slams his hands on his hips, thrusting himself at me.

“What do you want?” It comes out as a hoarse whisper, because I know exactly what I want, and it's the monstrous Gryn in front of me. I want him more than anything.

“Mate.” He opens his wings wide and reaches for me with hands that are more claw than finger.

I close my eyes, expecting him to sink those vicious appendages into my soft, exposed flesh, but instead strong hands grip me, pulling me against an impossibly hard, muscular body. Fyn's breath is hot as he runs his mouth and nose over my hair. I stare into a pair of eyes that are at once dark with a lightness within. It gives me hope that he is still there, somewhere.

“Do you want to mate me?”

I try to keep my tone even and my body still as he runs his hand over my breasts, my stomach and dips between my legs to find me wet, soaking wet. This time the growl that wracks his massive form is one of pure lust. Maybe I'm not taking advantage at all.

“Female.” The word is an order and desire all in one.

With an incredible ease, he flips me onto my hands and knees. His enormous hands grasp at my hips, and I know he's not going to be gentle.

And I don't want him to be. Because whatever else Fyn is, he is this feral, primal being at his heart, and I wouldn't want him any other way.

FYN



The terrible metallic taste is back when I open my eyes. Lucy slumbers comfortably at my side, warm and sweetly scented. She smells of her, all warm rain and good dirt, along with something else. The scent of mating.

I don't recall mating with her. But the only scent on her is mine and, as I study her delicate form, I see large, red welts that cross her thighs. Livid marks that correspond to only one thing. My claws.

My breath comes in short, sharp shudders. I have injured her again, and yet she sleeps next to me as if nothing has happened.

"Lucy?" I shake her shoulder.

"Hey, Fyn." She uncurls, one arm over her rounded stomach, she stretches out languidly, and I can see more marks on her creamy white skin.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, my *eregri*." I gasp out as I see what I have done to her.

"What's wrong?" She has captured my cheek in her tiny hand, one that couldn't stop me when I shredded her.

"I'll have to go to the lair on my own, bring the others back so you'll be safe." I rip myself away from her touch, something I no longer deserve, and pull on my pants.

"Wait!" Lucy is on her feet, and I manage, just, not to groan at how beautiful her naked body is, regardless of the marks that cover her. "Fyn, no, it's not what it looks like."

“What isn’t?” I look away from her, as much as I adore her, I can’t continue to look at what I did.

Then soft, strong hands are on my cheeks, turning my face to hers, her rounded form pressed against me and it’s glorious. The thoughtbond resonates, and my mind fills with her pleasure and of mine.

It’s harsh, guttural pleasure on my part. I almost don’t recognize it. I don’t recognize myself, but my cocks throb with the reminder of what we did to each other last night.

“I couldn’t sheath my claws.” I stutter out, staring at my hands until she wrenches my face back to hers. “I wanted you.”

“That’s right, Fyn. You wanted me, and I wanted you. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“But I hurt you, last night and before.” I can’t let her make excuses for me. “I’m not safe for you to be around, not whilst you carry my young. Not at all.” My heart thunders, blood boiling at my temples. “I have to go, I have to get help.”

“No!” Her voice rolls around the cave. “I don’t want you to go. You have to stay. I’m not losing you again. My heart can’t take it.” Her eyes shine a brilliant green, the color of the deepest healing pools at the lair. She vibrates with her refusal. “You have to stay with me. Promise me.”

The bond opens, like a flower I once saw bloom for only one hour. Petal after petal peels away and underneath is the sweetest, the most perfect and the only center. My *eregri*. Now I know what it means. My fated one, my whole. My everything.

My love.

“I promise.” I rest my forehead against hers. She’s just asked me to do the one thing I’m not sure I can promise, but I gave it to her anyway. “A Gryn’s word is his bond. I will not leave you.”

“You’d better not.” Lucy turns away from me and gathers up her clothing, pulling it on. “We can fix this. I know we can, so there’s no need to go running away from it.”

I desperately want to believe her. But survival is just that. If I know anything from the thoughtbond we shared, I know that there was fear, deep down. I can't control whatever it is that I become. I didn't hurt her this time, but next time could be different. She doesn't want to push me away and perhaps she should.

I don't deserve a mate, not one like her. I'm a broken thing that doesn't deserve her affection.

Except she stays with me. She hasn't rejected me, even though she's seen what I become.

Lucy finds some dried maraha in her bag and offers it to me as she takes a bite of a piece and chews thoughtfully. I want to snatch the food from her hand and devour it. The emotion takes me by surprise, and I have to hold myself steady as I gently take it, turning away so I can gobble it down.

"Do you think we'll reach the lair today?" She asks, keeping her voice even.

"Maybe. I think we can, now you've fixed me up." I extend a wing and check her work. It's as if my feathers were never damaged. I want to sweep her into my arms and cover her in human kisses.

But until I know what I am, I can't risk getting close to her again.

LUCY



Fyn loops the bag around his neck and under his arm. In daylight I have the opportunity to compare him with the thing that I indulged and enjoyed last night. He is bigger, bulkier than I remember from the lair, but whether he's so different from the creature that invaded my body last night, I'm not so sure.

His concern at what he did to me and his lack of memory is clear in the swirl of gray that fills the thoughtbond. I think of all the women I've heard wonder out loud at what their husband or boyfriend is thinking. I know what Fyn thinks and feels, and it's incredibly hard to deal with alongside my own emotions. All I want to do is calm him, make it right between us. To be able to reach the Fyn that nestles in my lap, all sleepy as I preen his wings.

Instead I get dark clouds and anger which I'm ill-equipped to deal with, given that I'm rather pregnant with his child and my own emotions teeter on the edge most of the time.

I can only hope that with the help of the other Gryn once we get back to the lair, I can get my Fyn back. The one that followed me around and grumped at me. The one that made a nest for me and came apart when I kissed him.

All that time with the Mochi, I held onto the part of my heart that knew he would find me. Now my battered heart wants me to believe we can be together, that our love can mend anything.

Our love? Do I love this big predator? The one that can turn in an instant into a monster?

“Are you ready, my *eregri*?” He asks.

“Always.” I guess that’s a yes from my heart.

Fyn takes off, his huge wings rowing hard as he gains height, and I wrap my arms around him, my face pressed into his muscular chest. He holds me as if I weigh nothing, and we gain height easily. My body aches from what we did yesterday, and my core pulses at the memory. I feel Fyn stiffen against me.

“My mate.” He murmurs into my ear. *My delectable mate.* The words fill my head.

I’m turning him on and, given our current height and trajectory, I need to get myself under some sort of control.

“Sorry, Fyn.” I giggle onto his skin, and I’m rewarded by a happy feeling in my head.

He keeps up a demanding pace, using the winds to his best advantage and keeping his effort to a minimum. Despite that, he lands regularly to give me a break from my cramped position and, fortunately, to allow me to relieve myself.

In these times, Fyn is distant, but I can tell he’s holding himself back.

“Do you think we are having a male or a female?” He asks out of the blue as we rest up, eating some dried maraha. Fyn eyes my pregnancy.

“What would you like to have?”

“Not really thought about it.” He blows out a breath, his words are dismissive and cause a spike of anxiety in my veins.

Quicker than I can blink, distant Fyn has become snuggly Fyn. He’s wrapped around me like a cozy, feathery blanket.

“I did not mean to upset you, my *eregri*.” He withdraws himself from me as if he made a mistake, leaving only his hand on my belly. “I’d like a female.” He fixes his blue eyes on mine. I could drown in them and not care.

“And I’d like a male.” I snap a little. I know he’s mixed up right now, but while I can deal with the monster, the flipping of personalities is starting to grate on me.

“Maybe we can have both?” He gives me a hesitant smile. “Someday.”

Just like that, my heart turns into a puddle of goo. I put my hand over his.

“Maybe we can. Someday.”

We’ve not been in the air long after our last rest stop when Fyn closes up his wings and drops into a stoop towards the ground. The sudden movement causes my stomach to lurch. In no time we’re on the ground.

“What the fuck, Fyn?” I berate him.

“We have to get under cover.” He grabs my hand and tows me behind him as he races over the blasted remains of a number of buildings, heading for the only one that’s still partially standing.

“What do you mean?” I’m trying to look around at the same time as I’m trying not to fall over, given the roughness of the terrain.

“Chemical storm.” Fyn’s words chill me to my bones and in a brief glance up I see the clouds above our head. They are a sickly yellow, different to Ustakos’s usual pale gray.

I know what that means. I saw the burns on the mercs caught in something similar. Fyn decides we’re not going fast enough, and I’m scooped into his arms unceremoniously as he runs like a Gryn possessed as the telltale patter of rain reaches my ears.

Only this isn’t rain. It’s acid.

A drop lands on my hand that’s wrapped around his neck and the pain shocks me into exhaling all my breath. Fyn dives for the building and we’re inside as the acid begins to pound

down in earnest. He rapidly backs into the one area that looks fully intact, getting out of the spray of acid as it pours into the remains of the rest of the structure.

“Are you okay?” He asks, seeing my face twisted with pain.

“I got some on me.” I bring my hand down and show him. A red welt rises. The anguish that flits through him clutches at my stomach. “It’s okay, Fyn. I’ll survive. I just need to get some clean water on it.”

“You shouldn’t be hurt at all. If I’d just flown a bit faster.” He growls, letting me down.

I pull out the flask of water, from its weight there’s not much left and it doesn’t look like we’re going to be able to fill up with fresh.

“Are we far from the lair?” I ask, ignoring Fyn’s grump.

“Not too far. About an hour.” He replies, arms folded across his massive chest, he stares out into the raging storm. “May as well be back at the trading post.”

I pour a little of the water on my hand, hissing at the pain it causes. At the same time, Fyn lets out a yelp.

“Vrex it!” He’s batting at the ends of his long flight feathers that steam unpleasantly. Just behind him is a pool of the acid rain that’s made it’s way into our shelter.

“Don’t touch it!” It’s too late, his palms glow red. “Shit!” I pull him towards me and pour the remains of the water over them.

“We can’t stay here, my *eregri*.” Fyn looks up from his burned hands.

“We can’t go out in that!” The rain has mostly stopped but a tremendous wind has blown up, sending acid spray spiraling into the air. “We’re going to have to wait it out.”

“That could be days if it sticks here. These storms have a habit of staying in one place.” Fyn looks at the empty flask. “I’m going to go to the lair. Get help. They’ll have what I need to get you back safely and without further injury.”

His hands are already looking almost normal.

“What the-?”

“I have the ability to heal much faster than normal Gryn. Another thing Proto did to me.” Fyn says through gritted teeth. “I can risk the storm, but you can’t.”

“You said you wouldn’t leave me.” I push him back. “You promised.”

“I’m not leaving you. I’m getting help.” Fyn walks away from me. “There’s a difference.”

“If I’m without you, then there’s no difference.” My heart aches. “Let’s just wait a little longer, then we can go together.”

“No.” Fyn says with devastating finality. “I have to go.”

Before I have a chance to say anything, he’s in the air and flying away from me. Out of my sight, and the thoughtbond is severed. I sink onto the dusty floor, put my head in my hands.

He did the one thing I asked him not to do.

He left.

Having sworn myself hoarse at my stubborn, obtuse male, I try to make myself comfortable in the weird alien building. I’ve not been outside the lair much since we arrived and most of the city nearby is leveled ruins. This place is different. It looks like it was once very beautiful. The metalwork is fine and, although alien in its structure, it’s elegant in the way the parts entwine with each other. Almost organic.

I spend some time tracing my hands over the wall behind me until I realize that the organic entwining forms symbols of some kind, not like those I’ve seen Orvos scratching on tiny pieces of parchment. These are more even, more regular. They glitter as I touch them. They glow, it’s only brief, but for a second they are lit from within, then they wink out.

“Lucy?” I almost leap out of my skin at the voice.

“Fyn!” I spin around, but it’s not him. It’s Kyt.

“What are you doing here?” He asks me. “I thought you were with the Mochi.” He spots my bulging stomach and

swallows hard.

“I was, but Fyn found me, and we were coming back to the lair when there was a storm. He went to get help.”

“One of our patrols spotted a lone Gryn warrior flying towards the lair. That’s why I’m here.”

“You’ve not seen Fyn?” Fear grips me, icy fingers impaling my heart. “The storm?” My voice cracks.

“It’s moved on. Fyn’s not here with you?” Kyt asks, walking towards me.

“He should be with you.” I whisper.

A horrible scream rips through the air outside of the structure.

“Vrexing mercs!” Kyt unfurls his wings and is gone before I can get to my feet. I run after him, but I’m stopped by a deep, wide puddle of the acid rain, and I can’t get out.

“Kyt?” I call out. “What’s going on?” I can hear more voices and see the occasional flash of a feather.

“Female.” The growl is low, guttural. Feral.

Hunched above me on a twisted metal beam crouches the beast that was Fyn. His claws drip with blood that’s spread down his chest.

“Fyn.” I swallow down every instinct that wants me to run. “You’re here.”

“Mine.”

“Yes, I’m yours. Why don’t you come down?” I search for the thoughtbond. It’s hard because I want to close my eyes, and I dare not take them away from the monster above me.

With a thump he’s in front of me. Huge, dangerous and bloody. I suck in a breath as I catch his mind on the edge of mine. Fyn is there, only just. He’s angry, confused and frightened.

“It’s going to be okay.” I take a step towards him, putting my hand on his pectoral. “We can sort it all out. We can fix it.”

“Fix it.” He blinks and some blue returns to his dark, deadly eyes. “What have I done?”

“You vrexing nearly killed him, you piece of gak!” Another Gryn warrior slams into Fyn’s side, tearing him away from me.

Four other warriors pile in and Fyn, or what was Fyn starts to tear into them, vicious and bloody. Someone starts screaming.

It’s me. I’m screaming as strong arms hold me until I can’t scream anymore, and darkness claims me.

FYN



I come around somewhere dark. Somewhere I'm bound hand, foot and wing. Somewhere without my *eregri*. There's a foul taste on my tongue. and her thoughtbond is empty.

But not completely gone. She is distant instead.

I struggle against whatever it is that ties me. It might be dark, but my eyesight is excellent, like all the senior Gryn, and I think I'm somewhere in the lair. My skin and feathers itch, and I try to shake off the feeling that my head is full of fog.

"Lucy?" I call out. I know it's useless. But if she's anywhere close I need to find her. I need to know she's okay.

Once I know that, I can make arrangements to ensure she, and my youngling, are intact. Then I can leave the lair because she's only going to be safe if I'm not around.

Whatever it is I become, and this time I can feel the anger and destruction in my chest, she should never be around. She should never see it again. She's better off without me.

And the thought alone nearly brings about my destruction, my mind rebelling even as I know I must do what is right by my fated mate.

Because fate can be wrong. Lucy deserves better.

"He's awake." Orvos's voice has my head turning as a light appears. I think I'm in a back room of the surgery, but I can't be sure.

“Put him out again until we know what to do with him, he can’t be awake.” Kyt appears.

Both of them have grim looks on their faces, and Orvos advances towards me with a very large bottle of tranq in one hand.

“Wait,” my tongue doesn’t want to work but I manage to get the word out. “My mate?” I huff out a breath as if I’ve been drinking var beer all night and squirm against my bonds.

“Lucy?” Orvos queries.

“Yes, Lucy! My mate.” I want to roar, I want to rip his head off, but these stupid chains hold me down. The tranq circulating in my system holds me back.

“Tranq him, Orvos.” Kyt says, urgently. “He’s changing again.”

Orvos steps forward, sloshing the liquid onto a small sponge which he shoves under my nose as Kyt grabs my head from behind to stop me from shaking it. I hold my breath for as long as I can.

“Lucy will be fine. As will your young. She’s strong and brave.” He says, his dark eyes almost glowing. “Now will you inhale the vrexing tranq?” His voice is almost pleading.

I gasp as my body demands air and suck in the sickly scent. It swirls into my brain and as much as I have questions, demands and a desire to kill, it dissipates like a cloud and my world contracts until I can only see Orvos and Kyt, the pair of them staring down at me, their expressions full of concern.

“She’ll be waiting for you.” Orvos’s voice is hollow as he disappears down a long tunnel.

LUCY



I came to in a pair of strong arms and for an instant thought it was Fyn. Instead I looked up into the tense, handsome face of Kyt.

“Don’t worry little one. It’ll all be okay.” He tried to reassure me.

Except there was no Fyn.

Kyt brought me straight to Orvos, who raised his eyebrows at my pregnancy, but then spent some time fussing around me, ignoring my questions about Fyn until eventually he could stand it no longer.

“Where is Fyn?”

“He very nearly killed one of the young mercs and several enforcers are badly injured. It took six of them to subdue him. That Gryn that they brought back to the lair, it wasn’t Fyn. It was something that used to be him.” Orvos sighs. “Jyr is holding szent now to decide what to do with him.”

“He can’t control it, whatever it is, Orvos. You have to tell Jyr. We have to help him.”

The doctor pushes my hair over my shoulder, exposing my neck and the puncture marks that Fyn left.

“All Gryn should be able to control themselves around a female.” He says in a tone that brooks no disagreement.

I pull the fabric of my top up to cover the marks.

“Don’t judge him. He didn’t know it was me. I promise you he is Fyn, and he needs our help.”

Orvos sits down heavily next to me. “I’ve not seen anything like this before.” He runs his hand through his hair, his feathers pricking then settling back into place. “Fyn’s always been - different. But his last run in with Proto has clearly resulted in much more than just a capture. I wish he hadn’t left before I had a chance to properly examine him.”

“That’ll be my fault.” I lift my eyes to the ceiling, trying to stop the tears that form all too readily from falling. “I should have stayed in the lair.”

“You should.” Orvos replies and I look at him. His face is creased with concern as he places a hand on my stomach. “If you were with young, this was the best place for you.”

“Without Fyn, this was the worst place for me.” My words sound empty, especially with my mate’s life hanging in the balance. “I have to help him now.”

“That’s going to depend on Jyr.” Orvos hovers a hand over my stomach. “Your pregnancy will go a long way to helping Fyn.”

“I won’t let Jyr do anything to him.” I growl, my anger and my ferocity a surprise, not just to Orvos but to me as well. “I won’t. Fyn needs help, not punishment.”

“Maybe. I’ll speak to Jyr about it.” Orvos concedes, but I’m not sure he’s convinced, and my gut fills with ice at what awaits Fyn.

“Can I see him?” Orvos makes a concerned clucking sound that would be comical if I wasn’t so worried. “Please?”

Fyn lies on a ledge in the surgery, his wings limp over the edges. He looks at once tense and unable to move.

“What’s wrong with him? What did Jyr do?” I demand.

“I’ve been told to keep him tranquilized, and that’s the best thing for him. It’s taken a huge dose, but he should be out soon. If you want to speak to him, you’ll have to do it now. I know he’d like that. He’s been asking for you.” Orvos tries to give me an encouraging smile, but I know him and he’s worried.

One of the big Gryn guards standing next to him makes way for me.

“Hey,” I sink down on a chair next to the ledge and run my hand over Fyn’s hair, down into his feathers in the way he likes. “How are you?”

Fyn manages to lift his head looks at me with unfocused, heavy lidded eyes. “Feel like I fell in a vat of var beer.” He slurs with an un-Fyn like laugh. “I missed you.” He snuffles, wetly. “You’re my mate. My boundless flight.” The slur gets worse. “Where are we?”

“We’re back at the lair, like you wanted. Orvos is here. You’re safe now. We’re both safe.”

“The youngling?” His eyes flash into focus for an instant.

“She’s fine.” I pat my stomach and think reassuring thoughts.

The wet smile returns as his brilliant eyes close.

“My mate. Always.” He smacks his lips.

“Where is that vrexer?!” Jyr roars from across the other side of the surgery. “I’m going to rip his wings off!”

I’m not sure I’ve ever seen the Prime so angry. Orvos steps in front of him, but he slams the medic aside.

“Don’t you dare!” I almost look around to see who is standing up for Fyn, until I realize that it’s me. I’m out of my chair and standing between Jyr and my mate. “He’s sick. Can’t you see that?”

Jyr snorts a hot breath of anger. “Gryn do not attack their own. He’s only here and still alive because he has a mate and young on the way.” He looks at my stomach pointedly, his dark eyes flashing with his ire.

“You really think he wants to hurt other Gryn? Until now, what has he ever done to make you think he would be that way?” Jyr pauses, my words cutting through his anger at Fyn’s behavior. “He hates what he is and would do anything to be different. To be more like you, Jyr. Your praise, your understanding, it means everything to him.”

“Orvos says he put marks on you, yet you still protect him.” Jyr growls. “If he wanted my respect, he should have ensured he treated his mate well.”

“He didn’t know what he was doing!” I’m not going to let Jyr get away with using me as a reason to punish Fyn. “He can’t control what he is, and he hates it.” My hands have balled into fists, even as I continue to stand my ground against Jyr.

“It’s Proto. It made him like this.” Orvos says quietly. “Fyn’s most recent capture gave Proto the opportunity to fine tune its work. He’s been programmed to be like this, and the program is running.”

“Vrex it!” Jyr fires out. “Vrex the pair of you!” He stomps a foot.

“Prime.” Fyn comes to life, wings flailing, he bucks against his bonds as he attempts to get off the ledge. “Must protect my *eregri*.” He drops onto the floor, and I run towards him.

I’m not fast enough, Jyr reaches him first, towering over Fyn’s prone form.

“You vrexing idiot.” He says, staring down as Fyn attempts to remain awake in the presence of his Prime. His eyes roll in his head as he gasps for breath.

Jyr stoops, and for a second I truly believe he’s going to rip Fyn’s throat out. My heart stutters in my chest, and I’m ready to leap in front of Fyn, to give my life for his. Then Jyr scoops my great warrior up as if he weighs nothing, Fyn dangling in his arms.

“You vrexing idiot.” Jyr says, his voice quieter, a hint of familial love creeping in.

“M’sorry, Prime. I...” Fyn’s words tail away as the tranquilizer claims his senses, and he goes limp.

Jyr places him reverentially on the ledge, gently tucking his wings underneath him as I resume my spot in the chair, confident that Jyr isn’t going to kill my mate. Fyn’s face is handsome in sleep, the frown of worry smoothed out. He is the male who makes love to me with passion and desire. The male that rests against me while I preen him. The male he wants to be.

“How do we fix this?” Jyr demands of Orvos. “How do we fix him?”

“I want my mate back and our child needs a father who isn’t some sort of pre-programmed killing machine.” We both stare at the healer.

Orvos rubs at his chin, staring at the wall as silence descends, save for Fyn’s gentle snoring.

“We can fix this, can’t we?” I don’t want to sound plaintive, but the drugs that Orvos have given Fyn are affecting the thoughtbond, and I’m tired beyond belief. I yawn. “He only ever wanted to be a good warrior. He can still be a good warrior.” I look between the Prime and the Doctor. “I want my mate.”

“Are you sleepy, sweet one?” Orvos asks.

“Mhm.” I really want to close my eyes. It’s only because I’m still not sure I can trust Jyr not to hurt Fyn that I’m fighting to keep them open.

“You can’t tranq pregnant females, Orvos.” Jyr says, appalled.

“Lucy has not been tranquilized, Prime. It is their thoughtbond.” Orvos rubs his chin again as I climb onto the ledge next to Fyn, curling up against his flank. I don’t even care what they think. If they want him, they’ll have to pry me off him. “It’s incredibly strong, the strongest I’ve ever come across. Which makes me think that there may be a way to fix this after all.” Orvos says.

“And shows what we always knew, the mate bond is true, it only forms when it’s right.” Jyr replies as I let go of conscious thought.

FYN



Her pretty face waxes and wanes in front of me. I'm fighting the tranqs as hard as I can, but they are Orvos's finest and probably stronger than anything Proto ever gave me. Instead my vision sparkles with pretty colors, and I would give in, except the one thing that is live and flowing through me more than the tranq, the thoughtbond. It throbs with her concern.

She shouldn't be concerned for me. But she is and the strain on her little body is too much, especially while she is with young.

Another face appears beside her, that of Orvos, and I'd recoil if I had full control of my limbs.

"Here, you could do with sobering up." A horrible sharp scent invades my nostrils, and my head clears a little.

It doesn't help my movement. I still feel as if I'm tied down. But at least I can see that I'm in the Szent room. At the head of the table.

Which is strange. My place was at Jyr's right hand. I give my head a good shake, my memories are twisted and filled with love.

And death.

"Fyn." Jyr's strong voice makes me focus.

"Prime." I reply, attempting to salute him, or at the very least offer my wing. But I can't move. I'm bound to a chair. The other seniors are ranged around the room.

None of them look happy.

“You have committed a crime against your fellow Gryn, but Orvos and your mate have convinced me that you were not in control of your actions.” Jyr says, his face grim.

His words flood my veins with sickly cold, and I close my eyes. He’s confirmed my worst fears. I am a monster, one without control and one designed to cause maximum fear. Even now, I feel it lurking at the back of my mind.

Along with my mate. My sweet, precious, and unprotected mate. The one thing on the whole of Ustokos that’s worth killing for. If killing is what’s needed.

I can’t let her see me like this, not again. I can’t stand the scent of her fear, or the cloud of sadness that hovers in the thoughtbond.

Lucy is pure and all that’s right. She needs to be free of me.

“She has to leave.” I snarl at Jyr, my claws lengthening. “She cannot stay.”

“Fyn!” Lucy has her hand on my arm, and I attempt to shake her free.

“Go!” I snap my teeth at her. “I don’t want you here. I don’t want you at all.”

She gasps, her hand over her mouth. A mouth I want to cover with mine more than ever. I roar, twisting against the chains that hold me.

“You don’t mean this, Fyn. You don’t.” She whispers.

“Jyr, you have to take her away. She’s not safe with me, and I can’t see her hurt.” I push every ounce of strength I have left down the thoughtbond, wanting him to understand how important this is to me.

“You won’t hurt your *eregri*.” Jyr says, softly.

“You don’t know that. Please Jyr, as Prime, please do this for me.” I beg. My voice hoarse with emotion, with my anger at Proto and at the world that has ruined something beautiful.

“Take her out.” Jyr orders and Myk gently takes hold of her hand. Lucy stares at me.

A sob hitches itself in her chest, and her eyes fill with tears.

“No.” She whispers. “I don’t—I can’t believe you want this.”

“You might not care about the injuries I have caused you, but I do.” I grind out, using everything I can in my part tranqed brain to put up the walls necessary to stop her bond. “I cannot be around you and know you are safe. Please go.”

The pain that hits me is not lessened in any way. She turns and runs, her little feet pattering away until I can’t hear her anymore.

I have destroyed her.

And now she’ll be safe.

“Vrex it! He’s changing again.” Jyr calls across to Orvos.

“Keep her away from me.” I’m just about able to say. “She can’t be near me. Not anymore.”

“Orvos!” Jyr’s eyes don’t leave mine, even as I know I’m changing into the monster that kills for pleasure. The monster Proto made me a long time ago. “We’ll find a way to fix you, Fyn. That’s why you’re here. All the seniors agree.”

I yell out as something sears through me, twisting in the chair.

“I don’t care what happens to me, just take care of my *eregri*, Jyr.”

“Rest now, warrior. We’ll take care of your mate.” Orvos says, tranq bottle in hand. I see the faces of the senior Gryn for a few more seconds until all is silent once more.

LUCY



I run, not sure where I'm going. I only know that, after everything we've been through, I'm not enough for Fyn. His rejection tears my heart to pieces.

I am exactly what my aunt always said I was. No good for anyone. Not even an alien who claims I'm his fated mate. I have fulfilled my destiny of being a nonentity and reaped all those years of being a little mouse. As the tears flow, I can't even see where I'm running to. All I know is that I have to get away.

A familiar scent has me wiping my eyes to work out exactly where I am. It's an open area, healing pool in one corner. In the other is a pile of furs surrounded by pretty things.

I've found Fyn's nest.

Literally the worst place I could find myself. I sink to the floor, unable to move any further. I bury my face in my hands. All I want is to block out Ustokos. To block out my feelings. To be numb to all the pain that floods through me.

Except I can't. I can't turn myself off. I can't stop my heart from aching. It's as if I've been hollowed out and only anguish remains. Sure, I can have this baby. I can get on with my life. But I want him. I want my grumpy shadow by my side. I want to see him in my lap, eyes half closed as I preen his feathers, a little happy Fyn smile on his face.

Just the thought of him sends a fresh flood of tears.

“Lucy?” I look up, through blurred eyes, I see the outline of Viv.

Fuck! The last thing I need is an audience to my misery. I scrub at my face with my sleeve and attempt a smile.

“Hi Viv? How are you? How’s Syara?” I can see that she doesn’t have the baby with her. That only means one thing. She’s come looking for me.

Great. Now I understand the saying ‘misery loves company’. Only in this case I don’t want any company, and I don’t want any judgement.

“Syara is delightful. Looks like the lair’s going to have more baby Gryn soon.” She smiles at me, eyeing my stomach.

“Yeah.” I struggle to my feet. “I don’t mean to be rude, Viv. But I just want to be on my own right now.”

“I understand.” Her gaze wanders around the room. “This looks like a nest.” She says and takes a step towards the bed of furs.

I growl.

“Is it your nest?” Viv stops moving.

“Fyn’s.” His name almost sticks in my throat.

Viv sighs, her eyes taking on a misty quality.

“I didn’t know that all Gryn nested. I thought it was just Jyr.”

“Fyn did this for me.” I don’t know why I’m telling her this, or why she’s staying. Not after I basically told her to fuck off.

“So your baby is his?” Viv asks. I look at her sharply, and she holds up her hands. “I’m not making any judgement or assumptions, for all I know you could have been pregnant before you got here.” I raise my eyebrows at her. “Shit! I didn’t mean it like that. You know, accidents happen.” I fold my arms. “Oh god! I meant that you know. Hell! I’m just making this worse, aren’t I?”

“Yep.” I reply.

“I’m really no good at this sort of thing.” Viv twists her hands together, a look of anguish on her face.

I lean up against a wall and try not to think of what Fyn, and I did against the same wall. It seems a lifetime ago.

“That makes two of us.” I run my hand over my stomach, not even bothering to stem the flow of tears. “All I want is him, and he doesn’t want me.”

“What?!” Viv is across the room and next to me. She reaches out hesitantly. When I don’t react, she puts a hand on my arm.

“Fyn doesn’t want me as his mate.” I sob.

“That’s not possible. Gryn warriors mate hard and they mate for life. Don’t you have the thoughtbond?”

“It doesn’t matter. He doesn’t want me.” I mumble, staring at the floor, her words only making it worse that he rejected me.

“Bollocks!” Viv says, and the venom in her voice makes me lift my head. “If he mated with you, if you have the thoughtbond, you are meant to be together. Jyr once told me that the mate bond is true. It only forms when it’s right.” She takes in a big breath, only to blow it out again. “I was burned in an accident, badly. I never thought anyone would want to look at me again. I didn’t believe Jyr when he told me I was his mate. Even when I accepted it, I just assumed that he had no choice, he had to accept me.”

She puts an arm around me, drawing me in. I let her because I miss Jesic, and I miss being close to another being. The void that Fyn has left yawns like an open wound. Nothing will ever fill it. Nothing can ever take his place.

Nothing will ever be the same.

“But then I found that being a fated mate isn’t something a Gryn male has no control over. It’s just their way of falling in love. A bit unorthodox. A bit alien. But it is love. Pure, unadulterated love.” She strokes my hair as I shudder in her arms.

“Fyn can’t feel that for me. He can’t.” I force out. “If he loved me, he wouldn’t have said those things.”

Viv unpeels me from her, holding me at arm’s length. “Oh, come on, Lucy. Look what he did for you here! He travelled halfway across the main continent of Ustakos to find you, on his own. He loves you more than life itself. Anyone can see that.”

“Then why-?” I wail, until one look at Viv’s face cuts me off. “Because he thinks he might hurt me?”

“Sweetheart.” Viv lifts the fabric of my top to one side to inspect the claw marks. “He’s already injured you when he didn’t mean it. To a Gryn that’s the worst thing they can do. He has to protect you at all costs, even from himself.”

“This isn’t the way to do it. We have to find a way to undo whatever’s been done to him.” I snap out at her.

“I know that. You know that. But this is Fyn we’re talking about.” Viv tilts her head, and a smile quirks the corner of her mouth. I’d forgotten she’s known him longer than me. “He charges headfirst into everything, not caring how he comes out the other side.”

“Interesting way to describe having sex with a Gryn warrior, but I’ve heard worse.”

Viv laughs out loud, a big belly laugh that reverberates around the room. “Oh, it’s always the quiet ones isn’t it!” She stills. “But Fyn’s stubborn too. If you want him, you’re going to have to fight for him.”

FYN



I've no idea how long I've been out, but when I open my eyes and look for her, she's not there. For a brief instant, I panic at her absence.

Until I remember what I said to her. And the way she ran from me.

"Vrex it!" I snarl out under my breath. My head is a little clearer, but I'm still bound to a ledge in a back room to Orvos's surgery. His tranqs dull my senses.

"Maybe you could do with some of this?" Kyt sits at my feet, flask of lynk in hand. He grins, and I want to kill him. "Telling the best thing that ever happened to you to vrex off probably means you could do with a drink." He adds, taking a swallow himself, before he leans against me, clearly enjoying the fact I'm unable to move.

"Vrex you, Kyt. Don't you have a party to go to? What do you want?" I grind out. I'd much rather be alone, at least until Orvos comes to tranq me again. My memory of what happened after Lucy ran away is hazy.

He offers up the flask to my lips, and I let him pour the alcohol down my throat. Combining it with the tranqs probably isn't the best idea I've ever had, but I'm full of gak ideas today. The drink burns down my throat and settles like fire in my stomach.

"Jyr didn't want you left alone." Kyt says, lounging back and spreading a wing out to inspect it. "I volunteered to be

first watch, and if you can't party-" He tips the flask at my bindings with a wry smile. "I'm bringing the party to you."

"You shouldn't be bothering with me. I don't deserve it." I mutter, the lynk is making my head ache already. Or that could be the lack of thoughtbond. I want Lucy more than anything.

"Apparently you do, or I wouldn't be here. You might be a grumpy bastid, Fyn, but it seems we like you none the less." Kyt takes another pull on his flask.

"Go easy on that stuff. You drink too much." I hear myself say. He laughs, and it's harsh.

"You're one to talk."

"Talking is all I can do." I wriggle against my bonds. "Unless you fancy letting me loose and having a sparring match."

Kyt snorts into his flask. "Yeah, like that's going to vrexing happen. I saw what you did to Ryk."

I exhale loudly, bumping my head back onto the ledge.

"You don't remember anything do you?" Kyt asks.

"I know what Proto did to me. That's all. The rest..." I hiss out a breath. "It's worse for my *eregri*. I can't risk her and the youngling."

I stop talking. I can't get the words out. The last thing I want is to be parted from her, to hurt her and yet it's the only thing I can do to keep her safe.

"You did manage to get her most of the way across the wastelands without harm though." Kyt drains the flask, tipping the last drop onto his tongue and looking disappointed. "I'd have thought that counted for something."

He stretches and yawns before eyeing me carefully.

"Don't you vrexing dare!" I say as he begins to nudge me over on the ledge. "Kyt!"

He's always been a Gryn that liked company. I lost count of the times I found him draped over Myk after a party, who seemingly tolerated his behavior. Even Ryak on occasion let a

drunken Kyt onto his ledge, or at the very least didn't kick him off.

“What? Jyr says I've got to look after you and you're warm. I've been busy. I need a rest.” He curls up next to me, one wing covering me. I wriggle violently. “If you fall off, I'm not picking you up.” He adds with a grin at my struggles.

“Vrex you.” I turn my head away from him, knowing he's just doing it to annoy me. It's a good thing I am tied up or he would be exiting very swiftly and head first.

“Tell me one thing.” Kyt actually snuggles into my side as I attempt to inch away from him.

“What?”

“Why on Ustakos would you give up your *eregri* and your youngling? I mean, I've no desire for a mate, but if I was you, I'd never give her up.” Kyt's voice has a distinct slur to it, meaning the lynk has hit the desired spot. If I don't get rid of him now, I'll be stuck with him until Orvos comes to tranq me.

“I told you. She's not safe with me.” I start to inch back towards him, nudging him towards the edge.

“I think she's the one creature that is safe with you. It's the rest of us that has to watch out.” Kyt clamps a hand around the ledge, becoming immovable. “Jyr's right, you're a vrexing idiot, not seeing what you are and what you have.” His voice tails away as his breathing deepens.

“Just how much of that stuff have you had, you vrexer?” I attempt to lift myself and shove him out of the way, but he's a dead weight next to me and completely out of it.

Then he begins to snore.

I shake my head and stare up at the ceiling, spotting a small hole and my mind is flooded with images of my *eregri*. It was from up above the surgery I watched her. Seeing how she tended so gently to the mercs. Her quiet, soft presence easing their worries. My jealousy at seeing her handling them tempered by my awe of her ability to adapt to her new circumstances.

Something I never felt I managed, not since Jyr rescued me from Proto's camp and I arrived at the lair full of fire and fight.

And yet, the pathetic scrap of a Gryn snoring next to me would beg to differ. Kyt was never put off by anything I did, welcoming me with open arms when I was promoted to Command despite my gruffness and unerring ability to get into a fight.

And neither was my Lucy. She accepted me for what I was, even what I became, even though I still don't know what that is, other than a danger to all around me.

I had a life here. A mate. A youngling on the way.

Now I have nothing. Any chance I had at happiness left when I forced her away.

LUCY



I'm lying on my old ledge in the human quarters. It's the last place I want to be, but Viv somehow managed to convince me that hanging around in Fyn's old nest wasn't going to do me any good. Against my best judgement, I'm feeling out for Fyn's thoughtbond. I know he's drugged at the moment, because whatever he does to keep me out it only works in terms of what he's feeling, it doesn't stop the sedative effect because I'm as sleepy as anything.

It makes things worse, because if I do give into sleep, all I dream about is being ripped away from my Fyn with a look of betrayal and anguish on his face.

"Thought I'd find you here." Orvos bustles in and has a look of purpose about him.

"Not exactly going to be anywhere else, am I?" I heave myself into a sitting position, rubbing at the residual tears in my eyes.

"I've not had much of a chance to check you over since you got back." His eyes rake over me.

"Check me for what?" I yawn.

"Feather mite." He replies, and I snort myself awake. "Thought that might get your attention."

"Feather mite is a thing here?" The little burrowing chewing things are a nuisance on any wild hawk I've handled and even more annoying on a trained one.

“The state some of the mercs arrive in from Proto’s camps, you’d think they’d never been taught how to preen.” Orvos grumbles as he closes the door to the quarters and digs in his pockets for something.

He eventually pulls out something that looks like a small brass trumpet, like those used to announce the king on a period drama. It makes me giggle looking at it.

“Still affected by the tranqs?” He raises his eyebrows at my mirth.

“You’re the one tranqing him.” The mention of Fyn sobers me. Orvos gently pushes me back until I’m lying down again on the ledge, he gently rolls back my top and presses the trumpet end to my stomach. “Jesus, Orvos! That’s cold.” I hiss as the metal hits my skin. “What are you doing?”

“Listening for the youngling.” Orvos puts the other end of the trumpet in his ear.

I can’t think of a more comical sight than the one I’m just witnessing, a grizzled older male with wings, listening to my pregnant belly. It’s with some difficulty that I keep my laughter under control. He shifts the trumpet end around several times with a puzzled look on his face.

“Is there something wrong?”

He lifts his head and the grin that splits his face is something I’ve never seen before. My heart flips in my chest.

“Nothing at all. Your younglings are doing very well.”

I let out a sigh of relief until I realize what was wrong with that last sentence.

“Younglings?”

Orvos barks out a laugh. “Yes, you’ve got more than one in there.” He pats my stomach.

“How many?” I whisper. I’m amazed I can speak at all, my mind is running so fast.

“Two.”

Holy shit. I'm having twins. We're having twins. A sob escapes my lips.

"They're both fine, Lucy. Nothing to worry about. Twins are unusual for Gryn females, but not unheard of. Presumably this is similar for humans?"

It's too late, the tears that I hadn't wanted to cry again are flowing and despite Orvos by my side I feel exposed and vulnerable. All I want is Fyn. He should be here, to witness this, to enjoy this moment, and he's chosen to push me away.

"Sweet Lucy." Orvos gathers me to him. "You should not be sad. This is a great moment for the lair. We will rejoice that you are swelling our numbers."

I bury my head in his feathers, imagining for a brief instant that he could be the father I never really knew.

"Fyn." It's the only word I can say.

"You are such a strong brave female. Fyn doesn't know what to do with you." Orvos says, rubbing at my shoulders. "He's young and foolish. He thinks about the fight all the time. Whatever Proto did to him this time, it's all that fills his head, and he can't look past it." He holds me away from him, his dark eyes studying my wet face. "But you can see past it, you can see into his heart and his head. Don't judge him."

"I'm not," I sniffle pathetically. "I want to be with him more than anything, but I don't know how to convince him that he won't hurt me."

"Yes, you do, Lucy." Orvos says, his tone clipped. "You're clever and resourceful, and you are not so far gone with younglings in your belly that you can't help me out in the surgery. Keeping busy will help enormously."

"I should have known you just wanted help. Well, I'm not coming. Not while Fyn is there." I fold my arms over my bump, even as my stomach squirms with the thought of being close to him.

"He's been moved. Far too dangerous to have in the surgery." Orvos says, dismissively. "So you can work for me after all." He stands up, stowing the trumpet thing and strides

towards the door. "I've got a couple of youngsters that need help cleaning up after they fell into the laundry, and one that got in the way of the back end of a maraha, so if you would hurry along, they're waiting." He says over his shoulder, not even looking at me.

My heart yawns open in despair. I've lost Fyn. No one cares about him, and I don't know if I'll ever see my mate again.

"Come along, Lucy." Orvos calls from outside the door.

Looks like this is where I end up. At the beck and call of every Gryn warrior in the lair, except one. The one that means the most to me.

And the one who won't even look at me.

FYN



My skin feels like it's on fire, burning at me as I stare at the Gryn warrior who I know I must kill. The shackles that encircle my hands and feet won't stop me from completing my mission.

Nothing will. All Gryn must die. All organic life must die. That's what I've been told, and that's what I believe.

"Give it up, Fyn. You're not getting loose, I don't care how much you growl and snarl." The warrior says.

I can't speak, and the time for talking is over. What I need is fresh blood and this warrior will give it to me. I snap at a hand that hovers into my vision.

"Kill. You. All." I finally grind out.

Another warrior moves into view. A clawed hand reaches out, and my mouth is covered. It matters not, I feel the bonds around my hands give and I redouble my efforts to get free. The scent of something sharp in my nostrils is slightly distracting but means nothing. With a crack, whatever is holding me breaks and I lunge forward to take my prize, only to fall.

Down into a deep dark well, where everything is silent, and I could welcome it. But something is missing. Something that smells good, tastes good, and feels good.

My eregri.

But as I struggle to open my eyes, all I see is a ceiling with a hole in it and all I can smell is lynk, feathers, and my own

sweat. I groan as my vision rainbows with the heavy tranquility flowing through my veins.

“Is there any chance you can lay off on the drugs, Orvos?”

“He isn’t here.” Jyr says, unfolding himself from a neighboring ledge. “Why did you send her away?”

“If you were me, would you risk your mate?” I fire back at him. He’s always been straight talking, but I’m not in the mood.

“I’d do anything for my *eregri*, and I would never leave her side.”

“Vrex it, Jyr! You’ve seen what I become.” His eyes glitter with concern. “If I was Lucy, I’d not want to be anywhere near me.”

Jyr begins to laugh.

“It’s not vrexing funny!” I stare up at the ceiling, feeling the muscle tick in my cheek and trying not to let the darkness overtake me again.

“Fyn. I can’t—I just can’t.” Jyr slaps his thigh. “You really haven’t got a clue, have you?”

“I’ll hurt her. I’ve done it before. She means everything to me, everything.” The words come pouring out of me. “If I injure her or our youngling, there’s no coming back from that. I couldn’t live with myself. That’s why I sent her away. That’s why we can’t ever be together.”

Even as I say it, my heart pulses in my chest. It doesn’t want to accept that Lucy isn’t part of my life, that I can’t be with her and our youngling. But I can’t think with my heart. For once I have to let my hot blood cool and deal with the situation logically.

“What a load of gak!” Jyr ranges above me, wings high and claws out. “You’re scared. My command is scared of giving his heart to his *eregri*.”

“No!” I roar at him, struggling uselessly. “You’ve seen what I am. No female should be subjected to that.”

He's on top of me, claws buried in my shoulders, my wings pinned to the ledge.

"What you are is my Command. A Gryn warrior. What's more, you are a mate with a youngling on the way. You want to run away from that?" His face is close to mine, sharp teeth bared.

I turn my head away.

"I'm not running from anything. I only want what's best for Lucy. She is my heart, my soul. She is my boundless flight and my *eregri*. What else should I do?"

The weight on my body is lifted, and Jyr resumes his place on the ledge next to mine. My eyelids are heavy after the initial adrenaline rush.

"You should want to be with her every second of every day." Jyr says, quietly.

"I do. You know I do, that's why I went after her. Being apart. Being here, like this," I shake my bound hands. "It causes me more pain than you can ever know. All I want is to be with her, by her side, holding her sweet form, waiting for the arrival of our youngling."

"Then nothing should keep you apart. You're a fighter, Fyn. Why are you not fighting for her?" Jyr unfolds his massive form from the ledge, his eyes darker than ever as they fix themselves on me.

"Because I'm too busy fighting myself." I sigh.

"No, you're too busy feeling sorry for yourself. It's about time you took a long hard look at what you are and stop blaming others for what you are not." Jyr turns to leave. "Or else you're going to end up here for the rest of your days, high on Orvos's tranqs and rotting away with nothing. That's not what I expect from any of my warriors and especially not you."

He walks out and the icy claws of despair clutch at my heart. I'd do anything to be back in Lucy's arms. I'd fight anyone. But how can I fight myself? The one good thing that has happened to me since I came to the lair, and I let her go.

Unless there is something that will stop me transforming into a monster, I have no hope of winning her back.

The tranqs mean I can't think clearly. I reach out to her through the thoughtbond because I can't help myself anymore, and I don't want to be alone. I can taste her sadness like metal in my mouth. The fact I caused her to feel this way means that her pain spears me like nothing I've ever felt before.

There's no way of putting this right, and I lie back on my hard slab, trying not to let the monster out. Trying to be a good male that deserves a fated mate. But whatever I do, Proto is in my head, reminding me of my mission.

The mission to kill them all.

LUCY



Orvos wasn't kidding about the work that was needed. All three of the Gryn youngsters are causing a row in the surgery when we walk in. They are some of the youngest in the lair, allowed to roam wherever they like and, of course, get themselves into trouble wherever they can.

Their noise and chatter stops briefly as Orvos walks in, but as soon as they see me, I am surrounded and peppered with questions.

“Are you carrying a youngling?”

“Did you have a fight with Proto?”

“Are you mated?”

Eventually I hold up my hands to shut them up. Two of them are slick with laundry soap, and the third is covered from wing tip to wing tip in maraha shit.

“Healing pool, now!” I order, pointing them out of the surgery. They troop off and return a short while later, having done a very good job of messing about and a very poor one of cleaning themselves up. I roll my eyes and get to work, showing each of them in turn how to dry off their feathers. Orvos appears and throws a clean, dry pair of pants at each youngster. They merrily strip, not in the least bothered by my presence, and haul on the clothing.

Having dismissed the young one who had been covered in shit and simply needed a wash, I turn my attention to the two that got covered in soap. Given that they are the most

talkative, I suspect that a moment, or more, of inattention has resulted in them ending up in a state. The stuff is caustic and has stripped their natural waterproofing from their feathers. I dig out my oils and try to make quick work of the re-proofing process. The first youngling squirms and misbehaves, once I've finished with him, I'm in no mood for another bout.

“You must be hungry after all this, why not go and see if there's something to eat in the food hall?” I suggest, hoping that if I can deal with the second one by himself, he might be better behaved.

As usual, they don't want to be parted, but eventually hunger wins out, and I'm left with the last Gryn.

“Let's get this over with.” I eye him warily. “Try not to move around too much and you can join your friend for food in no time.”

He stills as soon as I begin to work the oil through his feathers. Within minutes he's cuddled up to me, one arm over my bump and a clawed thumb in his mouth, eyes closed.

Literally the last thing I was expecting.

“You smell like my mother.” He removes his thumb briefly. I'm reminded that, although these males are taller than me, they are still children in many ways.

“Do you remember much about her?”

He shakes his head, thumb back in his mouth as I comb through his flight feathers.

“D'y wanowa secret?” He asks.

“Again, without the thumb?” I smile. He takes it out.

“Do you want to know a secret?”

“You think I can be trusted?”

“You're mated with Command, of course you can be trusted.” He says with fierce loyalty.

“Then tell me your secret.”

“Me and the others, we found a big room full of Proto. It’s all dead, but there’s loads of it.”

I stare at him, puzzled.

“Have you told any of the seniors about this? Your barrack enforcer?” He blinks his dark eyes at me.

“We shouldn’t have been there.”

That’s hardly a surprise. If you let them run wild, that’s exactly what they’ll do.

“If it’s here, in the lair, it’s important, and you should’ve told someone.”

“What should the little squirt have told us about?” I look up to see Kyt leaning against the wall, a smile quirking up the corner of his mouth.

“Nuttin’.” The youngster says through a mouthful of thumb, and he presses himself to me.

Kyt is across to us in two strides and has the unfortunate male by the scruff of his neck.

“We found some Proto, in the lair. That’s all.” The youngster screeches.

“Kyt! Come on!” I shout at him.

“This sort of thing is important, Lucy. They know better than to keep quiet. The safety of the lair could be a stake.”

He drops the young male, and I hold out my arms for him. He hesitates for a second then snuggles against me.

“Take Kyt to this room, okay?” I tell him. “He won’t hurt you, and you’re not in any trouble.” I give Kyt a malevolent look. “But if he does anything to you, tell me and I’ll make sure he pays.” I growl.

A giggle hitches in the youngster’s chest. The thumb back in his mouth.

“And if you keep secrets from the lair again, I’ll make sure you spend more time cleaning out the maraha like your

friend.” The young one pulls his thumb out with a pop, his dark eyes wide.

“You’re going to make one fierce mother.” Kyt says with a laugh, that dies in his throat as he sees the tears in my eyes. “I knew it was best if Orvos kept you close. You have a way of finding a solution.” He grabs the young male by the shoulder of his wing and drags him off me. “Lucy could do with some peace. She’ll still be here when we come back.”

I miss the kid’s warmth as soon as he is gone. Regardless, I flick away the water that runs down my cheeks. It seems I can fix almost anything other than my own life.

That’s a disaster area of massive proportions, not in the least that I’m having twins. Fyn’s twins. The thought should make me laugh, but I want to be sharing the silly rhyme with him, seeing his oh-so-serious face crack into that gorgeous smile that he only seems to have for me.

I’ve just finished the clearing up when Kyt races back into the surgery, a whirl of feathers and anxiety.

“What is it? Is it Fyn?” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

“I think I’ve found something that can help him, and you. I’ve asked Jyr to hold szent immediately. You have to come.” He dashes out, leaving me reeling.

What could he have found that can mend two broken hearts?

FYN



Through fuzzy vision, I can see I'm back in the szent room. My entire body aches because I haven't moved for what seems like forever. My head pounds with the tranqs and the effort of attempting to keep the thing inside me from getting out.

"Fyn?" I roll my head to one side, my neck seemingly the only thing that can move. Kyt appears as if out of a fog.

"What do you want, you vrexer? Going to steal my ledge again?" I laugh, the sound cracking in my chest, hollow and drunken. "What am I doing here? Is it time for my sentence?"

"Vrex it, Orvos." Jyr's voice is on my other side, and I languidly move my head to see him. "Will you sober him up?"

Something is shoved under my nose, sharp and acid. My head clears. It's not a good feeling. I'm also not that keen on being surrounded by the seniors and the center of attention again. I huff to clear my nostrils of the smell of acid, and as I do, something else invades my senses.

I twist my head to look around the others and I see my Lucy, hanging back by the door, her green eyes startling in her face. She is utterly bewitching, one hand pressed over her rounded belly. She sees me looking at her, and for an instant, I think she's going to turn away.

Instead she raises her chin defiantly and marches into the room.

“Kyt told me to come.” She says loudly, and I suspect more for my benefit than the others. It’s a barb from her that’s intended to hurt, and it would, if only I wasn’t mesmerized by her beauty and so desperate to have her in my arms.

She sits down, arms folded and looks away from me, staring straight at Kyt. A growl escapes me, and Orvos hovers nearby, tranq bottle in hand.

“What was so urgent that you needed me to call szent?” Jyr asks him.

“One of the younglings told Lucy he had found some tech in the caverns under the lair. Initially I thought the little vrexer had been poking around in one of my storerooms, but that wasn’t the case. Nisis knows what they were doing, but a group of them found a hidden room, below the waterfall, and it’s stuffed full of tech, ancient, but serviceable.”

“Fascinating though that is, Kyt, why call szent? It’s not like we can use any of it. Proto will simply activate, and then the lair will be at risk of infiltration.” Jyr sits on the edge of the szent table.

“That’s just it, Jyr. It’s not connected to Proto. This stuff was obviously cut off before the great reckoning. We can use it.” Kyt says, unable to keep the excitement from his voice.

“At the risk of sounding ungrateful that you want to involve me in this discussion.” I twist against my restraints, making them creak. “I’m probably going to go mad and try to kill you all shortly. So perhaps if you want to return me to my cage, we can avoid a scene.”

Lucy makes a scoffing sound.

“What?” I fire at her without thinking.

“Could this possibly not be about you for a change, Fyn?” She stares at me, fire in her eyes. “Maybe it’s about the lair, or the mercs, or anything other than you?”

My cocks shouldn’t be reacting to her, but as she sits there, full of the fight, full of anger, and full of my youngling, I want to take her, mate her, and savor every single drop of her. I can’t even hide my arousal, given that I’m tied up and entirely

at her mercy. The thoughts flood my body with heat. Her eyes widen, and the delicious scent of her reaches me.

She wants me.

A loud clearing of a throat brings my thoughts up from crotch level, although only just.

“As far as I can make out, the tech we’ve found has diagnostic capabilities. It might even be able to work out what Proto did to you, Fyn. Not sure if it can change you back, although who says that would make you any better?” Kyt says, joking around as always.

“It has a medical function?” Orvos interjects, finally taking Kyt seriously.

“I think that’s what it is, some sort of healing machine.” Kyt replies. “There’s other stuff in there too, but I’m not sure what it all does.”

“What the vrex is it all doing here?” Jyr asks, drumming his claws on the tabletop in the way he always does when he feels frustrated.

“The lair was some sort of laboratory facility before the great reckoning, I believe.” Orvos taps his teeth with his claw in contemplation. “I thought I had done a thorough survey before you arrived, but apparently not.”

“I suspect if you add inquisitive youngsters into the mix, they’re going to find things none of us are looking for,” Jyr adds, sagely.

“Nope, still not sure why I’m here.” I interrupt their musings and earn myself another glare from Lucy, but then I just want her to look at me.

“Don’t you get it, Fyn? They think this is a way of fixing you. Although I guess all the tech on this damned planet isn’t going to stop you being an asshole.” Lucy snaps as she stands, ready to leave.

“Wait, Lucy!” I say at the same time as Orvos. She looks between us, her face a mixture of gorgeous anger and confusion.

“Fyn hasn’t changed.” Orvos says, before I can open my mouth again. “All the time you’ve been here, he hasn’t changed.”

“So?” Her defenses are back up. Kyt sniggers.

“It’s you, Lucy. You’re stopping him from changing, from whatever it is that Proto did to him making him change.” Orvos explains slowly.

“Jyr told you that you were a vrexing idiot.” Kyt pokes me in the abdomen. “All that ‘I can’t be with her, she’s not safe’ nonsense,” he mimics my tones exactly. “Turns out she’s the only one that can keep us safe from you.” He laughs.

“You’re extremely lucky I’m still tied up, Kyt.” I growl at him, before looking over at Lucy.

But she’s nowhere to be seen.

LUCY



I left because I think I might have killed him.

He pushed me away, said those awful things and left me wondering what the hell I was going to do with my life, and now it's all okay because actually our relationship is keeping him sane? He fucking wishes. I stomp down the ramp back towards the human quarters. For once I want to see one of the girls, just so I can let off a bit of steam.

“Lucy?” Fyn’s velvety voice is just behind my shoulder.

I spin to face him, and the thoughtbond snaps into place as our eyes meet. His mind is a whirl of conflict, churning blue, green and violet. His hair is mussed up, along with his feathers from his enforced confinement. But he’s no longer bound. He is in front of me, his warmth seeping into my bones, his musky, spicy scent surrounding me.

I shouldn’t give in. I should stay mad at him.

“I’m sorry, my *eregri*. You were right, I was thinking of myself. I couldn’t have lived if I’d done anything to hurt you or our youngling, and that’s what made me say what I said. I couldn’t take it if you rejected me either.” He takes hold of my elbows very gently. Not trying to pull me to him, but not prepared to let me go. “I didn’t even consider how it would make you feel.”

“I want to be with you, Fyn. Regardless of what I have in here,” I look down at my bump briefly before I return to drown in the azure blue of his eyes. “I was willing to fight for you, to do anything for you.”

A sob chokes in my throat, and I'm in his strong arms, held against the silky softness of his chest. I don't want to bare any more of myself because he'll just break it down again.

"You make everything all right for everyone except yourself. You don't deserve a vrexing pathetic male like me hanging around. Your heart is much too precious." Fyn murmurs in my hair, his head resting on mine. "What if this tech that Kyt has found doesn't work? What if I'm doomed to be a monster? What will you do then?" I feel Fyn still against me, as if he's holding his breath for my answer.

"Then we'll deal with that when we get to it." I'm not prepared to let him back in, not yet.

Because he still doesn't trust me, and without that, I don't know how we can continue.

"Fyn, I'm sorry but I'm going to have to put the chains back on." Kyt interrupts us. To give him his due, he does look apologetic. "Jyr isn't entirely convinced by Orvos, not yet."

"But is he prepared to give your tech a chance?" Fyn asks, and I catch his concern.

Kyt nods. "It'll take me a few days for me and Orvos to work it out, but if it has the properties I think it does, we might be able to unscramble that big, thick head of yours."

I snort out a laugh. "Not sure there's enough non-sentient tech on this planet that will do that, Kyt." Fyn looks at me, eyes narrowed. I shrug. "Someone has to say it, Fyn. You're as stubborn as a brick wall."

Fyn drops his head into my hair again, and the thoughtbond resonates with his fear and with his love. I want to send it back to him, I really do. But it seems that he's only able to accept me again with the thought of a 'cure'. He can't see that I want him no matter what.

"I have to get back to the surgery. I'm helping Orvos again." I take a step back as Kyt wraps the cuffs around Fyn's wrists and loops the chains over his wings.

"Oh, you only get to go where Fyn goes." Kyt's eyes twinkle with amusement. "If you're the one keeping him from

killing us all in our sleep, you don't get to leave his side.”

I stare at him, then realize my mouth is open, so I shut it with a snap. Fyn is looking insanely smug because we're going to have no option but to work out our differences.

Kyt leads Fyn down to the surgery level. We make our way through the main area and down several corridors into a back room I've not been in before. Up above us I can see light that isn't the bioluminescent plants, it's some sort of skylight covered by the only intact glass I've ever seen on Ustakos. There is a single, wide ledge, a metal ring embedded into the wall above it. Off to one side, tucked behind a low wall is a sanitary facility consisting of the usual round bowl and running water.

“What is this place?”

“We all spent time here, after we escaped from Proto.” Kyt says as he fastens Fyn's chain to the metal ring. “It did things to us all. Things we couldn't control at first.” He's speaking directly to Fyn. “Things we overcame.”

Fyn huffs at him, but there's no sign of what he can become. He is very much just a gorgeous muscular warrior, who desperately needs a bath and a preen. The disheveled look suits him. It even melts my resolve not to get too close to him again. Not until I know what he wants from me.

Like the thoughtbond helps with any of that! I can taste, feel and see his emotions, but as for interpreting them, I've got a way to go.

What I can tell though is that my presence puts him in a very different state of mind, especially now we've spent time apart again. It's as if I'm the dam that holds back what he is. The monster, the thing that Proto created, prowls against the bars of our collective minds. But it can't get through.

That's not enough, I know that now. I want Fyn completely, but he has to decide he wants me.

FYN



Kyt finishes fixing the chain to the wall, heaving on it to ensure it doesn't come loose.

"Is there a healing pool Fyn can use?" My *eregri* asks. "I'd prefer it if he didn't have to have those chains over his feathers."

Kyt shakes his wings in sympathy. "I suppose not. Given that you've been free of tranqs for a few hours and haven't yet tried to tear anyone to pieces." He lets the chains running through the shoulders of my wings drop away. I stretch out one wing, then the other, enjoying the simple feeling of freedom. "There's no pool he can use, Lucy. You can get water if you like, but until we know how he's going to behave, Jyr isn't prepared to allow him out of here."

Lucy wrinkles her sweet little nose, and without another word, she leaves the room.

"Don't go far!" Kyt calls after her. "Sorry, Fyn. I'll get the mercs to bring you both some food, and I'll try to be as quick as I can to get the tech online."

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be than with her." I sit heavily on the ledge, the residual tranq in my system weighing on me. "Although I'm not convinced the feeling is mutual."

"The thoughtbond takes time. Yours is strong on an unconscious level. You just need to work at it." Kyt says, nodding as if he knows anything about mating.

Lucy returns, a young merc following her with a large pan and a container of water.

“Well?” She folds her arms and stares at Kyt. “Don’t you have somewhere else to be?”

“Yes, mistress.” He says with a smile that exposes his canines. Lucy doesn’t shrink from him, not at all, my brave, fearless female. Kyt takes the hint, grabbing the merc by his wing, he leaves us both alone.

She pours some of the water into the pan and dips in a cloth.

“Wing.” She demands, and I stretch out my left one. She begins to steadily and carefully wipe the water over my feathers.

I do my best to let out my breath as slowly as I can, attempting to keep my libido under control. Her scent and touch is intoxicating. Once she’s finished going over my feathers, she starts on my torso gently swiping away the sweat and grime that covers me.

“Do you know how the merc I injured is doing?” I ask, my voice rasping as I struggle with self-control.

“He’s fine. Up and about. He doesn’t blame you for what happened. Like most of them, he is in awe of you, and his scars are something he’ll boast about for years to come.” She doesn’t sound impressed.

“And what about you?”

“You know how I am, Fyn.” She doesn’t look at me. “Pregnant and dealing with a male who doesn’t know who he is or what he wants.”

She pushes me back onto the ledge, and I sit with a thump, watching as she picks through a small case of bottles before extracting one and dropping the oil onto her fingers. I internalize a groan. If she’s going to help me preen, there’s no way I can hold back my body from reacting.

“I want you, Lucy.” She climbs on the ledge behind me, her stomach pressing into my back.

The first swipe of her fingers has me seeing stars. I shiver violently until I feel her, in my head.

“Lucy,” I murmur as she works her way through my feathers, and I become boneless, leaning into her, taking every small comfort I can from her. “I am nothing without you.”

“I think you get on just fine without me.” She says, but I already know she doesn’t mean it.

I just don’t know what to say to convince her.

“I’ve stared into the abyss without you, my *eregri*. It was cold and dark and lonely. I’d spend the rest of my life chained to this wall as long as I could see you, be with you. I wouldn’t care. But I will do anything to make sure that you are mine.”

“You’d do anything for me as long as I preen you.” I hear the mirth in her voice and want nothing more than to hear that in her voice forever.

“I can’t deny that.”

“Oh, Fyn.” She runs an expert hand down a flight feather. “I want to believe you, I really do.”

“Without you, I am nothing, Lucy.” I spin to face her, caging her in my chained arms. Her tiny hands are pressed against my chest, but she’s not holding me back. Her eyes study mine, carefully. “Our love, your love, it completes me. It keeps me sane. Please say you will have me. Say you will be my mate and accept my band?”

I’d never even considered the ceremony until now. But with her in my arms, it seems right. I can imagine the lair toasting our union and celebrating our youngling.

I can imagine being the center of the celebration for once.

“Your band?” She queries, sliding a hand around my waist, the other cupping my cheek.

“My marker,” I look at the metal ring that encircles my right bicep. “When Gryn mate, they give each other bands to seal their bond.”

“Humans do something similar, but the bands go on our fingers.” Lucy says, quietly. “You’re not just saying this because you want me to like you, are you?” She forces the words out, and our thoughtbond is crowded with her terror.

I enclose her with my wings until we are the only two creatures on Ustokos.

“You are my *eregri*. My fated mate, my boundless flight. I would do anything to keep you, to save you, to protect you. Whether you take my band or not, I will always be there for you.”

LUCY



The place where this tech is stored is somewhere deep in the bowels of the lair. Kyt has told me that it's quite a trek from the main living areas, and one that they cannot fly to as the corridors are too narrow for wings. Orvos and Kyt are waiting for me when I walk into the main surgery, having left Fyn grumbling that he can't follow in order to find out what the plan is.

"It's probably going to take a couple of hours to get there, with Fyn as he is and," Kyt eyes my stomach, "you know." He ends with a clearing of his throat.

"What do you mean, 'how Fyn is'?"

"We can't risk him getting loose. He's going to have to stay chained. Your job is going to be to keep him calm, both on the way and when we get there. There's a lot of prep needed before we can fire up the machinery."

Great. I'm toting the 'baby on board', or babies if Orvos is correct, and I've finally got Fyn back, but it's going to be my job to keep a Gryn warrior with the worst reputation for fighting in the lair calm and compliant for several hours. Or he'll do something distinctly unpleasant to any of the Gryn with us.

"Are you sure that this thing is going to work?"

"From what we can tell by accessing his thoughtbond, Fyn's been programmed by Proto to see all Gryn as organic life to be destroyed. He needs this element reset and erased." Orvos says.

“How does some tech that you claim is ancient going to do that?” I shake my head, already worried for Fyn.

“It’s tech that was originally developed by the Gryn, and it’s a healing platform that would have been able to perform multiple surgeries and other treatments.” Orvos puts an enormous bottle of sedative into a bag.

“Would have been able?”

“It’s old, most of the functions are broken, but it’s okay,” Kyt adds as I take in a sharp breath, “the functions we need are still working. It might be possible to get the rest operational in time.”

The handsome Gryn warrior has dark shadows under his eyes, and I know he’s been working night and day to get to where we are now. I want to have faith in him, as much as he clearly cares about Fyn. I can’t help but be more than apprehensive at what they are attempting to do.

After all, it’s not as if the current occupants of the lair have had much luck with tech. If the metal and table chairs in the szent room crafted from joykill bots is anything to go by, destroying it has been their main task for a very long time.

“It’s time.” Orvos intones. “You ready, Lucy?”

I swallow hard, knowing that there will be no going back after this. Kyt disappears and returns with Fyn, the chains back over his wings. We’ve spent the last days as we waited simply eating, sleeping and cuddling. It would have been bliss, had we not had this mission hanging over us. I’ve done my very best to keep the feeling of dread sitting in my stomach from flowing down the thoughtbond.

I make my way to my mate’s side, putting an arm around his waist as he is no longer able to hold me. The two other warriors making up our party enter the surgery, taking up their positions around Fyn.

“It’s going to be okay, my *eregri*.” Fyn looks down at me, hitching up the corner of his mouth in a distinctly un-Fyn like smile.

“That’s not helping.” I say, pressing my head into his chest and inhaling his scent. Trying to burn who he is into my brain.

“Not helping me either.” Kyt says with a grin.

Our strange party moves off, and we troop down the central shaft going deeper than I’ve been before. Next to me, Fyn growls.

“What is it?” I whisper, looking up, I see his eyes are darkening.

“Not good.” He squeezes them closed and when he opens them again, they are clear blue. “It’s easier to control when it’s just you and me.” He says by way of explanation.

I reach for him down the thoughtbond, his sanity is clinging on, but the churning black hole that is burning in his mind, put there by Proto, fights to get out.

“It won’t be long,” I try to reassure him, “then Kyt and Orvos will cure you and we can be together.” I pat my stomach. “To raise these little ones.”

Fyn makes a guttural sound before inhaling deeply and we press on into the gloom of the lair.

Kyt wasn’t kidding about how deeply this tech is buried. I’m amazed the younglings found it at all or found their way back. By the time we reach the cavern, my feet are burning and my back is aching. However, we’ve made it without a Fyn related incident. Although I’ve been helping him hang onto himself virtually every step of the way.

The narrow corridor opens into a large cavern lit, not by bioluminescence, but by artificial light. It takes me by surprise as I hadn’t thought this was possible.

The rest of the Gryn, Fyn included, stare at the large machine in the center of the room. It looks like a cross between a decompression tank and a hospital bed. One large clear central chamber is surrounded by multiple robot arms.

While Kyt claims it's ancient, it's the most modern and futuristic thing I've ever seen. Clearly the Gryn were once highly sophisticated and very technologically advanced.

Then their tech became sentient, and they were thrown back into the Dark Ages.

Fyn bows his head, and I get a strong metallic scent in my nostrils and taste of blood in my mouth.

"Hey," I put my hand on his arm. The blast of emotion that hits me is of his recollections of his treatment at the mercy of Proto that have been triggered by the machine in front of us.

This one's to help you, not hurt you.

I strain to make my thoughtbond work over Fyn's mind that wants to descend into chaos. The chains covering him clink as he strains against them, and the warriors with us rustle uncomfortably. They don't want to have to fight their Command. Not while he's something else. It hasn't stopped two of them drawing their sharp swords and taking a step back from my mixed up warrior.

Fyn's head jerks up, and his eyes are clear blue pools of ocean. Water he's never seen and has no idea how beautiful it is. His love for me hits so hard, it's like a physical blow to my chest.

"For you, my *eregri*." He strides towards the machine, towing the unfortunate mercs in his wake, causing me to hurry after him.

Kyt and Orvos are already working on the thing, firing up various elements that emit strange whines and clicks. Fyn folds his arms, chains clinking as he watches them. The other warriors, the ones tasked with guarding him are looking particularly flighty.

"It's not Proto." Fyn says to them. "It's safe, for you, at least."

They relax and I see Kyt smile secretly to himself. Fyn hasn't forgotten who he is. The second in command of the legion of the Gryn. I'm just desperate that this works for him, that he can go back to being his gruff self, ordering the mercs

around and being grumpy when he doesn't understand something.

Like what love is.

The whining, humming sound shifts up a notch, then dies away to a gentle whooshing.

“We're ready for you, Fyn.” Orvos says, beckoning him over. “Release him from the chains.” He orders the mercs.

I move to his side, to give the mercs confidence that he'll behave, but also to make sure he knows I'm here for him. The chains slip away from his wings and wrists, and he massages them whilst shaking out his feathers.

“What do I do?” He asks Orvos.

The doctor presses his thumb against a panel on the machine, and the clear cylinder slides open, exposing a white plastic-like interior bathed in a blue light. The space inside is much larger than I would have thought necessary for a single Gryn, but then this entire place is something I never expected to see.

“Get in and lie still.” Orvos tells him.

“Your bedside manner is as good as ever, Orvos.” Fyn replies as he climbs into the cylinder and settles himself inside.

Kyt leans in and attaches something to the side of his head with a metallic sounding noise as Fyn winces.

“This might hurt a bit.”

“Thanks for the warning, you vrexer.” Fyn growls, and Kyt shifts away from him, looking over at me.

A deep seated fear gnaws at my insides. I don't like the machine at all. It reminds me of an iron lung I saw in a museum once. Both life giving and barrier creating. I swallow down my concerns as Fyn's own fears reach me through the thoughtbond. His fear that this might not work. His fear that he is not worth the effort. In that one moment, my anxiety leaves me, and I close the distance between us.

Fyn lies inside the cylinder, staring up at the canopy above him as I reach in and run my hand down the shoulder of his wing. He shivers at my touch, his blue eyes drawn to me. I take hold of his clawed hand, lacing my fingers through his.

“It’s going to be okay, Fyn. I’m here and I’m not leaving.” I smile at him, gently brushing his hair back. His hand grips mine in recognition of my words. “I’d never leave you and don’t think for a moment I’m going to let you leave me.” I say fiercely.

“I wouldn’t dare.” His mouth hitches up with the hint of mirth. “I know you’d come after me.”

“When you’ve been tracked relentlessly by a Gryn warrior, you learn a thing or two about stalking.”

Fyn laughs as if he can’t help himself before he sobers again.

“If anything is to happen to me, you—” I press a finger to his lips and shake my head which makes the tears that hover in my eyes run down my cheeks, even though I meant to stay strong for him.

“Nothing’s going to happen to you. I won’t let it.” I whisper hoarsely.

“But if it does, tell my youngling that I loved his mother, that we were fated and that I’m in the sky looking over him.” His breath comes in short bursts. “Tell him that I loved him, and that I would have been there for him, for you both, no matter what.”

“You can tell them yourself, when you come back to me.” I can hardly choke out the words. “Because I love you, for all your threats and grumps and being the stubborn idiot that you are, I love you. That’s what fate is for.”

“You love me?” He asks, eyes wide.

“Of course I do. I always did.”

“It’s time, Lucy.” Kyt says in my ear. I hadn’t even realized he was there, my entire being was concentrated on Fyn. “You need to step back so we can get started.”

Fyn's hand holds mine in his grip for an instant, then he lets me go. Staring back up at the ceiling. I lean in and press a kiss to his lips, cupping his cheek in my hand. He reaches around my neck and kisses me back with an intensity that only he can generate.

"Lucy." Orvos this time, he takes hold of my arm. I pull away from my mate unable and unwilling to look away as I'm gently towed back from the machine.

Kyt begins to lower the canopy.

"Wait!" Fyn calls out. "They?" He pushes himself up on an elbow.

"Twins." I rub my hand over my stomach. "Looks like we're having one of both after all." I can't help but smile at the emotions flitting across his face, that of surprise, terror, and finally desire.

"Lie down, Fyn." Orvos orders. "You can be with your mate once this is all over."

The canopy descends as Fyn lies back once again, his eyes not leaving mine.

"Lucy," Kyt is at my side. "I need you to do me a favor. You have to try not to tune into Fyn's thoughtbond whilst we go through this process."

"Why? I thought that was why I'm here."

"We need you awake and functioning in case we need you to calm him down. It's likely that the machine will use something to render him unconscious."

"Likely it will?" I fold my arms. "You mean you don't know."

Kyt holds up his hands. "I'm sorry, Lucy. This sort of tech has been off limits to us for generations, and I've had no time at all to understand all of its functions. If I'd had half a cycle, I'd be able to be more reassuring."

"But Fyn didn't have that long, did he?" I stare at the big warrior, lying motionless in the cylinder.

“He didn’t.” Orvos is on my other side. “But we need you as much as we need him. You’ll find that if you try, you can block him out. You’ll have to concentrate really hard.”

“Oh, I already know how to block him out.” I laugh but it’s not with any joy.

The machine’s humming noise increases, and Fyn’s eyes close. I feel his consciousness desert him and do my best to break the bond between us. He’s bathed in the strange blue light again, and this time it starts to rake over him like a laser.

“What’s happening?” I ask Orvos as Kyt stands next to a control panel.

“It’s scanning him, then we’ll get an indication of what it can do.” The humming stops, and Kyt lets out a shout of triumph.

Orvos is quickly beside him, peering at the various screens until he turns back to me with a grin on his face, the like of which I’ve never seen before.

“It’s found the damage Proto did to his brain and the scans indicate that it can heal him.”

“Well, what are you waiting for?” I tap my foot, but I can’t wipe the smile from my lips. I’m going to get my grumpy warrior back.

After a short conference, Kyt and Orvos press in a sequence on the console and the machine begins to hum again. This time, a red beam slowly traces over Fyn’s head until it reaches a particular spot and doesn’t move again.

“Okay. Let’s hope he’s ready.” Kyt mutters to himself and presses his finger on a green lit area on the console.

The humming drops an octave and for a few seconds that is the only sound that we can hear. Until the drumming starts.

“Vrex it!” Kyt runs his hand through his hair, his feathers standing on end.

“What’s wrong?” I take a couple of steps towards the cylinder.

“Stay back, Lucy.” Orvos says as he lifts the canopy. The drumming gets louder.

“Gak! He’s convulsing. Stop the procedure!” Orvos shouts over at Kyt.

“I can’t. Once the program is started it can’t be stopped.” Kyt says, his voice full of anguish.

I push past Orvos to see Fyn bucking inside the machine, as I get closer, his tremors slow. Orvos looks at me. “Did you sever the thoughtbond as I asked?” He says sharply.

“Yes, as far as I can.” I snap.

“Can you feel him now?”

Fyn’s mind is a riot of red and stars exploding. My mind hurts with the contact. “Yes, I can.”

“I know we said not to join with him, but you’re the only thing that’s going to keep him present. I can’t ask you to do this, there’s a risk to you, but without you, I fear Fyn might have a far rougher time.”

“Meaning what?” I ask, my voice so quiet I almost can’t hear myself.

“Meaning he might not be the same when the machine is finished.” Orvos’s eyes are darker than ever. “But I can’t ask you to do this.”

“Don’t be stupid. He’s my mate, and you know I’ll do anything for him. You always did.” I heave myself into the cylinder beside Fyn as his body relaxes, and I cuddle up to him, reaching for him with the thoughtbond. The world outside the cylinder disappears, and it’s just us.

For an eternity.

Together.

FYN



The sky above me is a deep, clear blue. I'm lying on something soft and springy that smells sweet and warm. There's a gentle hum in the clear, beautiful air, interspersed by high pitched calls that have to belong to some sort of animal. I prop myself up on an elbow to work out where I am.

Lucy sits beside me, knees pulled up to her stomach and her arms wrapped around them. She's wearing clothing I don't recognize. A smile lights up her beautiful face.

"You're awake then?" She says with a laugh.

I inhale the glorious clean air and look around me. We're on a hillside the like of which I've never seen. Purple undulating plants stretch out down and away from us, and in the distance, there is green and more green, crisscrossed in square patterns that flow away as far as I can see.

"Where are we?" I ask her.

"I think we're up on the moor. One of my favorite places on Earth."

"The moor?" I wrap my tongue around the unfamiliar word.

"It's where I used to come with my falcons." She nods behind me. "They're just over there."

I twist around to see a large open box that has four of the strangest, and most familiar, creatures I've ever seen. Each one occupies a side of the box. They all have long pointed wings,

like mine, but there the similarity ends. They have no arms, only two yellow feet, their toes elongated and tipped with long black claws. Each one has something over its head. Brightly colored side panels and a feather plume on the top, long straps hang over their shoulders. Each sits so still, it's hard to believe they are alive, until one of them lifts up a long thin toe and scratches at the cap on its head, a tiny silver bell tinkling melodically.

“These are your birds?”

Lucy stands, pulling on a thin leather glove on one hand and walks over to the box, she slides her hand behind one of the creature, and it obligingly steps back onto her glove.

“This is Wolf.” She deftly removes what looks like a leash from its legs, then she takes one of the straps that hang down its shoulder in her mouth, the other she holds in her hand and pulls at the back of the cap.

With a deft movement, she reveals the creature's head, and it looks at me with liquid dark brown eyes that see everything, right down into my soul. I feel as if I'm looking at Nisis herself.

Wolf bobs his head as he looks around the moor. Then his feathers begin to prick, lifting up until he finally shakes them all back into place, and I feel mine itch to do the same.

Lucy opens her hand and Wolf takes off, initially working hard until he catches a breeze and his wings set as he climbs up above us.

“Will he come back?” I watch as the creature begins his spiral up on a thermal.

“Probably.” Lucy sits down next to me. “Will you?” She asks, her eyes almost the same green as I can see in the distance from this stunning place.

“How could I not come back to you?” I tuck an unruly lock of her curly fiery hair behind her ear, enjoying the silky strands running through my fingers. “You're all I ever wanted.”

“That’s all I needed to hear.” She stands again, just out of my reach and dips into a bag at her waist, pulling out a long piece of rope with a small leather pouch on the end.

She begins to swing it around in a circle, slowly at first and then increasing the speed as she scans the sky.

“This was all I loved before I met you, Fyn.” She says to me, our eyes locking. “Now I know what love is. I know what to fight for.”

She spins away from me as the tiny, winged creature dives at her. Lucy expertly throws out the pouch and the creature tries to catch it, but she pulls it away at the last minute and it fires itself up into the sky again. After several more loops, she throws up the lure and Wolf catches it, fluttering a short distance before landing on the ground, wings outstretched.

Just like she caught me.

“He came back.” I breathe.

“He always does.”

“Fyn! Fyn!” It’s Kyt and he’s shouting at me. My head aches, and I wonder if I stupidly attended one of his parties last night. “Wake up you vrexer. We need to get to Lucy.”

“Lucy!” I sit up. I’m in the machine and alarms are ringing. She lies beside me, still and pale.

“What happened?” I reach for her, but I’m unceremoniously dragged away by two mercs who immediately let me go when I glare at them.

Orvos is frantically checking her over, tipping out various substances onto a sponge and holding it to her lips.

“You weren’t doing well, Lucy went into the machine to help you out. She created a thoughtbond so strong, we think that the machine saw her as a threat.”

“What? You let her go in with me?” I turn on Kyt.

“You think we could have stopped her?” He asks.

Orvos is muttering and swearing as he continues to treat my mate.

“Can’t we just put her on it?” I gesture to the machine.

“It’s for Gryn, not humans. There’s no way I could configure it to her physiology in time.” Kyt replies, his eyes never leaving my mate.

The lights in the cavern flicker, causing me to let out an involuntary growl.

“Your good now though?” He turns on me, away from the machine, studying my face.

“Yes.” I search my psyche for the thing that Proto hid there and come up blank. My mind feels oddly refreshed, as if I’ve spent some time in the air, clearing my head. If I wasn’t so worried about Lucy, I’d say I felt better than ever. “I’m fine. Whatever that thing did, it worked. But I’m going to be a vrexing load better once I know my mate is going to be okay.”

The lights flicker off completely, and Orvos swears loudly. “Get me some light!”

The mercs rush forward with bioluminescent lamps, but the lights come back on.

“What the vrex is happening?” I fire at them both. Kyt runs his hand through his hair as he stares at the console.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that this thing is connecting with Proto, but that can’t be possible.” He says with exasperation.

A grinding noise comes from somewhere behind the machine. Followed by the noise that we all know far too well, the chattering insane laughter that is a joykill bot. I can’t see it, but that doesn’t mean anything.

“Can you destroy this thing?” I ask Kyt urgently as I push Orvos aside and pick up the limp body of my mate. “Because we’re going to need a distraction to get out of here.”

Wherever the joykills are, they can't follow us back to the lair. They have to be ended here, hopefully without transmitting their location back to Proto.

“Gak!” Kyt is staring at the machine. “It was going to be the key.”

“Leave it, it's nothing but a liability now.”

With extreme reluctance, Kyt presses a large red area on the console in front of him and the entire thing begins to shudder, the light inside changing from blue to red.

“Time to go.” He says. “We've got about half a minute before this thing blows.”

I turn and lift off the ground, flying back towards the entrance to the cave, Lucy in my arms. I dare not look at her. She doesn't even feel warm anymore, and I can't bring myself to try the thoughtbond. A loud cracking sound indicates that something is happening behind me, and I speed up as a hot wind hits my feathers and scorches my skin. I do my best to cover my *eregri* as best I can.

The mercs, Kyt, and Orvos reach the entrance before me. As I land, Kyt hangs back, looking into the cave. I risk a glance over my shoulder. As I do, the machine explodes in an eyeball searing flash of white, just as a joykill bot reaches it. The bot is engulfed by the white heat and for an instant I think it hasn't been destroyed, until I see part of it firing up to the high ceiling of the cavern in a destructive arc.

Under our feet, the ground trembles.

“It's going to collapse, Fyn. We need to get out of here and Orvos needs to tend to your mate.” Kyt has a hand on my wing, dragging me backwards into the tunnel behind us. But I have to be sure. I have to know that Proto has been destroyed, because I can't possibly let it pollute the lair.

With an almighty shudder, the cavern ceiling drops, the pieces seemingly hanging in midair until they crash down, and the space starts to fill with dust. This time I let Kyt tow me away, and we race back through the tunnels as fast as we can

until the noise of the destruction dims. We reach a wider corridor where we halt.

“Let me see her.” Orvos has ripped Lucy from my arms, and he is crouched over her prone form.

“What’s wrong with her?” I drop to my knees beside them. As I feared, she is a ghastly color, her lips tinged with blue.

“She’s gone, Fyn.” Orvos says, his voice cracking.

“No!” I don’t recognize the sound that erupts from my lungs.

I pull her limp body to mine, every atom of my being aches at her, wanting to transfer my life force to her. She saved me when nothing else could. She gave me reason simply to be in this world. She was there when I couldn’t see the light in the darkness.

She was my *eregri*, the only mate I would ever have.

“No. She can’t be dead. She can’t. Do something!” I growl at Orvos, snapping my teeth. “She lives or you die.”

“Not this way.” Kyt puts his hand on my arm and his thoughtbond flows with his own devastation at her loss. “She wouldn’t want you to be this way.”

“She should be here, with me.” My voice is strange, far away, pinched to the point of nothingness. “She should be here.” I tuck my head into her glorious, scented hair, inhaling the scent that haunted my dreams when she was away from me.

“Use the thoughtbond,” Orvos is by my side, but his presence is cold to me. “Yours and Lucy’s bond is the strongest and deepest I have ever seen. If anything can bring her back, it will be your bond.”

I don’t even hear the words, not properly. I clutch her lifeless body to mine, the mating bond straining inside me. Our last moments together cannot be as if in a dream.

“Come back to me, my *eregri*. Don’t leave me. I need you.” I whisper the words into her ear, my heart beats within my chest, enough for the both of us. “I want to fill the lair with

our younglings.” I shut out everything with my wings until it’s just her and me.

“I can’t go on without you, Lucy. I watched you. I saw you, but I didn’t know what you meant to me until now.” I touch my lips to her fragrant skin that is just warm to the touch. “Please be mine. Please come back.”

I close my eyes, imagining that I can transfer my life to her, enough that we can be together. My chest pricks as if someone is slipping in a blade, but I don’t care. My heart pains me by still beating where hers is still. It’s as if I’m dropping into a black pit, unable to see the sky or feel the wind. Anything Proto did to me, it pales in comparison to losing my mate. The one thing that held me to Ustokos, that grounded me.

That made me whole.

“You can’t get rid of me that easily, Fyn.” Her voice enters my head more than it reaches my ears, and I stare into a pair of bright green eyes as my heart leaps into my throat, desperate to prove how much it wants this second chance.

LUCY



Fyn came for me, like he promised. He followed me down into the depths of death and pulled me back.

“Do you want any more maraha?” My god-like alien angel asks me, holding out a platter of the thinnest slices of rare meat.

“Absolutely.” I help myself, balancing my plate on my bump.

I don’t remember much after the cavern, much of it was a blur of azure blue eyes, feathers, and dust. When I finally came around, I was back in Fyn’s nest, the big warrior slumbering next to me. He hasn’t left my side since, and we haven’t left his nest.

“What time is the ceremony?” I polish off the remainder of the maraha with some delight. Seems like my babies are taking after their father as I’ve never craved meat like this before.

“It’s just after the evening meal. If you still want to do it.” Fyn says, settling next to me and placing his hand on my belly. “I only want you to go through with it if you’re up to it.”

“Orvos has given me a clean bill of health.” I say. “Although, given that he also pronounced me dead, I’m not sure how much confidence we can have in him.”

Fyn closes his eyes, inhaling deeply, then he snuggles into my side. I feel his presence in my head like a warm and comforting blanket.

“I think I’d know if anything was wrong with my mate, just like you could help me.” He burrows against me, and I begin to comb through his feathers, thinking that I need to get some oil on them soon. My mate sighs and melts into my arms, a beatific smile on his face.

“I think we’ve proved that once and for all.” I press a kiss to his forehead, working through his feathers. “And, for the record, I want to have the ceremony more than anything. I want to show the lair that you are my mate and that we will be having younglings soon.”

Fyn looks up at me. “Show the lair that I’m your mate?” He laughs.

“Well, it’s not all about you, Command.” I tease. “Sometimes it’s about me. About us.” I pat his hand that sits on my stomach.

“Do you really think you’re having more than one youngling?” Fyn asks, dreamily as I start on the shoulder of his wing.

“Twins aren’t uncommon among humans. My mother and her sister were twins, so I guess it runs in the family.”

I feel my heart twist at the thought of my mum who left me too soon and the woman who raised me and couldn’t stand the sight of me. For the first time, I wonder if it was because I reminded her of the sister she had lost, and that’s why she found having me around so hard.

“My mate?” Fyn’s brilliant eyes study my face. He has caught my pain through our bond.

“I was just thinking of Earth.” I settle him further onto me to continue my preening.

“Do you miss Earth and your birds. It seemed like such a beautiful place.” Fyn’s voice is a low burr of contentment.

“I thought I did, but I was wrong, Fyn. My home is here, in the lair, with you.” When I say the words out loud, my chest is tight with the love I have for him, as if my body is unable to contain it. “Because home is with the person you love, wherever in the universe that is.”

His exhale of breath coincides with the cloud of emotion that is Fyn. A deep purple of his affection.

“I never thought of the lair as my home, until you arrived. Now I don’t want to be anywhere else.” He murmurs. “You fill my flight, my heart and you make anywhere my home.”

I bend to kiss him, my lips snagging his and he curls an arm around my neck, one hand snaking up under my top to caress a tight, sensitive nipple.

“You smell like you need mating.” He half-groans in my ear.

“You always want to mate.”

“Can you blame me, I’ve got to make sure you’re always filled with younglings.” Fyn hitches a lip to expose a sharp canine and presses himself against me to ensure I’m in no doubt how aroused he is. “I love you like this, all ripe and round.”

His hand releases my breast and while I’m captured in another amazing kiss, it’s heading around my abdomen and descending lower.

“Have we got time for this?” I murmur against his kiss.

“There’s always time for mating.” He says hoarsely as I hear the click of the mag catch on his trousers, and my hand reaches for his hard members.

Fyn thrusts himself eagerly into my touch, both cocks rigid for my attention. I separate them out in a way I’ve learned he loves, stroking the secondary one with a hard firm movement of my wrist before I move onto the larger main cock that pulses in my hand as I gently roll my fingers and palm over its ridges. Fyn moans, and both shafts weep with pre-cum.

“That’s enough of that!” A familiar voice cracks across our nest. “Lucy needs to get ready for the ceremony and you need to make yourself scarce, Command.”

Fyn scrabbles to encase his cocks back in his pants, and I pull down my top, looking over to see Viv, hands on hips, stood at the entrance to our nest, flanked by Jesic and Sophie,

who appears to have been coerced into carrying one of many bundles that they are all piled with.

“Jesic!” I’m on my feet, even if I do look like a turtle on a half shell getting off the fur bed and then I’m racing over to my friend, who captures me in her warm, furry embrace.

“Let me look at you.” She steps back my hands held in her clawed paws, and she assesses me carefully. “Blooming! Looks like mating suits you.” She gives me the naughtiest of smiles as Fyn saunters up to our little group attempting a glowering look.

“What is the meaning of this. Jyr gave his word that my *eregri* was not to be disturbed whilst she is recuperating.”

“Guess that doesn’t apply to you, eh, Fyn?” Viv gives him a huge stage wink, and he rustles his feathers in the way he always does when he doesn’t know how to react.

“Mating with my Lucy is the best medicine.” He wraps an arm around my waist, tilting my chin up him so he can press a long, lingering kiss that has all parts of my body sparkling.

Sophie’s sound of retching eventually draws us apart. Both Viv and Jesic are trying and failing to keep smiles off their faces.

“Your mate, whether you have had a chance to mate with her today or not, needs to look her best for the ceremony this eve.” Viv says, her smile getting wider.

“Can we not discuss our mating so publicly?” I say, exasperated as Fyn draws himself up to his full height, dwarfing the humans and Jesic.

“Our mating is something the entire lair is celebrating. It is nothing to be ashamed of.” He holds me to him, protectively, and his love is bright down the thoughtbond. He looks down on me, one hand caressing my stomach.

You are my entire world.

His words resonate in my head.

All of you.

“Jyr wants to discuss some issues with the patrols with you, Fyn, and I believe Kyt has been hanging around since breakfast wanting to speak to you about something.” Viv says. “So you’d better leave us to get your mate ready.” Her tone brooks no argument.

Not that Fyn would argue. He wouldn’t do anything he doesn’t want to do, and I find myself in his arms, wings closing out the other women.

“Will you be okay with them?” He studies my face.

“I don’t think they’ll abduct me, although I’m not entirely sure what their idea of getting me ready is.” I peep out from behind Fyn’s feathers, and Viv gives me a less than reassuring thumbs up and a grin. “But you know I’ll be fine.”

“I don’t want to leave you.” He murmurs into my hair.

“Dealing with your work as Command is hardly leaving me. Just be sure to check in if you decided to go chasing after any patrols.”

Fyn folds back his wings with a snap. “As you wish, my mistress, my *eregri*.” He executes the most comical bow I have ever seen, his wings almost tipping him over. “You speak and I obey.” In a fraction of a second he gives me the most delightful smile ever to have graced the face of a Gryn warrior, before it’s gone and replaced by his usual grim demeanor.

“Lady Prime.” He nods at Viv and is gone in a sweep of wings.

Sophie snorts, and Viv turns to her. “I wonder if we should ask Fyn to tell Kyt where we are?” She puts a single finger to her cheek and Sophie colors.

“Only if you want to be bored to death, rather than zapped to death by some sentient machine.” She fires out. “Shall we get this over with?” She stalks towards the bed.

“What?” I look at Viv, who has an enigmatic smile on her face that she drops as soon as she sees me.

“What’s eating her?”

“You know she used to work in IT? She asked Kyt if she could work on Ustokos tech and he refused. He thinks it’s too dangerous, and he’s convinced Jyr to say no too.”

“Sophie doesn’t agree?”

“What do you think?”

I shrug. “I think she thinks Kyt is full of shit.”

“Got it in one. Not going to change his mind though.”

“If he’s half as stubborn as Fyn, that doesn’t surprise me.”

“Anyway, that’s more than enough of lair business. I got Jesic to bring a few gowns for your ceremony this evening, so let’s have some fun!” Viv claps her hands together, her eyes bright, even as I swallow hard. “Don’t worry, I was terrified before my mating ceremony, but they don’t ask you to mate publicly, you get to do it behind a screen with only the seniors watching.” Viv strides away across the room towards the others.

“Wait? What?” I cry out as her words penetrate, and I hurry after a laughing Viv.

The next few hours pass in a blur of fabrics, gowns, me groaning about my ever expanding belly and laughter, which even Sophie joins in after a while. Viv finally gives in and admits the part about public mating was made up, just as we are joined by Emma and Bianca, who are carrying several platters of food.

“Wow!” I look at the spread, much more than maraha, piir sticks and the strange blue/red vegetables. There’s proper baked bread, pickles, something that looks like coleslaw. “This is different.”

“Viv persuaded Jyr to let me in the kitchens.” Emma says, her eyes twinkling. “This is just the start. I don’t know what half of the ingredients are, but I’m going to have so much fun finding out.”

“You look absolutely beautiful.” Bianca says, languidly as she puts down a platter. “That color suits you. Fyn is one lucky male.” The prickle that runs over my skin is difficult to place,

I'm not sure if it's pleasure at her compliment or jealousy at her mention of Fyn. "I always thought you two would be perfect for each other."

My jaw drops. "You did? But I heard you say I was no good for him." Bianca recoils, her pretty brow furrowed.

"When?"

"At Syara's celebration. You were telling Sophie what you thought of me." I half-snarl.

Bianca stares at me for a beat, then the creases on her forehead smooth out.

"Oh, that!" She claps her hand over her mouth. "You didn't think I meant you and him, did you?"

I dip my head, my cheeks burning, only to find a pair of arms wrapped around me. I look up to see it's Bianca.

"I'm so sorry if you thought that was about you. It really wasn't, I promise. You deserve all the happiness you can get with Fyn." She releases me suddenly as if she suddenly remembers herself. "Leaves more for the rest of us." She laughs, the ice queen barriers back up again.

"So exactly what happens at a mating ceremony." Sophie asks, her mouth full of bread roll. "If it doesn't actually involve having sex publicly." She laughs and shies away as I launch a piir stick at her.

FYN



Kyt is hanging around as I turn in to the central shaft. He peers over my shoulder, and I'm unable to repress a growl at another male being in proximity to my nest.

"Gak! Sorry, Fyn." Kyt backs away from me. Not quite what I was expecting, but his due deference calms the mated male inside me. I do something I never thought I would, I push at the senior thoughtbond with my thanks at his actions.

I'm pleased to see him relax and fall into step beside me.

"Jesic tells me that they found the culprit that assaulted Kijg female at the trading post where you found Lucy." He says conversationally.

I swallow hard. So much of the last turns have been a blur, but the injury of the Kijg had weighed on my mind.

"Who?"

"Not you, if you were thinking that. Another Kijg apparently. You know how they can be. Cold blooded." Kyt does a mock shiver. "As for the dead maraha, that was definitely you. I hope you enjoyed it." He gives me a sideways glance. "I reimbursed the Mochi and they have forgiven you."

"What's one more maraha to them?" I growl, despite Jesic being Lucy's friend, I still don't trust them.

"Anyway, I have these for you." Kyt digs into his coat pocket and pulls out two mating bands, one large and one small. They are a flaming red color, just like my *eregri*'s hair.

“How much do I owe you?” I ask, thinking of my depleted cache of coin.

“Nothing.” Kyt says, pressing the bands into my hand. “Think of it as a mating ceremony gift.” He springs into the air with a couple of beats of his wings as he drops into the central shaft. “If any Gryn and human mating is going to fill the lair with the younglings we need, it will be yours.” He flashes me a smile and is gone, down the shaft.

I inspect the bands, they are completely beautiful, the smaller one flecked with green, like Lucy’s eyes. The other with blue like my own. I open my wings and fall into the shaft, beating to keep my descent even as I head down to Jyr’s quarters. As I get lower, mercs stop what they are doing, and I hear drumming of many feet. All at once a cry goes up.

“Fyn!” It reverberates around the lair and becomes a chant that morphs into “Command!” The drumming continuing as I land next to Jyr.

“Looks like you’re home, Fyn.” He slings an arm around my shoulder, leading me into his chamber. “We’ve got a lot to discuss before your ceremony this eve.”

“Where is she?” I ask Myk for the hundredth time.

The silent swordsmith has been doing his best to keep my simmering temper under control. Between Kyt asking me inane questions about var beer, food and games to keep the mercs amused, along with all I discussed with Jyr, I’ve not had a chance to breathe or get used to the idea that in a very short time, I will be asking my *eregri* to be my mate in front of all the lair. Now I’m waiting outside of the great hall, waiting for her, and my nerves are frayed to the point of breaking.

Although why I’m worried about that, I don’t understand. Her thoughtbond has been comfortable and happy all the time I’ve been away from her.

“Relax,” Jyr booms beside me, in the least relaxing way possible. “You’ve already done the hard part and filled your mate’s belly.” He laughs. “Frankly, if she’ll let you do that, then she’s going to take your band.”

“Vrexer.” I mutter under my breath. Jyr is still my Prime after all.

“Any further thoughts on my proposal?” He asks, becoming serious. “Your mate has to come above lair business. You are more than welcome to delegate your work as you see fit.”

“I need to talk to my *eregri* about it.”

Jyr doesn’t scoff, instead he nods sagely. “As it should be. Let me know when you’ve made a decision.” He turns as Viv appears from the central shaft. His face lights up at the sight of his mate and his thoughtbond thrums with pleasure.

Whether it’s a side effect of what Lucy and I share, I feel much closer to the seniors than I did before.

“It’s because you’re home, Fyn.” Viv puts her slim hand on my arm. I knew that she had a very special bond with Jyr that allows her to feel ours too. I just hadn’t experienced it until today. “And she looks so very beautiful, you needn’t worry.”

“I’m not worried.”

“Good.”

With that, she links arms with Jyr and the pair walk into the great hall to the delight of the assembled mercs who let out a roar of approval at the entrance of their Prime and Lady Prime. Myk claps me on my back and spins me around. The sounds of the mercs fade away as I see Lucy.

She’s wearing a long gown of soft dark red material that clings to her every curve, showing off her rounded stomach, dipping at the neckline to reveal the hint of her creamy breasts. Her hair is loose curls around her shoulders.

“Mouth closed, Gryn warrior.” Jesic says as she walks past me into the hall. I snap it shut as the vision that is my fated

mate walks towards me.

“You were beautiful from the first day I met you, but now everyone will see.” I take her hands. “And they will know what a lucky Gryn I am.”

Lucy places a hand on my chest, looking up at me under her long lashes.

“And you brought a girl obsessed with birds into a real world.”

“But your birds always came back.”

“I tamed them to do that. Training and reward that was all.”

“You have captured my heart, Lucy. You took a rough warrior and tamed him, over and over again. Will you take my band and be mine, forever?”

Her breath stutters in her chest and tears form in her eyes.

“Forever?”

It’s my turn for my breathing to cease.

“Forever.”

“I want nothing more.”

“Then let us take our vows, together.”

I tuck her arm in mine, and we walk towards the entrance to the main hall. As soon as one merc spots us, the shout of ‘Command’ goes up joined by that of ‘Lucy’ and we enter the hall to a raucous cacophony of our names.

Accepted into our home and family and together.

LUCY



I'm not sure I've ever had so much fun in my entire life. I might have been nervous before the mating ceremony, but with Fyn by my side, I felt I could face anything.

The ceremony was short and, of course, I cried my way through it. The look on my sweet mate's face when I handed him his band—my heart simply melted. And then there was the kiss.

He might be new to kissing, but Fyn chased everything away in that moment. There was nothing on Ustokos except me, and him, and the new lives growing within me. I'm not sure what drew us apart eventually, it certainly wasn't the whooping and shouting of the mercs. Even then, he was the only center to my world.

Afterwards, maybe it was even better. Having settled me on his lap in the main hall, there was a constant stream of warriors dying to congratulate us, eyeing my pregnancy with undisguised delight. All the while, the reassuring presence of my mate behind me ensured I never felt anything but love.

Then the fun and games began. Drinking games, fighting games, chasing games. All undertaken with the greatest exuberance by the mercs and the seniors. Even Fyn joined in with one mock fight, easily besting the young merc who had challenged him, yet the grin on his face was not that of a victor, but of a warrior who felt accepted. The thoughtbond rang with his delight.

“We don’t have to stay if you don’t want to.” Fyn whispered into my ear as yet another round of var beer was drunk and toasts made. His tone light and easy.

“I’m happy to stay and happy to go.” I snuggle against his strong, muscular form and revel in the scent of his feathers. “Looking forward to getting you alone.” I add, and to my amusement, Fyn shifts in his chair uncomfortably.

“You are too tempting, my *eregri*.” He murmurs into my hair, both hands snaking over my rounded abdomen, and this time I feel the evidence of his arousal as well as delicious haze of pink lust filling my mind.

“But how exactly do we get away?” I wriggle against him and cause a low groan to escape his lips. “I think we’ll be missed if we try to make a quick exit.”

He dips his head and gently nibbles on the exposed skin between my neck and my shoulder, sending a frisson of desire spiking through me. “I may have an idea.”

Before I can open my mouth, I’m caught up in a pair of strong arms as Fyn jumps onto the table in front of us.

“I am required to mate my female.” He growls, his eyes almost glowing blue. “We will leave now.”

I barely managed to hold onto my squeal of embarrassment, my cheeks heating at his words even as laughter bubbles up inside me. I catch the eye of Viv, who sits next to Jyr, her tiny baby in her arms.

“Looks like Fyn’s lost nothing of his stubborn nature in taking a mate.” She smiles up at me. “And none of his impetuosity.” Her smile widens, and she winks just before Fyn takes flight.

“Did you really have to do it like that?” I ask as soon as he lands us inside our cozy nest.

“Like what?” Fyn answers, swiftly peeling off my dress and scrabbling at my undergarments.

I shake my head. Fyn will always be Fyn and I wouldn’t have him any other way. I still his worrying hands with a kiss,

and he melts against me, his hard body curving around my expanded form. At least I can still tame my wild warrior. Our thoughtbond intertwines with our need for each other. He no longer needs controlling, and the more undone he becomes the more I desire him.

Like the night in the cave with my dark, dangerous mate, Fyn hasn't lost all of the danger that followed him, even if the machine did manage to deprogram whatever it was that Proto did to him. His eyes no longer darken, but I can awaken the beast within him.

I unsnap the catch on his pants, and he swiftly dispenses of them, pushing me back towards the furs as he kicks off his boots. His cocks are hard, pressing against the underside of my abdomen, slippery with his arousal. Before we reach the bed, he rips away my knickers and lifts me off my feet with a growl.

"I want you, my mate." His cocks breach my entrance as he holds me easily, spearing me completely. "You need me inside you." His voice is a feral roar of lust as he pushes me up against the wall of our nest, thighs gripped in strong, clawed hands, he thrusts hard into me, stretching me to my very limit as always.

"I need you, my darling Fyn. I need all of you." I rasp, my voice hoarse as I hold onto one of his strong arms and lean away from him so that he can lavish attention on my needy breasts with his tongue.

He laps over my tight nipples and rubs at my stomach, making me feel like a queen to his king. With each touch, he pushes into me, the ridges on his main cock hitting my g-spot in the most perfect manner. Because this alien predator can prey on me any day, any night. Fyn's sensuality continues to amaze me, it's as if he always knew what pleasure was.

I feel his secondary cock begin to swell inside me and it tips me over the edge, my orgasm crashing over my body in waves of delight.

"My *eregri*, my mate." Fyn moans as his thrusts become irregular, his hips snapping at me, and his beautiful eyes close

as my mind whirls with his climax seconds before I feel him paint my channel with his hot cum as he explodes inside me, joining us with his swollen second member.

He gasps out several breaths as he carries me back to the furs and we collapse, still joined as we both luxuriate in our orgasms that still spasm through our bodies.

“You will be my undoing, Lucy. I want nothing more than to always be inside you.” Fyn sighs.

“And you will be mine, Fyn of the Gryn. Command of the Legion. Because I always want to be in your arms and to have you pleasure my body.” I snuggle into his warm, fragrant chest. “You are my safe place.”

And he is. Fyn is everything I ever needed. A male to bring me out of myself and a mate to stand beside me against the world, whatever that world may be.

EPILOGUE



LUCY

“**L**ook at them.” Jesic coos into the twin cribs sitting next to our bed of furs.

Kessie and Myrl gurgle up at the Mochi as she spins her tail over them. Kessie laughs, waving her little fists in the air as she tries to grasp the furry tip. Her bright blue eyes, so similar to Fyn’s, sparkle at the new toy.

Myrl is a little quieter, far more like his father. His dark eyes take in everything before he shoots out a clawed hand to try and grab Jesic’s tail.

“Such gorgeous kits! Do you love your auntie Jesic?” She bends closer, and I wonder whether I should warn her that both babies have somewhat faster reactions than you might expect.

But I needn’t have worried, once Kessie’s hand connects with Jesic’s fur she is mesmerised. Myrl, on the other hand, starts to fuss and I pick up him up for a cuddle whilst Kessie is otherwise occupied.

“He needs a feed,” I explain to Jesic. “I’ll do that now and the pair of them should go to sleep pretty much straight away.”

Thank god!

I had no idea what to expect having one baby, let alone two. However Fyn proved himself to be an exceptional father. Nothing phased him, and he very quickly got us all into an

easy routine, which meant I could concentrate on keeping the pair of hungry Gryn younglings fed and cleansed.

“Are you ready, my mate?” Fyn’s deep, velvety voice has me looking up from the nursing baby.

His face lights up as he strides across our nest to sit next to me and carefully wrap his wings around us both. He kisses me on my forehead and then gently runs the back of his knuckle down Myrl’s cheek. The hungry baby doesn’t take any notice, he’s far too concentrated on getting as much milk into him as he can.

“I’ll be ready as soon as this one’s finished. Jesic’s all prepped so we can leave them for a few hours. What Kyt wants to show us isn’t going to take much longer, is it?”

We’ve been summoned to some sort of presentation by Kyt. I’ve heard from Viv that Sophie is involved somehow but given how much she seems to hate Kyt and goes out of her way to avoid him, I’m not entirely sure what’s going on.

Of course, I’d prefer to take the babies with us, but this is taking place long past their bedtime, hence Jesic being roped into babysitting duty. The lair loves seeing the younglings, and often it takes a growling Fyn to clear a way to the food hall in order to get through the mercs clamoring to see the babies. It’s a good thing that both twins seem to revel in the attention and that brings me joy that they take everything in stride.

Which, in turn, means I am bursting to give Fyn my news, but I want to be alone with him when I do.

After several false finishes, where I’m sure that Myrl is sure he’s done, but apparently, he isn’t, both babies are fed, wrapped up and little eyelids drooping as Jesic cuddles up to them, curled like a big cat on the furs. She purrs gently to the twins, and my heart is full as Fyn bends over them, giving each one a soft caress. Our younglings are most definitely Gryn and the only thing that worries me is what happens when they’re big enough to start flying. All of my falconry experience will be redundant at that point.

As soon as we are outside of the nest, I find myself pinned up against a wall, caged by a Gryn warrior who's azure blue eyes flare with desire and need.

"Your scent," he presses his head into the crook of my neck and inhales. "It's like nothing else tonight." He traces a claw over my collar bone and down towards the swell of my breasts. "We don't have to go to this thing with Kyt. No one will notice if we don't attend." His breath is hot on my skin.

"I think that the seniors will notice if their Command is not at szent." I laugh as he spans my waist with his huge, clawed hands. "Plus, you're going to have some news for them."

Fyn stops his gentle kisses that pepper my shoulder. I'm suddenly the center of a predator's gaze.

"News?" His brilliant eyes study mine carefully.

I spread my hands over my stomach and look down, before looking back up into his face. Watching as realization slowly spreads from his brain to his mouth.

"You're-?"

I nod, a tear slipping from my eye as his entire being, his mind and the thoughtbond lights up with joy. "Orvos confirmed it today."

"I thought...I was afraid that what Proto did to me might mean we couldn't have any more younglings." Fyn wraps his arms around me, pulling me close and I capture his fear with my love, encasing it completely.

"Fate has other plans for us, my mate." I whisper in his ear. "And fate is never wrong."

BOOK 2: Read Kyt and Sophie's story in ***FIRE: A Sci-Fi Alien Romance*** coming on the 1st January 2022.

You can get an alert for all my new releases before anyone else by signing up for my newsletter. You'll also get sneak peaks from my latest work, cover reveals as well as a FREE steamy sci-fi romance novella 'Angel and the Alien Brute' as a thank you for signing up!

So if you want all of the above, sign up [HERE](#) or at www.hattiejacks.com/subscribe

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You can also follow me on [Amazon](#) if you so wish, but I'm always going to say my newsletter is better!

AUTHOR'S NOTE



As if you hadn't already guessed, our Rogue Alien Warriors were inspired by falcons, in particular my love of falcons and falconry. It followed that I couldn't resist making Lucy a falconer.

Falconry is around three thousand years old, with evidence that it was practiced by the Egyptians (who, of course, worshipped the falcon god, Horus).

Falconry is still practiced today by a dedicated band of men and women. I like to think of it as a form of time travel. Very little about it has changed, and I could converse with a falconer from the Middle Ages as well as with a modern day falconer.

Although I don't have any birds at the moment, falconry remains part of my soul, so I'm honoured to immortalise the pastime that defined me for many years in our Gryn warriors and with Lucy taking centre stage in Fear with her unusual job.

All the best

Hattie :)

P.S: The song that Fyn overhears Lucy singing is 'Planets' by Kate Rusby. It's the most beautiful haunting song, so if you get a chance, check it out.



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Crave: Alien General's Obsession

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Traitor: Alien Hunter's Mate

JUST WHO IS THIS HATTIE JACKS ANYWAY?

I've been a passionate sci-fi fan since I was a little girl, brought up on a diet of Douglas Adams, Issac Asimov, Star Trek, Star Wars, Doctor Who, Red Dwarf and The Adventure Game.

What? You don't know about The Adventure Game? It's probably a British thing and dates me horribly! Google it. Even better search for it on YouTube. In my defence, there were only three channels back then.

I'm also a sucker for great characters and situations as well as grand romance, because who doesn't like a grand romantic gesture?

So, when I'm not writing steamy stories about smouldering alien males and women with something to prove, you'll find me battling my garden or zooming around the countryside on my motorbike.

Check out my website at www.hattiejacks.com!

