



DAEOS

AN ALIEN WARRIOR ROMANCE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
HATTIE JACKS

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CONTENTS

[JOIN ME!](#)

[Opal](#)

[Daeos](#)

[Opal](#)

[Daeos](#)

[Opal](#)

[Daeos](#)

[Opal](#)

[Daeos](#)

[Opal](#)

[Daeos](#)

[Opal](#)

[Opal](#)

[Daeos](#)

[Opal](#)

[Daeos](#)

[Opal](#)

[Opal](#)

[Daeos](#)

[Opal](#)

[Opal](#)

[Daeos](#)

[Opal](#)

[Daeos](#)

[Opal](#)

[Daeos](#)

[Daeos](#)

[Opal](#)

[Opal](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Daeos](#)

[Opal](#)

[JOIN ME!](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also by Hattie Jacks](#)

[Just who is this Hattie Jacks anyway?](#)

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OPAL

A blood curdling growl slides through the air and under my skin, every hair on my body rising with the sound as it crescendos into a snarl which drips with blood.

The bucket I was holding falls from my hand with a loud thump and rolls away, the contents spilling out on the ground, white and frothy.

This is a shortcut I should never have taken, even if it meant getting the milk from the shaggy alien cow thing to the cooking area quicker.

“Er...sorry Mr. Growl. I’ll get out of your way,” I call out, taking two slow, long steps back, and with a haste I’m pretty sure I never showed on Earth, I turn and run, and run.

I pop out from the alleyway, take a swift step to the side, and slam my back against the wall, chest heaving as I gulp down air.

Nothing follows me. Whatever was down there, it doesn’t like the light. I put my hand over my décolletage as I attempt to calm my beating heart.

I’m in an alien prison maze called the Kirakos. With actual aliens. Some of them are bad aliens. I really should try to remember that.

“Hey, Opal.” I jump at the sound of my name, incredibly relieved when I see Lyra, one of the alien inmates, walking past me. “Everything okay?”

She’s a Jiaka. They have three eyes and are short, even by my five foot three standard. They’re also apparently thieves, which is why they’re in the Kirakos.

“I’m fine.” I give her a smile and a wave. “I’ll be along in a minute.”

She blinks her three eyes at me, flaps a hand, and walks on, the long way.

I drop my hands to my knees, leaning over as I finally catch my breath. I

left the bucket back in the alleyway, and I won't be going to retrieve it.

Or using the shortcut again.

I make my way around to the large open alcove where food is prepared for everyone in this quadrant. There's a mix of species, some Jiaka, some who look like furry raccoons (so cute, but don't touch, they don't like it), and one or two hungover Sarkarnii, the huge, huge alien males who are covered in scales and *turn into dragons!*

Real dragons, with wings, tails, flames, horns, the absolute lot. I never thought I'd get to meet a dragon, so I'm chalking this particular experience up as a win on the alien abduction front.

Not much else is, including being stuck in an alien prison where just about everything seems to be designed to kill me...horribly.

I have to think about my friends, the other humans who are also stuck here with me, abducted in a similar manner, late at night on a lonely road. Although I don't believe any of them were offered up as a tribute like I was.

Friends who will be wanting their breakfast soon, just like everyone else. It's not my turn to cook, but I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd help out.

"Sorry, Mistress Loani," I call out. "I took a shortcut and tripped." I hold up my empty hands.

I don't want to lie to her, but if they think I did something stupid again, I won't be allowed to help at all. And I love to help.

The Jiaka rolls her middle eye, a universal expression apparently. "Just keep an eye on those kiffily instead." She points to a large skillet where flat, round, pale lumps are cooking. "Keep turning them, or you'll discover they burn, just like the Sarkarnii did."

I see the dark silver male who is looking particularly worse for wear slumped on a bench next to the fire. Mistress Loani makes a low hissing sound which is the Jiaka version of laughter.

"I guess he turned up, in body if not in spirit." I grin at her, using a flat piece of metal to turn the kiffily which is a sort of bread with a strong herby taste I've not yet been able to place.

"It's the spirits he should be looking out for." She chuckles and goes back to basting the massive carcass of the cow like creature called a tralu.

We work in relative peace, save for the occasional clatter as other breakfast items are prepared. Eventually I have a big basket filled with bready goodness, so I carry it over to the long trestle table where everything is being set out and then help put out all the platters and watered down ale-

wine, which the Sarkarnii prefer at breakfast (and the silver male is already helping himself to). Everyone else gets warmed sweetened tralu milk.

“Are you here again?” A heavy hand falls on my shoulder, and I look up to see Jade, one of my lovely human friends, her long dark hair pulled back from her face, looking down at me.

“I couldn’t sleep.” I give her a big smile. “I like to help.”

Jade shakes her head. “You’re too good to be true,” she says, not commenting on the not sleeping thing.

She knows why I don’t sleep. We shared a cell long enough before the Sarkarnii rescued us. I still dream about the night I was abducted and what happened afterwards.

I flap my hands at Jade as we’re joined by Doctor Coral who runs her fingers through damp hair. “You know I love to do it. Being busy is great.” I add.

“You think everything’s great,” Jade grumbles.

“I think things could be worse.” Coral smiles at me. She looks tired, and I know she’s been working on helping those Sarkarnii who are injured.

“They could!” I take her arm and push her into a seat before hurrying to get her some breakfast, making sure I get both of my friends some warm kiffily.

“Have you heard the latest about the space ship?” I say, attempting to contain my excitement.

“You are far too happy for this early in the morning.” Coral yawns.

“She only does this so she gets all the gossip.” Jade rips up her bread into little pieces. “What were you back on Earth, an *influencer*?” She makes bunny ears around the word.

“I worked in PR,” I say, somewhat haughtily. “It’s not the same.”

Jade grunts. I haven’t told her I hadn’t been working for the last six months before I was abducted, or I’d moved back in with my mum because everything had fallen apart, and I couldn’t cope anymore on my own.

No one needs to know those things. I don’t want to make anyone unhappy on my behalf, given the situation we’re in.

A group of Sarkarnii make their way noisily to the breakfast tables.

“Go on then, what about the space ship?” Coral says.

“I hear it’s nearly fixed!” I say, placing my hands flat on the table and keeping my voice low. “We might finally be able to get into space!”

“Great. Swapping a rock for a tin can,” Jade says. “I can’t wait.”

“You’re going to love space.” I clasp my hands together. “Imagine being up in the stars. So romantic.” I sigh.

Even if romance is the last thing on my mind, getting out of this prison is most definitely the first.



DAEOS

The shadow looms over them, their bodies still and unshifted. I don't understand what has happened, nor why they are not here to protect me. It makes a noise I do not want to hear, mouth yawning to reveal teeth upon teeth.

It's my turn to protect...I pull in a deep, deep breath...my parents will be safe...I will see to it...

Something hard slams into my chest. I open one eye with a growl.

Drelx is stood over me, mute as always. He glares down at me. I'm stuffed in an alcove at the entrance of the den quarters, ones I'm supposed to share with my fellow warriors. I dislike the dark and they dislike a light on. My compromise is to sleep here, whenever I sleep.

I wish it were Drasus or Draxx standing over me with disapproval written all over his face. At least they'll fight with me, providing they get enough incentive, which is usually me kicking them in the guts until either they battle or we go to the pit, in Draxx's case.

I like the pit. The pit is good. Nothing else matters but the fight in the pit.

Drelx lifts his lip and exposes a fang. He's hungry and he wants food. I'm hungry too, but I'm fed up of being followed around like a Sarkarnling, all because I was firing up the engines on the *Golden Orion*. Nothing more, nothing less.

The fact one of them exploded was not my fault. I want to get out of this ancestor-forsaken prison as much as the rest of the warriors. I wouldn't do anything deliberately to sabotage our way out.

My stomach cramps. I don't remember the last time I ate.

“Need Draco,” I growl at Drelix. He shakes his head. “See him. Can help,” I snarl.

My ability to string together a sentence deserts me far too often. Stress, battle, fight, nightmares, all rob me of the spoken word.

That head shakes again. I want to kill him.

“Then stay here.”

It’s pointless goading Drelix. The mute nevvver will not bite, no matter what I do. I curl back up in the alcove I’ve pushed myself into. Unless I have my back to something, I cannot sleep.

There are too many things in the dark for sleep. Too much to fight, too much to kill. Too much which wants to kill me. I’ve done too many terrible things for sleep to be easy.

So, when I close my eyes, it’s never for long. Although recently, my dreams have been filled with a scent and a longing I cannot fathom. I quite like being asleep at the moment, when it comes.

I squint up at Drelix, wondering what he’s going to do. Neither of us can shift in these quarters—they’re too small—but his tail has shifted, and it waves gently from side to side as he contemplates his next move.

“Nevver,” I swear at him. “I want to see Draco.”

Drelix shakes his head again and turns away from me.

Big mistake. I shift quickly, and I’m in the air before he can stop me.

A deep roar bellows across the main square. With a flick of my tail, I turn in the direction of the sound, to see all three brothers heading in my direction. Draco, Genera Draxx and Drega, the most feared of all the Sarkarnii, when we were free and hunting through the galaxy on our ship, the *Golden Orion*, and not incarcerated in the Kirakos. The prison maze.

They are not amused. My need to fight and fight wasn’t a problem when we were on the ship, but here in the Kirakos, I’m a nuisance.

The sight of all three sends a frisson of pure delight down my veins. A fight. A battle. All for me. Trouble is my name. It has always been this way.

Draco flames as he gets closer. I dig down inside me, filling my flight lungs, but my accelerant sacs stay empty. I have nothing but the ability to outmaneuver the other Sarkarnii.

Something I’ve always been good at when I want to be.

The general slams into me, and I sink my claws and teeth into his scales, for all the good it will do. Draxx is virtually impermeable to injury, something I learned the first moment I joined his battalion and my rage had

not yet been channeled.

Here in the Kirakos, training means nothing, not anymore. I bite and claw at him, thinking of the pit, of anything other than what they've done to me.

Something slams into the side of my head, my wings are caught in a tight grip, and I'm falling towards the ground, laughing out loud as I hit out, trying to make my blows reach flesh or bone.

My back slams against the ground, temporarily winding me as three clawed feet pin me down. Draxx shoves his face into mine.

"Daeos," he growls, his voice filled with menace. "Be still."

He's shouldered aside by Drega. The massive blue Sarkarnii shakes me until we both shift back.

He shakes his head. "If you want to be free, Daeos," he sighs, "you're going to have to try harder."

"I told you we should have collared him," Draco growls.

"No," both Drega and Draxx say in unison.

I take advantage of their discordance to throw Drega off and scramble to my feet, running swiftly to get away. I love the battle and I love the chase too. Plus, I have some explosives hidden somewhere in the walls just off the main square, ones I haven't been able to get to because I always have a nevvig warrior with me.

"Nev him to the ancestors!" Draco growls out behind me. "Daeos!"

I ignore his tone, rattling my scales at them all.

Draxx and Drega take me from both sides and the momentum carries us for some distance, me sliding on my back until the best scent I've ever known enters my nostrils. We career into some furniture which splinters and crashes around my ears.

The dust clears as I'm sucking in the scent like a Sarkarnii starved. Both my superiors have a foot each on my chest. My wings are semi-shifted, and my tail is lashing with the desire for more violence.

This time there's going to be trouble. The last thing I should do is nev off Draco....

"Hello?" A voice like I've never heard before cuts through all the noise of warriors, Jiaka, and smashing things.

I look up, past the pair of highly irritated senior warriors pinning me down, to see the most beautiful face I've ever seen peering at me.

"Are you all right?" she asks.

Breathless, my mind is an absolute blank as I'm lost in her eyes, in her

scent, in everything about this exquisite female. My hips automatically flip from one side to another. I am completely taken by her.

Which is a mistake. I'm hauled to my feet, ears ringing with a cacophony of threats about what will happen if I shift, and before I can reply, I'm being marched off, arms wrenched up my back.

I crane my neck, attempting to get another glimpse of her, but there is only an angry crowd.

"You've really done it this time, Daeos," a warrior hisses in my ear.

I shrug. It won't be the first time I've faced the abyss. If I've any luck at all, they'll toss me in the pit and leave me there. Alone in the dark, I can battle until I'm dead.

But then I'd never see her again.



OPAL

I'm not exactly frightened of the Sarkarnii. They're big and rough, they like to fight, but they also have something about them. Something noble.

So, when one of them slides on his back to a halt at my feet, I'm a bit conflicted, especially as he has both Draxx and Drega, two huge males who are mated to my friends Ruby and Jem, grappling with him.

He's equally as massive, bright scarlet scales, like a real dragon (I know, they're all dragons, but he's a red one and they're the best), and his long silver hair is everywhere. His eyes are bright like fire, like the flames they can all produce at will.

And as soon as he's come to a stop and I've asked if he's okay, he's spirited away from me, dragged between two of the other warriors and with Draco looking like he's about to explode.

"Fuck me, Opal." Jade wrenches me backwards as the warrior is unceremoniously removed, leaving all around him destruction. "You can sure pick them."

"What? I thought he might have been hurt," I say.

She huffs at me. "They're Sarkarnii. They have hides as tough as old boots and turn into fucking dragons. Smashing up a table is hardly likely to do any damage at all, especially to that one."

"Daeos?"

"Is that his name?" Coral asks, still with a cup in her hand. She always looks completely serene even when chaos goes on around her, like a proper doctor. She takes a sip. "I heard he was trouble."

"What do you mean?" I stare after the warriors until they disappear

around a corner.

“And here’s me thinking you subscribed to the Hippocratic oath and didn’t give away confidential patient information,” Jade says, her mouth quirking up at the corner as she watches Coral for a reaction.

The doctor doesn’t bat an eyelid at Jade’s goading. “That’s for humans,” she says in a way I know she doesn’t believe it for a second.

She sits down on one of the remaining benches with a sigh. “Drasus told me Daeos was an orphan, which is unusual in Sarkarnii society. When he was found, just before they come of age, he was nearly feral. So, he was taken into General Draxx’s battalion, ending up in what must be their equivalent of special forces.”

Coral takes another drink. I find my heart beating overtime in my chest.

“He was very good at what he was asked to do, but he’s never been one to follow orders, not if there’s a fight or food involved, apparently. He loves to cause complete havoc and destruction, and he was the one responsible for the problem with the engines on the *Golden Orion*,” she adds, referencing the mystical Sarkarnkii space ship none of us have seen yet, but is our hope to get out of this prison maze and into the stars.

“None of these Sarkarnii follow orders, Coral.” Jade barks out a laugh. “And you’ll never convince me otherwise.”

Coral pats the seat next to her. I grab a jug of the hot water with herbs in it I know Coral likes and top up her cup before taking a seat.

“There are plenty of Sarkarnii here you could consider *romantically*, if that’s what you want, Opal,” she says. “Maybe Daeos isn’t the right one for you.”

For a second, I bristle. She sounds like my ex. The man who wouldn’t take no for an answer and even after I moved out, he still messaged me, called my mother, sent me flowers, turned up at my workplace.

Until they sacked me because he was rude to a client.

“This isn’t my first time around the block,” I say, gently, getting a grip on my emotions. “I’m thirty-three. On Earth, I owned my own home and had a good job. I know what I’m getting into,” I lie.

Coral takes my hand and studies my face. “It’s not about what you were, it’s about what they *are*.”

“I can take care of myself, Coral,” I say, with every intention of convincing her it’s the truth.

She smiles. “I’m sure you can. You’ve got such a good heart. I don’t want

anyone hurting you. None of us do.”

“I’m tougher than I look.” I push my blonde hair back over my shoulder, wishing I’d chosen today to wear it up, to appear a bit more businesslike.

I mean, there are blondes on Earth who were taken seriously, right?

“I think we all are,” Jade says. “We’ve survived this long, haven’t we?”

Coral nods. “I could do with a hand today, if you’re not busy,” she asks me and Jade.

Jade shakes her head. “I’m working with Mistress Kiki today. And if you lot want more underwear, you’ll be happy for me.”

I want more underwear. I very much want more underwear. Not having any is...odd, to say the least. I nod enthusiastically.

“Can’t argue with you there.” Coral grins.

“Underwear it is,” Jade says without enthusiasm.

I admit, I wasn’t sure what to make of Jade when I first met her. She had a brooding quality about her which had “go away” vibes. But I love a challenge, and I don’t take no for an answer, so it turned out Jade is actually fiercely loyal and incredibly talented when it comes to making things.

A talent she has turned to helping the Jiaka with producing clothing to fit the human females, more practical than the fluttery, pretty dresses they produce on a regular basis. Dresses I’d wear every day if all the humans here in the Kirakos didn’t stop me, damn them.

“I can help after I’ve cleaned up here,” I tell her, surveying the damage done by Daeos and the others.

“The Sarkarnii should clear it up,” Jade grumbles, but she doesn’t push the issue.

“It won’t take long,” I say to Coral as I start picking up pieces of wood and piling up the metal platters. “I’ll come to you.”

As I thought, the clear up doesn’t take long, although none of the Sarkarnii involved in the fracas return to assist. Somewhere out in the maze, I can hear a cacophony of noises which are most likely related to what happened. I didn’t get a good look at the downed male’s face, only his eyes, which burned into me like coals in a grate.

A clatter has me snapping back to the present. I need to help Coral out. She looked so tired, so the sooner I get to her, the better. My friends Amber and Jem are quite pregnant with Sarkarnii babies and neither are having the best of times. Amber can’t be far off giving birth, and I know it’s worrying Coral. Helping a human give birth on an alien planet to a hybrid baby has to

be a concern.

With everything sorted, I hurry away, passing the small passage I was going to use earlier. It will cut at least ten minutes off the trip over to where Coral has set up a small clinic to tend to us humans, the Jiaka, and the Sarkarnii, who rarely need any medical treatment.

I mean, the thing which was down there can't still be down there, can it?

I take a step forward. There's no sound. I've used it before and was fine. It gets dark about halfway through, but that's it. I'm sure it'll be okay this time. I take another step.

Nothing.

Until the growl which rattles my teeth. The growl coming from *behind me*.



DAEOS

Drelix has his arms folded as he stares at me. He is not happy. Neither are Draco and Draxx who are talking on the other side of Draco's main living quarters.

My leg bounces uncomfortably as I stare at my superiors.

There's a faint scent of female in Draco's den which is vaguely calming, although not as utterly delicious as the little female I only caught sight of for a seccari. She lingers in my scent glands, and my head doesn't spin as much, my desire for violence is not as strong. I can concentrate on what my leaders are talking about.

"Liability doesn't come into it, Draxx," Draco growls at the general. "You saw what happened to the *Golden Orion* when he was aboard, something which is going to take half an ev to fix."

"Why do you care, brother?" Draxx replies, his eyes glittering with repressed humor. "You wanted the Kirakos, and now you have it."

"Unsanctioned explosions are not part of me having the Kirakos and you know it, Draxx," Draco snarls, eyes flicking in my direction.

I open my mouth to complain it was not me. Across the room, Drega spots my insubordination and shakes his head. I close it again.

"Our plans have changed," Draco snarls, embers firing from his mouth and nose in evident frustration. "And that warrior has put everything on hold." He stabs a clawed finger at me without even looking. "He was your responsibility, Draxx."

"Mine?" The general looks over at me. "Why is it whenever Daeos does something wrong, he's my problem? You brought him to our den in the first

place, brother!”

“Someone had to take care of the half-feral nevver.” Draco does look at me this time. “He couldn’t be left...where we found him.”

I lift my lips in a silent snarl.

Draxx rolls his eyes. “Warrior!” he snaps at me, and I have no choice but to obey, my feet dragging me towards him.

“General.” I approach him with my head high. If I deserve a beating, I will enjoy the fight. I bow to them both. “Draco.”

He lifts a hand, and for a seccari, I wince, waiting for the blow. Instead a heavy hand falls on my shoulder, warm and without claws.

“Daeos.” He sighs. “This past ev has been difficult for all of us, I know. I could have been a better general.” He looks at Draco who allows smoke to curl from his nostrils, which I take as an improvement in his temper. “You have very special talents, Daeos, ones which have been underutilized and in some cases, repressed. But not here and not with us. You know you’ve always been able to do what you want.”

I nod. I have been indulged. I am fully aware of my shortcomings in every department.

I’m doing everything I can not to tremble under his hand. Being this close to another Sarkarnii who is not wanting to fight me makes my heart beat double time, seemingly wanting to explode out of my chest. I want to flame, but there is no flame.

“Belek experiments,” I burst out, unable to stop myself. I wanted to be more sure before I said anything to Draco and Draxx.

Draco turns his sharp gaze on me before returning to his brother. “Another one? Were all my warriors *befouled* by the Belek?”

“Need to be stopped.” My mouth is not engaging with my brain today. Not at all, given what I’m blurting out in the hope I can be of some assistance and no longer need a constant chaperone.

“They have been, Daeos. The Belek are gone,” Draxx says, a kindly tone in his gruff words as he stares into my eyes. “When did you last eat or drink, warrior?”

But if the Belek have gone, how come I still scent them in the air from time to time? Not stale, but fresh? How come I’ve heard them?

“Get him fed,” he orders Drelix, “and make sure he drinks something other than ale-wine.” He sniffs over my skin. “A visit to your den aquium might not go amiss either, warrior.”

I stare at Draxx in wonderment. How my general knows what I need is impressive and the reason I obey him. However, before my voice returns, Draxx is already turning away, using his bulk to propel me towards Drelix.

Drelix rolls his eyes, and his tail lashes as I crash into him deliberately. He knows what will happen if he tries to do anything with me I don't want to do.

"Bring him to the undercroft when you're both done," Draco says, a distinct edge to his voice which has "do not disobey" threaded through the tone. "Daeos is mine, for the time being. Until I decide what will be done with him."

Yep, I've well and truly neevved things up this time. Whatever Draco has in store for me, it's unlikely to be good. Or to involve explosives or anything else I actually enjoy. I'm probably going to be stuck in a dark hole somewhere until I beg to be let out.

Draxx shakes me. "Go, now, warrior, before my brother changes his mind," he murmurs. "And try to stay out of trouble."

Drelix clicks his tongue, the only sound he ever makes, as I walk past him and attempt to trip him up with my tail to a chorus of growls from Draco and Draxx.

Outside Draco's quarters, Drelix slams me in the back of my head with a shifted wing before returning to looking completely innocent. I contemplate if this is him attempting to start a fight with me and whether to take the bait.

I take the bait, leaping for him as he shifts and dances out of my way. Any thoughts of no more trouble vanish like smoke from a Sarkarnii who can breathe fire. I need another fight. I will always need another fight. As I shift, pulling in a lung of air, the scent hits me again. It hits me so hard, I'm in the air and leaving Drelix behind before I know what I'm doing.

I have to find the source. I'm not sure my head has ever been this clear since we arrived on the Kirakos and the Belek pumped me full of I know not what but left me terrified of the dark and without the ability to flame.

Alongside the delicious scent is another, bitter, evil, and twisted. I see a bright flash of light below me, which disappears into the dark.

It is the female from earlier, the female who absolutely should not be going into the yeykok lair. The slimy shadow creatures have a habit of finding dark spaces and occupying them. Usually we spend time finding them and removing them from around our quadrant, but...

Maybe we've—maybe *I* have been distracted.

And now the female is about to walk without care, right into the jaws of the thing. I shift before I even hit the ground, sprinting after her, as she is a few paces inside already. As I reach the entrance, the stench of the yeykok is immense, as is the darkness it inhabits. I have nothing left to do but growl.

If I can lure it out into the open, it will die for even looking at this female.



OPAL

Whatever is behind me sounds like it has more teeth and claws than strictly necessary. If I run, I run into the unknown. If I turn, I might just be able to get away.

With every hair on my body on end, I slowly spin, until I'm face to face with a scarlet, scaled, and spectacular muscled chest. A chest which seems to go on forever as I look up and up until I see a chiseled jaw, tensed and ticking.

"What are you doing in here, pretty one?" Daeos growls rather than speaks the words, which vibrate through in here.

For a second, when I open my mouth, my voice doesn't want to work.

"It's a short cut," I squeak.

I've never been this close to a Sarkarnii before. They mostly keep their distance and those mated to my friends are pleasant enough but are very good at keeping away from the rest of us. Daeos smells incredible, like wood smoke with a hint of spice and earth. I find myself wanting to press my nose into his scales and inhale.

Which would not be appropriate. At all.

"It is a yeykok lair, and the only thing getting cut today will be the creature who wishes to harm you."

Daeos wraps one arm around my waist while his free hand bristles with the most enormous, sharp claws, each one a harmony in ebony. His chest is wracked with yet another blood curdling growl, and I'm pressed into it, with nowhere to go.

Down the passageway, a shadow moves. Unable to help myself, I jump,

and this causes Daeos to snarl very loudly, releasing me and shoving me swiftly behind him. I have to skip over his tail which is lashing wildly.

“Go,” he orders. “I’ll deal with this.”

It’s only a few swift steps back out into the air and light of the quadrant, and I do not waste any time exiting, then immediately regret leaving Daeos in there.

Especially given the sounds of a tremendous scuffle, punctuated by impressively loud snarls and ending with a soggy crack. Daeos appears in the entrance, covered in black-green slime and with a mile wide smile on his incredibly handsome face.

It’s a face which could make some of the so-called Hollywood heartthrobs weep with jealousy, made all the better for the megawatt grin.

“I disposed of it for you, sweet treasure.” He gives me a completely unnecessary but totally gorgeous bow.

As he straightens, his stunning eyes grow hard, the fire within them turning to onyx. The smile drops away.

“What is it?” My voice is hoarse as fear courses through me.

Have I done something wrong? Should I have reacted to a Sarkarnii bow in any other way than clasping my hands together and allowing my insides to go all melty? I wish I’d asked more questions of the other girls...

Daeos’s lips ripple. It’s then I see he’s not looking at me, but behind me.

Another Sarkarnii, who is in the process of shifting from dragon to almost-man, has landed, one with mauve scales and a frown on his face.

“Stand aside, pretty treasure,” Daeos growls. “I need to deal with this.”

I immediately take a step back as Daeos takes a run up at the other warrior, who slams a wing into his head, toppling him immediately.

With a snarl, Daeos is back on his feet. His words are almost incomprehensible through the mouth filled with fangs, but I fancy I hear the word *mine* growled as he glares at the other Sarkarnii, who holds up his hands in what has to be a universal gesture and then folds his arms, returning Daeos’ glare with a force very nearly equal.

Finally, after the staring contest has gone on for some time, I clear my throat. Whatever the black goo is which is covering Daeos looks like it’s beginning to harden. Two pairs of eyes turn on me. Daeos fires out an arm, and the other warrior goes flying backwards, skidding to a halt on his arse, as I’m stalked by a filthy and sexy Sarkarnii, his hips swinging as he approaches me, tail curling and uncurling.

I am pinned to the spot, unable to comprehend exactly what is happening and how I seem to have ended up right in the midst of the Sarkarnii when they've all been ignoring me since we arrived in their quadrant. Before I can think, he runs a knuckle up my throat and takes hold of my chin between a clawed finger and thumb.

"I have to go, my little treat," he rasps. "I'm in enough trouble as it is." He glances over his shoulder at the warrior, on his feet and heading directly for us. "But I will find you, and we can discuss why you were walking into a yeykok lair all on your own."

He faces the second warrior, holding his hands out to the side, snarling all the while. The other warrior grabs him by his shoulder and the pair of them grow wings, firing up from the ground in a whisk of wind which is surprisingly gentle for the two huge dragons.

That is until the afterburner kicks in, and I'm covered in a cloud of choking dust.

There's something to be said for getting up close and personal with Sarkarnii...or maybe it's just Daeos? My entire body is shaking, and I can still feel the prick of his claws into the skin of my face, see the fire of his eyes. I can still smell him, as if he's stood next to me.

He might be trouble, but he saved me from myself. With legs wobbling, I give the shortcut a wide berth and make my way slowly towards the human quarters, where Coral will be waiting for me.



DAEOS

“What the nev have you been doing?” Drasus looks me up and down before holding up a hand. “I don’t want to know. I trust you’ve had your vitals?”

I nod. I didn’t get much, mostly because I was thinking about the female and the yeykok. The female mostly. Her hair like a shining sun, her delicious scent, and the way her skin felt under my fingers, like nothing I’ve ever touched before, soft, yielding perfection.

And the way she looked at me, as if I was the first Sarkarnii, not Daeos the troublemaker. As if I was a whole warrior again.

“There was a yeykok,” I say, although it seems the conversation might have moved on, given Drasus’ snarl.

He’s still recovering from injuries he sustained when we took the warden and Xicop guard quadrant. It means he doesn’t get out much, and nev me, he is a grumpy Sarkarnii with, if I remember rightly, a very long reach.

I keep my distance.

“Where?”

“Near the morning food area.”

This time, Drasus’ growl is not aimed at me. “We have been remiss in clearing out the nevving things.” He glares at the wall, one arm being held stiffly by his side, an enormous scar running down his shoulder.

“There’s one less now.” I swagger.

“Nev me, Daeos,” Drasus drops his chin to his chest with an exasperated sigh. “I want a full inventory of weapons and explosives, Daeos,” he says, swiftly. “You will not use any of them, you will not even think about using

them, and you will not keep any for your own purposes. You will count them and let me know what we have. That is all.”

He sweeps past me before stopping and grabbing me by the throat, claws digging into my skin. Smoke and embers fire out of his nostrils. I do not let my gaze waver. I would consider fighting him only, even injured, Drasus is more than a match for me.

And I’m still thinking about the female.

“I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt, warrior, because you served the general well, and you were an asset when it came to the spaceworms.”

An asset? Bait more like.

“But if you do anything, and I mean anything but what I’ve asked you to do, I will find a use for the control collar I know Drega has kept for research,” he says, voice dripping with menace. “No one liked being collared, Daeos. I know you didn’t.”

He’s right. Every day the collar was on, every day I could not shift, was agony, a torture I dealt with because I’ve endured worse.

Although once it was removed, like Draxx, I rejoiced. At least until the other issues manifested.

“Yes, Drasus.” I sigh.

He muscles up to me, smelling like female and healing. I wrinkle my nose. “If you do this job well, maybe the little female you’re keen on will take an interest.”

I open and close my mouth a few times. “Female?” I say. “What female?”

My head is already filled with her sweetness. It’s as if she’s in the room, and unable to help myself, I let out a growl. How does he know? How can he know?

Drelix!

The nevvver might not speak, but he has ways of communicating, and he has informed Drasus about my female.

I need to protect her. From me. From everyone else.

“No female will want me.” I square up to Drasus. I may as well accept what I am and how unlikely it is the female with hair like a supernova star will even want to look in my direction. “So, there is no female.”

My skin prickles as if flamed, my hips restless, and my tongue seems to be covered in fur. Given I’ve not been eating raw tralu recently, I’m sure it isn’t. In my neck, there is a pulsing, setting my veins on fire.

“If you can control yourself, Daeos, if you can reach the pit inside you

where I know you have calm, she will want you. Possibly before you rut for her.” Drasus steps back, his gaze raking over me as I do my best not to shake, as usual. “Although it might already be too late.”

“I can’t rut,” I snarl. “I am not capable.”

“If you say so, warrior.” Drasus snorts, mouth quirked at the corners. “But if you want to see your female again before it gets dark, I suggest you get to work.”

He leaves me in a wreath of smoke and embers. Only Drasus and Drega know I have lost my flame, something I have been unable to inform Draxx about. Something my general should know, but I haven’t been able to bring myself to tell him.

Grumbling to myself, I make my way through to the armory which is buried deep under Draco’s quarters. Or possibly under the main square. I might be happy to sleep on a bed made up of blankets and psi-grenades, but most other Sarkarnii have a distrust of such things. I’ve no idea why. Making stuff into smaller stuff with extreme prejudice fills my soul with joy.

It’s probably one of the reasons none of my fellow warriors want to share den quarters with me though, given my desire to sleep with my psi-grenades on occasions.

The armory is dark. I step inside, expecting the lights to go on, but they do not. I would not be expected to use my flame in here, if I had any, so the lack of lighting is curious.

The heavy door slams shut behind me.

I am a Sarkarnii warrior. I am death. I am destruction.

The dark is the dark. There is no fight for me here.

There are only the things. The ones which want to wrench my soul from my body, who took my flame, who made me weak.

I don’t know when the things crawled into my life. All those years I spent alone as a child? Possibly. All the missions doing the High Bask’s dirty work as a silent warrior? Maybe. My time in the confinement pod at the mercy of the Belek? It didn’t help.

I can’t process any of it. All I know is the howling, the rushing of wind, and the feeling of helplessness which curls around every organ in my body. All my strength, and I cannot fight it. All my shift, and I cannot shift. I am a Sarkarnling once again, alone and desperate next to the bodies of my parents.

Their deaths went unavenged. And the things know it.

They know everything about me.

When Drusus finds me, I know not how long later, I haven't done the inventory. I haven't even moved from my position on the floor.

Wordlessly, he helps me up without comment, and propels me out into the light.

“Find your female, Daeos. Find your way forward.”



OPAL

I don't make it to Coral. Instead I end up in our quarters, in the bathroom, which is probably my favorite place on this prison planet.

The bath is about the size of a swimming pool. Well, I'm probably exaggerating, but it is big and deep and filled constantly with hot water. We've yet to discover anything which can create an authentic bubble bath experience, and the Kirakos' version of soap is liquid, used for everything but weirdly non bubbly, however the bath remains an indulgence we all love.

And I get it all to myself today because everyone else is doing other things. I strip off and wrap a sheet which passes for a towel around my body. My stomach is churning over and over, and I'd be no use to Coral, even if I was with her.

I feel bad, almost about to pull my clothes back on and go do what I said I'd do, but the pull of the bath, soothing waters to quiet my spinning mind, fills my senses, and I slip blissfully into the huge tub.

Time is immaterial in the Kirakos. We've worked out a day lasts around twenty-six hours, but we know it's all artificial. The Sarkarnii operate on their own time anyway, with seconds as *seccari*, almost an hour as an *uri*, a day, such as it is, is called a *tick* and a year (give or take) is an *ev*. Everything else in between is referred to as portions of these timings.

So here, the Sarkarnii operate as they wish, sure meals are served at regular intervals throughout the day, along with regular celebrations which last into the "night," but there are always dragons, always.

I'd say I've got used to it, but how can you get used to being abducted and then dumped somewhere a long way from your home planet? Especially

when your ex, a streak of shit called Dave, when confronted by aliens the size, shape, and smell of a wheelie bin, pushed you forward and said, *take her*.

I'm not sure I'll ever forget the cruel smile on his face when they did.

I am doing my very best here, but Daeos has introduced something weird into my brain. A desire to, well, see him again.

After Dave, trust is in short supply. I'd agreed to meet him again, after we broke up, because I'm a soft touch, and look what he did! I can only trust those around me who have proved themselves. Like Jade, who held me when I sobbed. Or Coral, who is an amazing person, or Ruby, who is the very definition of a bad ass or my two lovely pregnant friends, Amber and Jem, who are so cute with their Sarkarnii mates I could just die. Along with my other gorgeous Jiaka friends, Mistress Leoni and Mistress Kiki of course.

But mating...being with a Sarkarnii...it's not for me. I'm Opal Jones. I do good. I don't do Sarkarnii males. Especially as I've also heard their anatomy is somewhat different to what is expected, *down there*.

In the hot water, I shudder. I shouldn't even be *thinking* about Daeos' *down there*.

I should not be allowing it to make my hands drift down my body to explore parts of me which have long gone unused, save for the vibrator in my bedside drawer. Although, living with my mum for the last six months meant use of the same was extremely rare.

I absolutely should not be using Daeos, and his endless abs, as wanking material.

"Hey!" Coral's bright voice has me scrambling for the side. "I thought you were coming to see me?"

"Oh, er—I got caught up in some trouble," I splutter out. "I felt like I needed a bath."

"O-kay." Coral elongates the word. "I'm no psychologist, but I am here if you ever want to talk, Opal."

"It was Daeos." The words rush out of me as a way of deflecting all the conflicting emotions within which I probably should talk about but can't bring myself to do.

"What was Daeos?" Coral's face darkens. "If he's hurt you, Opal, I swear to god..."

I can't help but laugh.

"I'm not sure there is a god, Coral, but thank you." I smile and she

relaxes. “What I meant was, there was a monster and Daeos saved me from it. He got pretty banged up in the process. He didn’t come to see you or Drega did he?”

At the mention of injury, Coral goes into doctor mode.

“No, we’ve had no patients today. Not that the Sarkarnii need much in the way of healing. It’s rare if their shift doesn’t fix what’s wrong.”

“Oh, that’s good then,” I say with a sigh, floating a little easier in the water.

“Er, Opal.” Coral points a finger behind me.

“What?” Too late, I realize my floating has exposed my bare bum. “Sorry!” I trill. “I’d have thought you’ve seen plenty of those.”

“Far too many, I suppose.” Coral sighs. “What’s one more in the grand scheme of things?”

I snort. “Seen any alien male bottoms you like?”

“Don’t deflect.” She turns her laser like glare on me. “What exactly were you doing with Daeos and a monster anyway?”

“Um...” I’m wondering how to tell the most risk averse person I’ve ever known I took a short cut in a prison maze filled with creatures which have far too many teeth.

Fortunately my explanation is halted by the sounds of crashing out in our quarters.

“What the...?” Coral furrows her brow and throws me a towel down next to the bath as she goes to investigate.

I don’t really want to get out, even if my fingers have started to go wrinkly, but I don’t think it’s fair to leave Coral to deal with whatever is happening. Reluctantly, I heave myself out of the water, and I’m wrapping the towel around me when the door bursts open and what I thought was a big bathroom is filled with seven foot plus of scarlet, agitated Sarkarnii male.

“Mine,” he growls, causing a huge reverberation to fill the room. “MINE.”



DAEOS

This entire place is filled with the scent of females, but I can pick out my female anywhere. She is definitely here.

Although she's not under the furniture in the ante room or in any of the first two rooms I check. Given my skin is on fire, and if I could flame, I would be flaming, my need to shift is getting greater and greater, while the area to shift in is getting smaller and smaller. It's a distraction when a different female steps into my view.

"What are you doing in here?" she fires at me.

From the room she's just exited, the scent of my female is incredibly strong, along with the scent of water, which is not my favorite thing at all. Is my female drowning? Has this female been drowning my female?

With a snarl, I stamp towards her, and she backs away.

"Daeos! You can't go in there!" the female cries as I shove at the door.

Stood next to a Sarkarnii sized aquium, is my female. Regardless of the water which runs from her hair, pooling around her feet, she is here, and she is safe.

"Mine," is the only word which comes out of my lips. "MINE."

"Daeos," she says, and my name sounds like nectar on her lips. "Get out!"

I blink at her.

"I mean it." She stamps a little foot. "This is our bathroom. You have to get out!"

"But..."

"Go!" She swings her arm out, pointing her clawless, pink finger to the

doorway, where the other female stands, hands on hips and very annoyed.

I know very annoyed stances of old. I've seen enough of them in enough species, including my own.

"Female?" I growl.

"My name is Opal, not female." She returns my growl and I stumble back. "Wait for me in the ante-room."

She takes a step towards me, clutching the cloth wrapped around her body to her. I fall out of the doorway, and she slams the door closed.

"Warned you," the female in the corridor says.

"Opal." I roll her name around my brain, reveling in how it feels, how perfect it is, just like her.

My skin is still itching like crazy, like I want to shed, but also I don't want to shed. My accelerant sacs burn at me as if, for once, they are filled. My neck aches and aches as my veins remind me how on fire they are.

"Come on." The female pushes past me. "You can wait out he—" Her voice halts, along with the rest of her, as she reaches the ante-chamber.

The one I wrecked, looking for Opal.

"Um." I rub at the back of my neck. "I can put this right?" I suggest.

"Be my guest." She gets closer to me, eyes narrowing and dark expression on her face which, even if I don't know females and humans, doesn't bode well. I want to edge away. I don't like being close to any female except Opal, I've decided. "But if this isn't sorted out by the time Opal gets here, you're going to be in big trouble. She made a real effort with this place."

Nev it to the ancestors! I came to claim my female, and I'm already at severe risk of being envenomated before I've even had a chance to dance for her, or even scent her properly.

I mean, I did scent her, and she was only covered by a sheet...

A sensation I cannot recall having had for a long time floods my body. My hard cock pushes at my pouch, wanting to emerge, to be touched and sheathed. I swallow.

This is the wrong time. I need to distract myself, somehow. I whirl around the females' ante chamber, attempting to right the furniture I tipped, to put things back to how they should be. Only I don't remember how they were, so I do what I can until the place looks less like I've blown it up with some of my favorite explosives.

"Daeos?"

I turn at the sound of her sweet voice. My Opal is standing across the room from me, her eyes wide as she takes in my efforts.

“What happened?” she asks.

I open my mouth to explain I was looking for her, and there was always a possibility she was stuck under the furniture, but I don’t get a chance to reply.

“Are you hurt?” She quickly crosses over to me, grabbing hold of my arm and very nearly causing my cock to emerge from my pouch involuntarily.

Thank goodness General Draxx taught me the importance of pants.

“I am unharmed. This was sort of my fault.” I say, voice hoarse for some reason.

“You *are* hurt!” She turns my bicep and there is a very small cut, something which will heal in the next uri without any intervention.

“It is nothing.”

“It is not!” She turns her head and yells at an impressive volume, “Coral!”

I stagger a little, overwhelmed by her scent, her proximity, and her ability to make a noise.

“Sit down.” She shoves me at a chair. “I’ll get Coral to check you over. Make sure you’re okay.”

“But this was...”

“What is it, Opal?” The other female, presumably Coral, appears with a sour look on her face, directed at me.

“It’s Daeos. He’s hurt. Can you help him?” Opal pleads.

Her voice is so filled with pain, I can’t help but growl at the mere thought she might be unhappy. Her head swings back to me.

“Is it sore?” Her eyes are filled with water, and I want to destroy the furniture all over again at the look on her face.

In fact, if I could flame, I’d burn the entire of the Kirakos for her. I catch her chin between my finger and thumb again, desperate to stare into the deep pools of her eyes which flicker between green and blue. I want to burn her image into my retinas, so I never have to close my eyes and see emptiness again.

“Nothing hurts when you are here, my sweet treasure.”

Just at that moment, a searing pain rips through my arm, and the other female, Coral, gives me a smug look as she slathers on some healing gel.

“How about now?” she asks.



OPAL

“Coral!” I glare at her as I feel Daeos tense up, even if his expression does not change.

“You didn’t see what he did to this place,” she grumbles.

I probably don’t have to. Not a single stick of furniture in our living area is in the position we left it. There’s broken crockery which has been brushed under one couch, by a tail if the single sweep is anything to go by, and at least two chairs now have a rakish vibe which they didn’t have before.

“What happened?” I ask Daeos gently.

I can feel his soft tremble through my fingers, and there’s a look in his eyes, both far away and laser focussed, which has me wanting to make sure he is not hurt, physically or otherwise.

“I was looking for you,” he says, averting his gaze. “I can get carried away sometimes,” he adds.

“There’s being carried away and there’s being a fucking bright red dragon tornado,” Coral snaps.

“I didn’t mean to damage anything,” Daeos says, and the pain in his voice is far too real. “I wanted to see Opal.”

“That doesn’t mean you can come charging in here...”

“Coral?” I stop my favorite doctor mid flow. “Can we have a moment?”

She swings her gaze between Daeos and me. My big scarlet Sarkarnii does his level best to look innocent, and I’m pretty sure it’s something he’s practiced. Practice not making perfect in this instance. My heart does a weird, lazy flip in my chest at the handsome warrior attempting to make himself look small and non-threatening.

I absolutely should not be finding any of this funny, but I think I might possibly explode with laughter if he doesn't stop.

"Fine," Coral fires at me. "But he's trouble, and he'd better not be here when Jade gets back."

"Yes, *mum*," I say as she sweeps away, grumbling under her breath.

"That female is your mother?" Daeos has furrowed his brow and now looks cuter than ever. "I was unaware the humans were related."

"No, Coral is not my mother. I'm calling her that because she's behaving like a mother. I'm taking the piss."

Daeos' expression doesn't change. If anything, the creases in his forehead get deeper.

"I'm making fun of her?" I suggest. "Because she's behaving like a mum."

"I'm not sure what a mother would do in these circumstances," he replies. "I lost my mother when I was a Sarkarnling."

Okay, I think my heart might be trying to get up my throat and into my mouth. Daeos suddenly looks so damn lost I can hardly breathe. Then, he changes, straightens, and yet another growl rips through him.

"Sarkarnii." He rasps the word, lifting his head and sniffing the air.

"Not here." I smile at him. "The only Sarkarnii who's ever dared to come in here uninvited is you."

"I don't want any other males close to you," Daeos says, his swirling eyes filled with flame, the pupils mere slivers of black.

"I can assure you, I do not want any males close to me either," I whisper, but it's not clear if Daeos hears me as he gets to his feet.

Only his tail remains curled proprietorially around one of my legs.

"I..." His stunning eyes flicker from me to the door until, finally, I hear it.

Outside there is a rumble, which grows louder, like an explosion. Daeos' face tenses.

"Are you in trouble?" I ask him, standing too and pressing my hand on his chest.

His head swivels, and his eyes trail from my face down to my hand. I can feel him vibrating underneath my touch, his scales soft, slippery, and warm. The delicious smoky scent which surrounds him surrounds me too. He stares at my hand for so long, I pull it away.

Only for it to be captured in a huge red one, onyx claws curving around

my slim fingers. He presses the hand back over his chest where I feel a huge heart thumping in a slow, almost lazy rhythm.

“I have to go,” he says. “There will be trouble. I am trouble.”

“Then go.” I smile up at him, taking in those chiseled cheekbones, so fine and rare. “Trouble.”

The clawed hand flattens over mine as the corner of Daeos’ mouth lifts, exposing a fang.

I’ve seen many smiles in my time, but as far as Daeos’ goes, this has to be the cutest and most deadly I’ve ever experienced.

He is a bundle of sharp objects rolled up into a delicious package made from acres of muscles, iridescent scarlet scales, and long silky silver hair, which tumbles down his back and over his shoulders like a waterfall. I admit, here and there the evidence of what he did this morning still clings to him in patches of black goo and what is underlying his sweet woodsmoke scent is something I probably don’t want to consider too much.

“Can I...come back...here?” he asks, and somehow the vibration within him is both a swagger and a terror.

“Why?”

“For you, Opal.” He says my name as if he’s testing it out, rolling it around his mouth and tongue. “To be with you.”

“Not to destroy any more furniture?”

His eyes slide to one large couch, and they flare as they return to me.

“I can’t promise anything, only should it happen, you will be a part of any such destruction,” he rumbles, sending shockwaves through me.

I am hot? Why am I hot? Did it suddenly get hot in here?

“What sort of destruction?” I ask in a breathy voice I didn’t even know I had.

Daeos leans into me, head dipping, and I’m enveloped in his smoky scent, intoxicated by it, by this huge male being so fucking gentle.

His lips are aching close. Just a few more millimeters and I could taste him.

“Any sort you desire,” he rasps.

Then the huge bulk, which I hadn’t even realized was holding me up, is gone and I’m stumbling into thin air, gasping for breath.

“What just happened?”

I’m absolutely sure my thought is in my head, until I see Coral *and* Jade standing across the room from me. Jade has her arms folded and she’s staring

right at me.

Come to think of it, that thought *was* in Jade's voice.

"Daeos." His name lingers on my lips.

"Yeah, I saw Daeos. I also saw you about to throw yourself at him," Jade snaps.

"I was not!"

I so was. If he had kissed me, I'm sure resistance would have been futile.

"Did you even hear what I was saying about him earlier?" Coral chimes in, clearly not having heard my joke about her being "mum."

"It doesn't make him a bad...dragon," I say, spreading out my hands. "He's misunderstood, is all."

Jade scoffs. "Fuck that, Opal. Misunderstood is utter bollocks. It's used to excuse all sorts of bad behavior, like coming into our quarters and trashing them."

"Ah, come *on*, Jade. That's not fair and you know it. You can't apply our societal norms to the Sarkarnii. They're honest-ish, fair, and they have a code of honor which I've never encountered," I retort. "Not once have I ever, ever felt afraid here, even when they're celebrating hard and the ale-wine is flowing. They hardly even look at us. Don't make this about you."

As soon as I've said the words, Jade's face darkens. She walks away, back into our quarters, without a word.

"Shit!" I swear under my breath and run after her. "Jade?"

Coral puts out her arm and grabs me. "Don't. Just leave her until she calms down."

"I can't," I wail. "I shouldn't have said what I said. It wasn't fair."

"For what it's worth, I completely agree with Jade that Daeos is trouble, but I also agree with you regarding the Sarkarnii," Coral says, still not letting me go. "I know you're old enough to look after yourself, Opal. But none of us want to see you hurt, that's all."

She releases me, but I don't go after Jade.

"I don't believe Daos would hurt me," I say quietly.

"Not intentionally, I'm sure," Coral says with a supportive smile. "He's not whole, like the others, Opal. So, just be careful, whatever you decide to do."



DAEOS

I can smell males everywhere, far more than I ever noticed. Sarkarnii nevvvers who might be interested in my female.

Only when I get outside the human quarters, there are none. Perhaps they are hiding from me. Perhaps they are hiding in order to ambush her?

Which means, whatever else I should be doing, I'm going to have to keep watch, ensure my Opal is safe from all the other males. I scan the area. On one of the walls, high up, there is a crack from where they last moved position. It will make the perfect look out. I don't bother to shift completely, and in a couple of strokes of my partially shifted wings, I'm up to where I need to be.

My scales are itching like crazy, worse than when I need to shift. My blood feels like it's on fire, and the ache in my neck is getting worse, but as I settle in for my vigil, some of my pain eases.

"What the nev are you doing here?" Drega fires at me.

I snarl, only a little, at his sudden appearance. He and his mate were understanding when the Belek attacked. He still has the scent of female clinging to him, and while it's not my female, it has a similar calming effect. My heart still pounds and the growl stutters in my throat.

The big blue Sarkarnii healer gives me a look which I know will lead to a dose of paraxio if I don't behave. I enjoy the drug as much as he hates it, but with a female to take care of, I do not have time to spend in the grip of it, and in any event, the thought sours my mouth.

The only sweetness I crave is her.

"Why are you using explosives outside our den?" I retort.

Drega narrows his eyes. "I'm working on something. I'd rather you didn't tell my brothers for the moment. The explosion you heard was in error."

"If there are explosives, I want to be involved," I growl.

Drega returns my growl.

"I thought you were working with Drasus, keeping out of the way?" Drega allows his gaze to slip, searching for my shadow, Drelix, no doubt.

"Drasus let me go." I stare down into the area in front of the humans' quarters, daring any Sarkarnii to walk past.

"To do what?"

"To see a female."

"You're in rut?" Drega grabs my shoulder, and almost immediately, we're tumbling down the wall, a whirl of half shifted limbs, and I attempt to bite, scratch, and claw at him.

We land at the bottom and somehow the lucky never is on top, his hands around my throat, constricting as I laugh and attempt to kick in between his legs or gouge his eyes. I am not beaten.

But I'm sure he didn't pick a fight with me, and I don't want to nev our healer off.

He studies me closely before leaping backwards to freedom, tail lashing.

"I don't know about rutting. I want to fight." I snarl at him, assuming the warrior stance, in case I've read the situation wrong.

He doesn't move.

I have read it wrong.

I scratch at my neck. Our brief tussle has sent the fire in my blood soaring.

"Are you able to flame yet?" he asks.

I wish I'd never told him, in a brief moment of weakness, just after the detonation on the *Golden Orion*, when I was injured and required his assistance, that I had been robbed of the ability to produce fire. I was trying to offer an explanation, an excuse, something for the destruction wrought, which was not my fault.

No one believed me. Instead, I let slip a secret I wanted to keep. The fire within me is out. I shake my head. Drega hums before approaching me carefully, hands held wide open.

"I've never seen a pre-rut before." He narrows his eyes as he inspects me, without touch this time. "I didn't think it was possible."

"I don't rut."

“I’ve heard that before.” Drega snorts out a long curl of smoke, shaking his head. “All Sarkarnii rut, even contrary nevvvers like you. The physiological changes might even bring back your ability to flame, along with other things...”

My heart feels like it’s seized up. I’m struggling to breathe, to think straight, to stand upright.

“Rut or no, she will not want me. I am a broken thing.” I rasp the words, almost before I’ve thought of them. “I cannot rut for one as fine as her.”

“You may have no option if she is your fate, your heartsfire.” Drega sighs.

I can tell he wants to get closer, but unless he wants to fight, it is not happening. I allowed him to make me wash once. Never again.

I take a step back.

“What if I am not worthy of the rut, of a female?” I ask.

“You mean what if she doesn’t want a half feral, uncontrolled Sarkarnii warrior who cannot follow orders if his life depended upon it?” Drega raises his eyebrows. “Or the one who would blow up a spacecraft engine? Or the one who would battle for his fellow Sarkarnii, no matter what?”

I am all of these things, and it is too much. There is a snarl on my lips and a growl in my throat, anger rising at what I am, who I am.

How unworthy I am.

This time I do not contain my shift. This time, my whole Sarkarnii erupts from me, carrying me into the air, as high as the upper echelons of the Kirakos, where I hope to breathe again.

Below me, Drega stares. He shakes his head.

“Control, Daeos,” he calls up. “It’s all about control.”

I am everything they call me and more. I am trouble. Opal cannot have such trouble laid at her door.

Which means, if I want to watch over her, I will have to control myself. I will have to ensure I am a warrior she can trust, even if she can’t be mine. She should be free to go about her business as she wishes, without concern for melebuk or yeykok.

I will find all of these creatures. I will destroy them, and I will ensure her safety.

If it means I have to go into the dark, I will. For her.



OPAL

“What are these doing here?” Coral holds up a bundle of clean rags which I’ve managed to leave in the room she refers to as the “sluice.”

I look down at the other packet in my hand, the one I’m just about to put away on the shelf.

“Sorry.” I take the second bundle from her. “Distracted.”

I’m helping my friend straighten up the small area she’s sectioned off for her human patients. It’s sterile and functional, but I wouldn’t expect anything less from Doctor Coral. She’s strong and caring. I wish, sometimes, I’d known her on Earth. Not that our paths would have crossed. Not only is she from London and I’m from Yorkshire, but given I worked for a small PR agency in a tiny market town, our respective career paths would never have converged.

And I was only in the little PR firm because Dave insisted I stay local. Because somewhere like London wasn’t for people like us.

“When will you get it into your fluffy little head, you’re not good enough.”

The words still ring hollow in my ears because in my heart, I knew he was wrong. But it took me finding the text messages on his phone, the ones where he was texting another girl, to shake me enough to walk away.

And the night on that lonely road where the lights blinded us and the smell suffocated me? The night he insisted we go out for dinner, but I still paid. The night he told me I’d never find anyone else better than him?

Same night he offered me up instead of him. Sacrificing me to save his own damn skin. I’d like to hope my mum would have reported me missing

and he ended up being the subject of a police investigation, but he'd already persuaded me not to tell her we were meeting.

So, no one knew. Not even my family. They'll think I left them. Dave managed to destroy not only my trust in men, but my entire family too. They loved him, my mum particularly. He could do no wrong and when I left him, they thought me silly and brainless.

I swallow down the tears which spring to my eyes.

"Hey." Coral takes both bundles from me and puts them on the shelf. "Are you okay? Are you still thinking about Daeos?"

"About Earth," I choke out.

Coral wraps an arm around my shoulder. "I miss it too," she says.

I want to tell her everything. About how I don't miss Earth, I don't miss my family's clawing need for me to the detriment of everything else, including my job. I want to tell her my desire to get off the Kirakos has nothing to do with getting back to Earth and everything to do with seeing the stars and everything out in the rest of the universe.

I want to tell her being abducted by aliens is probably the best thing which has ever happened to me.

But I don't. Instead I nod and go back to stacking.

"Have you heard when the Sarkarnii are likely to get their ship working?" Coral adeptly moves to an adjacent subject and one which, fortunately, doesn't involve Daeos.

My huge scarlet warrior with eyes burning into my soul, who sets parts of me alight which have not been touched for a very long time.

Easy, Opal!

"Ruby told me Drega's nearly finished. Most of the repair work is completed on the engine, and they're intending firing it up in another couple of days." I reply.

"Oh," Coral says.

Something seizes around my heart. "You are coming with us, aren't you?" I ask.

"It...it depends," Coral replies.

"No!" It's my turn to catch her hand and make her look in my eyes. "You have to come. You can't stay here."

"The Sarkarnii say it will be safe with the Ragad in charge. Ruby told me they have full control of the Kirakos. And there are creatures here which need my help," Coral says, unconvincingly.

“If the Sarkarnii decide to leave in the next few days, there are two humans who are going to need your help. Three,” I say triumphantly. “Ruby thinks she’s pregnant too, so we need you as much as the Kirakos!”

I probably shouldn’t have said anything about Ruby, but I have to make sure Coral stays with us. There’s only the six of us. We have to stick together.

Coral looks worryingly unconvinced.

“We’ll see if they get the ship going,” she says, turning away from me, and my heart sinks to my boots. “I’m just not sure my destiny lies with a bunch of dragon warriors who are perfectly capable of healing themselves.”

It’s bad enough having a scarlet peril playing on my emotions without having to worry about Coral and the others, as well. If I thought being abducted by aliens would be more of a rest, I was very wrong.

At least now I have a mission, a calling, something I want more than anything. I need to make sure Coral comes with us. Not only do I need my fellow humans on my side, but I’m going to need the Sarkarnii to convince her too.

And I know a Sarkarnii she can see the good in, who would be able to show her she needs to stay with us, not in the Kirakos. If any species needs a good PR overhaul, it has to be the Sarkarnii, and I can start with him.

No ulterior motives, of course.

So, I finish up my work, keeping the conversation light, and head out into the prison maze to search for Daeos.



OPAL

I mean, how exactly can a massive, scarlet trouble magnet disappear *from a prison maze*? I must have been looking for Daeos for close on an hour. The evening meal is not too far off, and the Sarkarnii are gathering like sharks at a feeding frenzy.

All except him.

Damn that male. When I don't need him, he barrels into my life like a ton of bricks. When I do, he's like the smoke the Sarkarnii are so fond of producing.

I do yet another circuit of the main square and while there are Sarkarnii of virtually every hue imaginable, and some I have not imagined, there is no Daeos.

Every time I go to speak to one of the males, they have an ability to be elsewhere. Sidestepping, finding someone else to talk to.

If it wasn't for the fact they're generally standoffish, I'd take it personally

Something tickles over my hair, and unable to help myself, I jump at the touch to find the bright mauve Sarkarnii who doesn't speak stood directly behind me. He gives me a soft smile and points up before instantly shifting into his dragon form and flapping away.

Just as something even bigger lands with a thump next to me, making the ground shake. My world is torn up in a series of growls and snarls until finally the shape resolves into the very male I've been looking for.

"Did he touch you?" he rasps. "Drelx. Did he touch you?" He peels his eyes away from me for an instant, every muscle straining as he clearly wishes to go after Drelx but at the same time, wants to stay with me.

“No, but I’ve been looking for you,” I say gently. “I need your help.”

For a second, I think he’s going to topple over. Until he grabs my arm and tows me swiftly into an alcove within the maze wall.

“You need...my help?” Daeos has all of his attention concentrated on me. “My help?” he repeats, as if he’s never been asked for such a thing.

“You do know what ‘help’ is, don’t you?” I smile at him.

“You want me to explode something for you? You want me to deal with Drelix? Or another Sarkarnii? I promise they will not see light again,” Daeos pants out, practically drooling.

“No, NO!” I grab at his hand, and the touch draws him back from whatever dark space his head went to. “Not that sort of help. I need you to convince Coral she should come with us.”

Daeos’ brow furrows deeply. His entire body is trembling because every single sinew is on high alert. In fact, this may well be his default.

Except the Daeos back in our quarters, the one who stilled as we talked, the one who shone with light as I told him he could come back to see me.

I’m not sure anyone has ever been so unadulteratedly happy to be in my presence, no matter what I’ve done. Let alone a seven foot plus wall of muscle, scales, teeth, and fangs. A monster. A perfect being.

I think I might have a thing for monsters. I am a monster fudger, who knew?

“Cor-al?” Daeos draws out the name.

“Our healer. You met her when you trashed our quarters. I think she might have told you off?”

The cutest range of emotions flits over Daeos’ handsome face. Confusion, which makes him look dangerous, anxiety which makes him look like I want to cuddle him, through to recognition, or at the very least a vague memory of what happened a few hours ago.

“The female with the long hair?” he queries, which could be any of my friends. “The one who put salve on me?” He growls.

“Yes, the one who *helped* you.”

Daeos gives me an impressive side eye, which makes me sure he doesn’t consider what Coral did as helping.

“She wants to stay in the Kirakos if we leave. I want her to come with us. I’m sure she would if she could see how wonderful the Sarkarnii are,” I gabble out, my plan sounding increasingly unlikely in the face of this massive wall of dragon muscle and havoc.

“We’re wonderful?” Daeos queries.

This time, I catch it, the crooked little smile as he hitches up a lip, exposing a fang. Then it’s gone as quickly as it was there.

Daeos has hidden depths behind his bombastic, brooding persona. The thought makes my heart beat a little faster.

No matter what anyone says, I’ve seen trouble.

And I think I like him.



DAEOS

My Opal wants my help. I am at once overjoyed, but also, she wants my help with another female. Given I'm not great with the one female I actually like, I am somewhat concerned about my ability to assist.

I'm not entirely sure I understand her reasoning, nor is my inner Sarkarnii particularly pleased she is referring to all Sarkarnii as being wonderful. But, if I am included in the definition, it makes me warm inside. Also, having her soft skin against mine also makes me warm in other areas.

'I've never seen pre-rut before.'

Drega's words hover in my psyche. Am I in rut for Opal? My cock certainly hasn't stirred so much since I came of age and was brought, kicking and snarling, into Draco's den, where I was adopted by him and his parents.

I bet they wish they hadn't been so generous.

"Whatever you want, sweet treasure, if it is within my ability to give it to you, I will. If not, I can take it anyway." I want to dive my face into her shining hair, suck down her scent, and never let her go.

Opal laughs. "I'm sure taking things won't be necessary. I think we can probably convince Coral without the need to do anything bad."

"Are you sure?" I ask. "I'd do anything for you. Whatever you ask. If you need things blown up, it is my specialty."

Opal looks up at me. She has to tilt her head back because she is so small. So easy to pick up and carry away.

"I don't need anything blown up," she says. Then she inclines her head, looking past me into what passes for the sky. "Yet."

My heart soars. It springs in my chest as if I've been on a hunt, fighting in

the pit, or battling with my den mates. It's as if I'm back on the *Golden Orion* before anything happened, when we were carefree, and no one cared who I was or if I made the occasional explosion.

My female makes me feel free as much as she intrigues me. Why would any female like an explosion?

"Be sure you tell me if you do. I don't want to be envenomated for any failure," I say, hoping my serious expression shows her how much I wish to do her bidding.

"Envenomate? You think I'll bite you?"

Nev! My cock is pressing uncomfortably hard inside my pouch. The mere thought of her teeth, blunt though they might be, on my skin is making it want to emerge with some considerable violence.

"Yes?"

"Would you like me to bite you?" Her head is on one side again, those incredible clear eyes studying my reaction.

I do my level best to bite back a groan. This female, my Opal—she is perfection.

"Not envenomate, but yes, bite," I reply, my ability to find my words virtually deserting me, as it was when I was first found.

"Hey." She takes my hand in between her tiny ones. "It's okay."

I hadn't even noticed but I'm shaking, hard.

"Difficult. You." Opal goes to drop my hand, but I capture it in mine, crushing down the squirm of emotions boiling within me. "I mean, finding the words is difficult around you. I have not spent time with many females. I was always considered too unstable."

My breath is short with the effort of concentrating. Mostly on stopping my cock from making an appearance, given I've been in my shifted form since I left Drega and therefore have no pants. The rest of the effort is on being coherent and not reverting back to what I was.

"It doesn't matter, Daeos," she says. My name on her lips is glorious, and my cock is so nevvng painful, I think my pouch is about to cut it off. "What I need is a big strong warrior to be bold and brave. To show Coral she should stay with us."

"I'm not sure...no one usually likes me around." Opal is so close to me, I feel the heat of her skin. Her scent is so strong in my nostrils I can't think straight.

I take a lock of her beautiful bright hair between my fingertips. It is

smoother than the scales on my abdomen, like water slipping over my touch. The light plays on the strands, and they glow like treasure.

“I used to collect bright things. When we lived on the *Golden Orion*,” I say, staring at the soft waves flowing over my hand.

Opal’s hand is on my abdomen. It’s nevvng close to my pouch, and I’m straining every muscle I have for it not to emerge. Females don’t enjoy a surprise cock. Or at least that’s what we were taught.

Remembering my lessons isn’t easy, but this one I do recall.

She reaches up, and her hand trails down my jaw. I lean into the touch.

“I don’t know why anyone said you shouldn’t be around females, Daeos,” she says quietly. “Because I think you are just perfect.”



OPAL

I think my heart burst. It spilled all its contents out and my chest feels hollow. How can anyone have kept Daeos from females, from anything? Save his desire to blow things up for me, he is a gentle, mixed-up giant of a male.

Keeping him apart hasn't helped him at all. The exact opposite, in fact.

My half-cocked scheme to convince Coral has been expunged from my mind. She can stay if she wants, but I don't think she will. The pull of staying with humans, of the adventure in space, will be too much.

Instead I want to learn more about Daeos. He might have a vicious exterior, an ability to cause destruction and chaos wherever he is, but there is so much more to this warrior than anyone has been telling me.

Far from being warned off, I want to spend time with him.

His beautiful flaming eyes are closed as he pushes his hand into my cheek, his body rocking against mine in a slow, easy rhythm which is causing certain parts of me to heat. He inhales suddenly, deeply, an arm and a tail wrap around my body, pulling me into his hard, muscular form.

And I don't mind at all.

Even if some parts of him are harder than others.

Daeos smells like warm leather and tobacco when I'm up close and personal. His entire body is vibrating, and it's hard to tell if it's because he likes me being so close or he's terrified I might *envenomate* him.

"I lack control"—he breathes through his nose—"at the best of times. Females like you are so delicate, so perfect, they cannot be around a Sarkarnii with no control."

Now I know what the vibration is. He is doing everything he can to keep himself under control.

“Females like me?”

“You.” His stunning eyes open and are fixed upon mine. “Only you. I don’t...I can’t hurt you, Opal, but things get hurt when I’m around.”

“I’m not hurt, Daeos,” I rasp, because I’ve finally worked out what the particularly hard part of him pressing up against my stomach is. “You can’t hurt me.”

Which is a lie. If what he is packing is *anything* like what I think it is, he’s going to do some serious damage.

Woah! Hold up there, Opal!

My internal cock block speaks very loudly when it wants to. Shame I’m going to ignore it.

“Not yet.”

“Not ever because you won’t let anything happen to me, will you?”

“No.” He growls the word, and I feel it come up from the bottom of his stomach. “Because you are mine, Opal, my pretty treasure. Mine and mine alone. No other warrior can have you, touch you, look at you. Nothing will ever harm you, not while I draw breath.”

“Then I’m safe...with you.”

Daeos has a heat which draws me in, pulls me close, wraps around me in a way I didn’t think was possible. I’m in the center of him, the tip of a tail curled around my ankle, an arm around my waist.

A face so close to mine I can see every scale, every iridescent flake, the depth of fire in his eyes, the pupils like slivers of onyx as he drinks me in.

I’ve never felt so consumed by anyone, by anything. Daeos is fire, and I am the fuel. My heart stutters in my chest, and I swear he can hear it because I’m lifted from my feet, achingly slowly, as if levitating, and all the while, we do not part, not at all.

This dragon is not in control. I am.

I span my hand over his cheek, the scales smooth as silk, a groan erupting from deep inside as his lips crash into mine.

And I am taken by him. The kiss is like nothing earthly. Daeos sweeps my mouth as if he’s been kissing all his life, constantly. As if he’s been waiting for this moment to become the champion of making my insides melt and my outsides heat to nuclear temperatures.

I am clutched in his claws, tail finding a natural resting place between my

legs as he moves slowly, sinuously against me. Daeos rips any sensible thoughts from my head with his forked tongue, exploring my mouth, tangling with mine, tickling me in ways which send far more than a tingle to other parts of my anatomy.

“You taste like you were sent from the ancestors,” he murmurs, releasing me, oh-so-briefly from the kiss.

His chest keeps up a constant rumble of delight as his hands rove over my clothing until they find entrance, and then, as his skin touches mine, he hisses gently. Fingers drift up my body until he reaches my breasts.

I’ve complained since we got here about the lack of proper underwear (and the inability of anyone, even Jade, to provide anything functional for my big girls), but here and now, the lack of it makes perfect sense. Almost as if destiny has been moving inexorably to this moment.

Daeos moans softly over my mouth as his huge clawed hands explore my breasts, a thick thumb swiping over a needy nipple and causing me to wantonly thrust myself into his hand.

“Sweet treasure,” he whispers, lifting his lips from mine only to press kisses down my jaw and onto my neck, sending my skin tingling with flame.

“Daeos,” I breathe, as if it’s the only name ever to grace my mouth.

“I am in rut for you,” he growls, nipping at the skin on the nape of my neck with his sharp teeth. “I’ve never rutted before, but I need to be inside you, or I think I might die.”

Oh shit. I think if he puts what I believe he’s hiding into me, I most definitely will die. Of an overdose of Sarkarnii cock.

What a way to go!



DAEOS

Opal is sweetness personified. I don't know if I can let her go. My tail certainly has ideas about where it wants to stay, and my shift is threatening the more my lips trail over her delicious skin.

My mating gland pumps the mix into my system with such a force I feel my neck twitch. I've heard of the rut, and I've heard what it does to male Sarkarnii, but nothing has prepared me for the desire to claim my mate.

My Opal. The female in my arms who tastes of promise and desire. Who has been riding my tail with heat flowing from her into me. Who fell into my kiss as if she belonged to me.

She does belong to me. The rut roars in my veins. I have to protect her. I have to keep her safe. I have to...

"Where did you learn to be such a good kisser?" she asks me, her breath coming in short waves, making my heart beat harder, worried for her health.

"Lessons." I can't stop myself from both smiling and growling, which amazingly, doesn't seem to put Opal off. "I was never any good at lessons."

"Oh?" Opal's eyes are shining. "Who told you that?"

I'm sure I hear a growl in her voice too.

"I could never remember my lessons. I would get into trouble." I dip my head for another kiss, glad for these lessons to have lodged themselves somewhere in the back of my brain.

"What else did your lessons teach you?" Opal asks, this time a mischievous smile playing over her lips, ones which are red and puffed from my attentions.

"Many things. How to please a female so she does not envenomate you."

“Oh, really?” Opal wriggles over my tail, and I can’t help myself. The tip of my cock pushes out of my pouch.

Control, Daeos. It’s all about control.

I’m not sure I ever had any, and such shreds that were there are rapidly disappearing as the mating mix fills me up. Opal’s movements are not helping much either.

“Tell me more about what you can do,” she suggests.

Nev! My mouth is dry as my blood heats. I run my tongue over my lips, and the perfume which rises from her is incredible, intoxicating far more than any ale-wine.

I cannot think straight. Every muscle in my body ticks, trembles, *desires* her. I don’t think I can repress my shift, not anymore.

“I need to claim you,” I rasp as my wings extend, catching in the small space we’re tucked into. “I need to consume you until your screams ring in the stars. I need to hook you, fill you, *breed you.*”

The shudder I feel is not from myself but from my pretty treasure. I am enveloped in her scent.

“Breed me?” she squeaks.

“Make your belly swell with my sarkarnling. Over and over. I want to plunder your ripe body, bring you pleasure as you make our young,” I hiss, my cock fully emerged from my pouch, running with pre-cum which hits the floor in a steady drip.

Opal’s eyes are wide, searching my face. I want to think I’ve maybe said too much, but I can’t think. The rut is all there is. The rut and the female I rut for.

“Breed you,” I breathe.

“Oh,” Opal whispers. “No one has ever...I mean...” Her breath comes in rapid gasps. She rides my tail with a delicious slow grind. “Daeos!”

The mating mix sends my head light, but I’ve never been surer of anything in my entire pathetic, pain-filled life. I want Opal. I want her in my arms forever.

“Daeos!”

I hear Draxx’s voice, and it makes me growl.

He calls for me again, and as much as I do not want to respond, as much as I want my Opal in my arms until the rut has been assuaged, ignoring my superior will result in further trouble.

And trouble means I can’t be with Opal.

I nuzzle into her bright hair one last time, sucking down her scent like a Sarkarnii starved.

“I need to speak to him,” I murmur.

“Then speak with him,” she whispers, arching her back and pressing herself against me.

“General,” I say out loud, mainly to ensure he doesn’t come looking farther for me.

If he even looks at my female, general or no, I will fight him. Opal unwraps herself from me, although my tail is having a hard time letting go of her as I step out into the light and gently push her behind me.

“There you are, Daeos!” He snorts out a lungful of smoke before taking a pace back when he spots Opal.

Unable to stop myself, my lips lift, and my fangs lengthen.

“Are you in rut?” He closes the gap between us, pinching my eye open and scenting me until I release the largest growl I think I’ve ever made.

At which point my general beats a retreat I never thought I’d see him make.

“You’re in rut,” he says with an element of glee.

He leans to one side in order to peer at Opal, who gives him a wave as I snarl up a storm.

“It’s okay, Daeos.” She puts her soft hand on my arm. “Draxx is mated to Jem, remember?”

I stop making a noise long enough I can scent the feminine smell which clings to my general and which I can pick out far more than I was able to before.

“Wise female,” Draxx says, studiously keeping his features neutral. “It is good to see you mated, Daeos.”

Behind me, I feel Opal shrink. We might have been entwined not so long ago, and she might have said she wouldn’t envenomate me, but we have not mated.

Confusion wars within me. I don’t want to deny the perfect treasure I vowed to protect. But the rut makes my head feel fuzzier than ever. Draxx studies me carefully.

“I need to go see Mistress Kiki. I usually have dinner with Jade,” Opal says, stepping away from me, despite my tail still curled around her ankle.

“I…” My voice is failing me. I want to tell her to stay, that I’ll explain the rut, if I can understand it myself.

“I’m not going anywhere other than Mistress Kiki’s. You can come find me later.” Opal smiles at me, and my insides instantly melt, my unruly cock wanting to emerge again and my muscles going slack.

“Yes,” I say as she finally pulls free of my tail and walks away.

It takes every inch of my being not to follow her, especially when she looks back at me, and unable to stop myself, one foot slides in her direction.

At least until a hand armed with multiple claws grips my shoulder. I go limp under Draxx’s grip as he drummed into me from almost the moment I was handed to him, feral and snarling. It’s not an action he uses often and one he’s only able to do because the roaring rut has dropped my guard.

“General.” I spread my arms, claws sheathed, as I was taught, if I wanted to avoid serious injury and a visit to the healer.

“Drega said you would be found hanging around the human quarters,” he says, attempting to put a stern inflection into his voice. “I wanted to see it for myself.”

“Opal is my female,” I mutter, still staring in the direction Opal took, although she’s out of my sight and my scales itch like I need to shed.

“That’s as may be, but if you are in rut, you will need a distraction,” Draxx says.

It’s enough to bring my attention back to him.

“That’s possible?” I’m not entirely sure I want to be distracted because some elements of the rut are blissful—the feel of Opal’s skin against mine, her scent filling my nostrils, the mere thought of being sheathed in her.

“Ancestors! It’s going to have to be in your case!” Draxx snaps.

My cock is pressing from my pouch again, pre cum streaming from it. I inspect it with interest, raising a grin to my general.

“Nev it!” he growls. “A warrior in rut is a handful. You’re downright dangerous. Come with me. Drega and I have a task for you,” he rumbles. “One which should keep you out of trouble and let you prove you are a worthy warrior.”

I bristle a little at his words. Draxx above all other Sarkarnii knows what sort of warrior I am.

Although, when I think about it a bit more, he knows what I’m capable of. Probably if there were less explosions and more constructive fighting (not simply any Sarkarnii who crosses my path or any enemy I pick to destroy), I might be more worthy.

But I have done what I’ve done for the High Bask, and Draxx knows it.

“A task which will show your female how much you are worthy of *her*,” Draxx says, his voice low and enticing.

“Whatever you wish, general,” I say smartly. “Let me at it.”



OPAL

The cacophony outside Mistress Kiki's is astounding.

“What the fuck?” Jade swears as the weird sewing machine she's using seems to jump in the air. “I thought we were safe now with no more fucking fighting.”

“This is the Sarkarnii,” says Mistress Kiki, a three-eyed Jiaka with six fingers on each hand, all of which are nimbler than anything I've ever seen. “They are dangerous and noisy.”

I'm not entirely sure the nanobots in my ears translated her correctly, but Jade agrees with a grunt and goes back to her work.

I have a prickle up my neck, and it's not because I've been a model for Jade and she's had me filled with pins. In fact, she's finished off the deep red dress I'm wearing, snorting that it was “far too fucking cheerful, just like you.”

I absolutely love it. The fabric is soft, silky, and like a thick satin which flows and wraps around me in a way which makes me want to dance around.

I might have danced around a bit, until Jade made a growling sound which could rival a Sarkarnii, although after I grabbed her and we performed an impromptu waltz around Mistress Kiki's, she was giggling as much as me.

Jade likes to think she has a dark cloud, but I know she has a light side, and when she shows it, it's wonderful. She has such a kind, giving soul.

“I'll go and see what's going on,” I trill and ignore Jade's comment about me wanting to show off.

I mean, I do. It's a lovely dress. So, I dance out of Mistress Kiki's.

And straight into a wall of scales and muscle.

“Little treasure?” A voice filled with desire, smoke, and sin curls around me.

“Daeos? Was all that noise you?” I ask him.

“Tried to get in while shifted,” he grumbles, rubbing at his nose which is grazed. “Forgot I was too big.” He gives me his oh-so-gorgeous, lopsided grin. “I’ve got a mission, all because of you.”

“You have? That’s wonderful!” I say as a tail winds its way around my ankle. “I’ve got a new dress.” I step back and do a twirl. When I return back to Daeos, he is unnaturally still, his jaw slack. “Do you like it?”

I’m swept up in a pair of strong arms, and a head is shoved hard into the crook of my neck, a forked tongue sweeping over my skin.

“You rob my words, treasure of treasures,” Daeos rasps.

I reach up to trace my fingers over his cheekbones and grazed nose. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. You are too beautiful.”

My cheeks heat.

“I want to show you something.” Daeos grins. “Something good,” he clarifies.

“Okay,” I reply.

And I’m tossed upwards until I’m caught again in a set of claws many times bigger than the ones holding me a few seconds ago.

Daeos is in the air, and I’m finally flying with a dragon.

The rushing wind, jerking, swirling, nausea inducing flight is not fun.

Not how I imagined flying with a dragon might be. Although that was mostly down to my childhood memories of a certain movie. Perhaps I should have tempered my expectations because they are absolutely not being met by my first flight with Daeos.

Plus, I keep slipping down between his claws, my legs hanging in the air. I’m scrabbling to hang onto him, desperately trying not to look down.

I look down.

“Daeos!” His name is ripped from my mouth by the wind and sudden sharp turn he executes.

I am slipping. I am going to fall. My heart is beating out of my chest when a second set of claws grasps me, and I have something I can put my feet on. I bury my head into the crook of his thumb and squeeze my eyes closed.

Whatever is happening, immediately after Daeos made everything about

me sing, I'm not sure I want to know. But I have been abducted by aliens, I've survived, I've made friends, and I've made a life for myself, which is... was going much better than my one on Earth.

I can survive this.

I think.

"Pretty treasure?" The voice which cuts into my thoughts is harsh as well as familiar.

I open one eye. We are no longer in the air. Daeos stands, holding me to him. I slide unceremoniously down his abdomen and onto my feet.

I have to hold on for a long couple of seconds.

"Where are we?" I ask as my brain catches up with everything else.

"My sweet treasure, I have brought you to the *Golden Orion*," Daeos says.

I'm still trying to recover my composure and have my hand on his chest. His heart is hammering in there, seemingly trying to batter its way out. Given how big Daeos is, this sort of heart rate cannot be normal.

Or good for him.

Slowly, I take in our surroundings. The weird smell, like the sea but with a heavy chemical overtone, the towering height of the place, which disappears into the gloom above us. The *space ship* sitting...hovering right next to us.

It is everything I ever expected a space ship should be. A sleek, matte titanium colored ovoid with what I am presuming are engines protruding from each side like swept back dragon wings. It is at once elegant and functional. It looks like it could go to war or park up at the restaurant at the end of the universe.

"Wow. It's a proper space ship," I announce and immediately feel like a cavewoman looking at a smartphone.

Fortunately, Daeos doesn't seem to notice. He's more interested in fingering the slippery fabric of the dress I'm wearing.

"I like this. It feels good," he says with a low, shallow sigh which settles around us like a cat in a soft bed. He continues to toy with the edging, rubbing it back and forth between jet colored claw and scarlet thumb and forefinger. "Drega and Draxx are coming soon. We're going to install the star map, but I wanted to bring you, to show you."

It seems his heart rate is due to excitement, and the tip of a tail winds around my leg. His handsome face is bright, his scales shining.

“They trust me,” he says. “I think they know I didn’t cause the explosion, which I didn’t. It was a trap, a Belek trap.” His face suddenly darkens. “What if there are more traps, ones no one has looked for because they thought it was me?”

My heart leaps into my mouth. “You were accused of deliberately causing the damage?” My voice is hoarse at the injustice.

Daeos may be many things including havoc personified, but he is not a traitor to his kind. It hurts me deep inside they would even think such a thing of him.

“I have form,” he says simply. “I am known for a cavalier attitude to psi-grenades in battle...and in general. I don’t think sleeping with them under my bed helped much either.” He mutters.

The way his lip twitches, I get the feeling he isn’t so bothered about his “reputation.”

“But it wasn’t you.”

“It was not,” he says emphatically, eyeing the ship.

My feet itch with the desire to have a look inside my first proper space ship. I’m not counting how I was brought to the Kirakos because the little I can recall was pretty unpleasant.

The *Golden Orion* looks very imposing, functional, and exciting.

“Can we go on board?”

Daeos has one clawed finger on his lips. “I’m not supposed to, not without Drega and Draxx.”

Something twinges in my chest. “But if you need to check for traps, they would appreciate it, wouldn’t they?”

His brow furrows, and his impossibly handsome face seems more chiseled than ever.

“It would be helpful?” Daeos suggests.

“I think so.” I nod earnestly. “And you know what to look for this time too.”

“Then we’ll go and check.” He grins, reaching for me as though wanting to pull me into his arms.

“Oh no!” I back away as far as the tail will let me and wag my finger at him. “Not again. Last time was more than enough.”

“I have to protect you!” he snarls.

“You nearly dropped me!” I retort.

He blinks at me, squeezing his eyes closed as his brain attempts to catch

up with whatever is going on in Daeos' world.

“You are mine. I would not drop you,” he says, with less of a snarl this time because he's not sure. “I rut for you, pretty treasure.” He gives me the most delightful lopsided smile with far too much fang. “Let me show you my ship while I check it for traps, and maybe you will allow me to claim you?”

After everything he's just put me through, I should be running away as fast as my legs can carry me, but Daeos is shining again, the little neons firing under his scales.

I don't want to change any of it. I want to be with him. And I really want to see the inside of a proper space ship.

I shouldn't be trusting anyone, but Daeos has something spinning inside him, something which calls to me, to my heart. He might have given me the most terrifying flight of my life, but he would not drop me, and the thing inside me which shouts about trust is pushed further and further away.

Dave always said he needed me, but what he meant was he needed me to clean, or cook, or to tell me whatever I was wearing looked awful. But Daeos doesn't need me...he wants me, and this time, I need someone to help navigate my new life.

“Fine, but we walk, okay?” I smile up at him, and his color improves even more. “Being smooshed up against a massive dragon thumb or hanging on for dear life is not what I want to do again today.”

It sends my heart spiraling as his tail wraps around my waist, and I'm propelled up the gangway to get my first proper glimpse of the inside of an alien space craft.



OPAL

Daeos' tail flicks back and forth as he tows me up the entrance ramp into the ship. As we enter, it closes up, and he flinches slightly.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

"I like being on the ship," he says simply, even as he gives the closed door a side eye.

Leaving me, although his tail doesn't want to follow, he's at a small glowing screen next to it, punching in numbers and muttering.

"I've never been on a space ship, other than when I was abducted and brought to the Kirakos. But I don't remember any of the trip."

At my words, Daeos visibly bristles, and a growl rips through his chest.

"No one takes my treasure from me." His tail lashes as he slams a hand on the screen, and it goes black.

"No one will," I say softly. "Are you sure it's okay for us to be here?"

Daeos blinks hard, first at the screen, then at me. Some of the tension in his muscles eases. "Like you say, if we check for traps, there's no harm."

"Welcome, Daeos." A soft, metallic voice wraps around both of us.

My big scarlet warrior narrows his eyes at the ceiling but says nothing in return. But then maybe it's a human sentiment to want to respond to soulless tech.

"I want to show you my ship," he says with a flash of fang. "I want to show you everything, and we can search at the same time," he adds with more enthusiasm, which is almost Daeos back to his old self.

The one which is a whirl of dragon and desire and promises. The one who has set a fire somewhere inside me.

I shouldn't be trusting anyone, given my trusting nature has been abused and abused, yet I trust Daeos with my life.

'You are mine. I would not drop you.'

I link my arm in his. Daeos' huge head swivels to look down at where my hand is tiny against his bulging bicep. He moves again, slowly so he looks in my eyes. A shuddering sigh rolls through this body, and he uses a huge onyx clawed hand to cover mine.

It's hot and dry, the scales soft. Heat swells in his fire flecked eyes.

"Let's go," I whisper hoarsely. "Because I want to see everything, with you."

The grin which spreads over his features is more than enough to wipe away any concerns I have and very nearly takes away the memory of the flight here.

I can't even pretend not to be excited to see a proper space ship which is overriding virtually every other emotion, including caution, but perhaps not the heat which is pooling in my lower abdomen.

We move through what has to be some sort of airlock into a large atrium. I note, with some interest, it has to be big enough for a dragon to fly in, and I try to imagine what it might be like when this ship is filled with Sarkarnii warriors.

"Down there is where we keep our cargo," Daeos says, leaning precariously over the low (to him) barrier. He gives me another, slightly unhinged smile. "The cargo we want to declare anyway. Then there is the aquium level." Another shudder wracks his body, and his wings partially shift into being. "This level is our main control area, the armory, star mapping, feeding, fighting rooms, and so on. Above"—he twists his head to look up into the atrium—"are the living quarters for warriors."

I feel rather giddy, not quite knowing which part I want to look at first. The control area doesn't strike me as much fun, not yet.

"What are the aquiums like on a Sarkarnii ship?" I ask.

I've heard from the humans mated to the Sarkarnii that they love their aquiums, although given the dirt and other items streaking Daeos' scales, it's difficult to determine if he dislikes a bath or just attracts muck.

"You want to see the aquiums?" he asks, and if it's possible, the smile he's sporting grows wider.

"I like a bath," I say with my own shudder, imagining hot water, steam, and a relax after the ordeal of earlier.

“So do I.” He nods earnestly as he steers me towards a bulge on the edge of the atrium.

“You could use one.” I laugh.

Daeos looks down at himself, almost as if for the first time. “I have shed recently. My scales are self-cleaning,” he says seriously.

“Er...no,” I reply.

He gives me a narrow-eyed look. “No?”

“No, Daeos. Nothing is ‘self-cleaning,’ believe me,” I say, followed by a squeak as he pulls me to him, against his hard body, and steps backwards through a gap in the barrier.

I’m fully expecting to fall, to be clutched to him, to experience yet more truly scary flight, and I screw my eyes up tight but instead there is no falling.

I open my eyes, and we are descending at a sedate pace, my feet firmly on a metal plate which is attached to the ship and moving downwards. Daeos makes a hissing sound and my head snaps to his. My big bad red dragon is attempting not to laugh.

And failing.

“If I wasn’t hanging on for dear life...again...you’d get a smack,” I warn.

His eyes flare. “Is that a promise?” he queries.

Oh, fuck. What with his expressed desire to *breed* me and now his suggestion he’d like a spanking...he is an absolute contradiction and sinfully sexy with it.

“You took me on the flight from hell. Of course it’s a promise,” I reply.

The shudder which runs through him is accompanied by a swelling pressing into my stomach, the origins of which I am in no doubt.

“I rut for you, sweet treasure. Do not tease me,” he rasps. “I have always lacked control and I am doing my best to have control for you.”

If this is Daeos in control, I can’t imagine what he might be like when he loses it.

But it could be fun finding out!

We reach the next level, and he swings me off the strange elevator and steps easily onto the floor, hips snapping. He said he liked being on the ship and his entire demeanor has changed. He actually seems relaxed, easy. Happy.

“The on-board aquiums are this way,” he says with a sweeping gesture, moving away with a swagger which is both cute and sexy.

For a second, I ogle his bottom. It’s most definitely a perk of no pants

with these dragons. Daeos has an arse to die for, and I totally would. His scarlet, shimmering tail, long and sinuous, swings in time to his hips, and all of it has me somewhat overcome.

I might have stared just a little too long as he looks over his shoulder at me and then holds out a huge clawed hand.

“Come with me, pretty treasure. Let me show you how a Sarkarnii can bathe.”



DAEOS

I maybe should have told my sweet mate we are locked into the ship. I checked the settings as we entered and all seemed fine, until the doors closed, and the entire system rebooted.

Normally if that happens, it will unlock in half an uri, so I shouldn't get into trouble with Drega for going onboard first, especially as I have my Opal to confirm we were looking for traps.

I mean, I *might* get into trouble for disobeying a direct order, but given how much the rut is roaring in my veins, I care even less than usual. Plus, the armory is only one floor above us, if needed. I can manage any threat, if there is one.

I can't scent any Belek on the ship, not like last time, when I was very nearly blown to the ancestors as I attempted to diffuse the explosive wired into the second engine.

All I can remember is pain and then the anger of my fellow Sarkarnii who thought Daeos had struck again.

All because I'm good with explosives and always hit the target I aim for.

"Oh!" Opal exclaims, and I immediately scoop her up into my arms in case there is danger.

She laughs, a soft, tinkling sound which speaks to my soul and sends my mating gland pumping the mix even harder into my bloodstream, until I can hardly see straight.

But I can see my Opal.

"I can smell the water," she says, putting her hand on my chest.

Can she also feel my heart, pounding for her?

“It’s not far.” Relief floods me even more than the mating mix. She is unharmed, there is no threat, there is only my Opal, in my arms.

“I can walk.”

“I don’t want you to walk.”

She laughs again, and I’d give anything to hear the sound over and over, echoing in my head always, to take the place of the hisses, of the dark, of everything terrible I’ve experienced. It’s something I’m sure could clean everything to a shiny white.

“Then I won’t walk.”

The door in front of us slides open, exposing the aquium I was looking for. Opal gasps, her hand leaving my chest and going to her mouth.

This one looks like it was formed inside a crystal. Every surface reacts with light and more light. It was always my favorite place on the ship because there were no shadows, no darkness.

I could hide from the dark.

“This is so beautiful,” Opal says in hushed tones.

“It is nothing compared to you,” I reply, stepping through the doorway, which closes silently behind us.

Opal squirms in my arms, and I let her down. She races away from me around the curved bowl of steaming, bubbling water with a scream and a laugh.

Every muscle in my body freezes for an instant. Every atom of my being needs to chase the little morsel who is swift of foot and smells like she was handed down by the ancestors. Without ceremony, I dive into the pool and use my tail, which has no desire to shift back, to propel me under the water to where she stands. I burst free and reach for my mate, who takes several steps back with a scream.

“I need you, little treasure,” I growl.

“Oh, do you? What’s the magic word?” she asks.

“Magic word?” I hang onto the edge of the aquium and squint up at her, water running into my eyes, making me flick my head and my hair.

“It’s the word you use when you want something.” Opal is too far out of my reach for me to be able to swipe a leg and draw her in.

“Now?”

“No.”

“Want?”

“No.”

I furrow my brow, thinking about what it could be as Opal pushes off her boots, one by one, revealing pink feet which I need to touch.

Then she slowly pulls the slippery red dress over her head, the fabric running and draping over her as she does. The fabric which felt almost as good as her under my fingers and which I would want to rub over and over.

She hangs it on a nearby crystal spike. My cock pushes out of my pouch as I gaze on her curves. Opal isn't entirely naked. Some fabric covers her delicious cunt, and disappointingly, there is also a strip of fabric which is only just containing the gorgeous globes of her breasts, the points of her nipples straining to be free.

Oh, I want all of her to be free!

Her hands are on her hips as she stands on the edge of the aquium, a morsel, a treat, a meal I want.

"The word, Daeos," she demands.

Only one word can pass my lips, and it's a needy, pathetic whine of a word. "Please?" I hiss.

Opal takes two steps back, then launches herself over my head in a stunning arc, slipping into the water with hardly a splash.

Except the water is my domain as much as the air. This aquium is large enough for a shifted Sarkarnii and so I shift. Extending my wings is incredible as the rut roars in my veins and my body expands, chasing the slippery female as she too twists and turns before breaching the surface gasping for breath.

"No fair, Daeos!" She splashes water at me. "Changing into a dragon and filling the pool isn't fair!"

I dip my head to hers, aware of how small, fragile, and tasty she looks.

"Please," I croon, swirling in the water and shifting mostly back to my biped form, save for my wings and tail.

"You want me to bathe you, Daeos?" she asks, holding up a cleansing bar. "Given you said you needed one."

I can't help but shudder at her words, breath staccato in my chest. She has a happy smile on her face, and if the thought of bathing with me put it there, who am I to argue?

"I have never been bathed and my scales...the rut...they are itchy." I force the words out, well aware not all of it makes sense.

My ability to string a sentence together seems to have deserted me once again in her presence.

Opal grabs the shoulder of my wing, and my cock spurts pre-cum as a cloud of white into the water at her touch.

Neve it to the ancestors! If I thought I knew what the rut was until now, I was most definitely wrong.



OPAL

Daeos' wings are silky smooth, not leathery like I would expect. My chest is tight as I run my hands over them, and he makes a sound somewhere between a groan and a sob.

"Is everything okay?" I ask. "I'm not hurting you, am I?"

"No." The word is forced out through gritted teeth, and I'm not entirely convinced.

"Is this what Sarkarnii females do for males?" I rub my hands on the soap bar.

It's not like anything I've encountered on Earth, but we've all found these cleansers to be absolutely incredible. My skin and hair has never been better since I was saved by the Sarkarnii.

Daeos seems to be struggling to form words as I slowly rub the slippery gel which the bars produce over one wing. He's half hanging on to the side of the aquarium, and his tail is whipping slowly through the shallow water on this side of the oval shaped pool, until it curls around my ankle and flicks gently against my calf.

"No...yes," he says with a rasp. "Wings...clean."

I'm obviously not going to get any sense out of him while I'm cleaning him up and the squirm in my stomach is reminiscent of every time I've found something cute. Only the heat between my legs reminds me I'm not finding Daeos cute, I'm finding him incredibly sexy. Thank god I'm in the water or we'd really be in trouble.

The gel spreads beautifully over the delicate membrane which makes up his wings. Each strut is like iron. The wings are nowhere near as big as when

he is full dragon, but they are big enough. As I work my way over them, with Daeos shuddering and grunting at my touch, I find the membrane is covered in a network of scars, and in places, the struts have large knots, as if they've been broken and badly healed.

"When did you hurt your wings?" I ask, scooping water up to rinse off the gel.

"I had no one," Daeos says, turning in the water to face me, his wings slowly shifting away. "When I first shifted. I didn't understand what was happening. I didn't do so well."

His face is a mask, attempting to hold back his emotions.

"Is this because of your parents?" I move closer to him in the water, placing my hand on his arm. "I was told you lost them."

Daeos' eyes dart from side to side as if something might come for him. I feel him tense.

"I couldn't save them, but I can keep you safe," he says, gaze narrowing and any semblance of relaxation leaving him. "When they found me, there was nothing left. I don't know how long I was on my own. My memories of that time are...mist." He opens and closes his hand in the air. "My head was sad and angry for a long time, until Draco's family found me. Even then, it still lets me down."

Immediately, I hate I even asked him. It seems to have caused him so much distress, and the last thing I want to do is hurt my Daeos, so cute, so soft, so dangerous and so protective.

"I know you can keep me safe," I say, quietly. "I also want you to know how much I...care for you. You can tell me anything, you know. It doesn't matter what. You can talk to me, even if you can't find the words."

Daeos visibly swallows, fire raging in his eyes.

"I am in rut for you, pretty treasure. It is like a fire inside me I cannot quench until I claim you. My head is filled with mating mix, my heart beats out of my chest because I need to be sheathed in your slickness, to claim you and hook you, making you swell with my seed."

All of this is growled, low and harsh as his claws trip over my skin, up into my damp hair which he rakes through, causing goosebumps to rise everywhere.

The hands stop.

"Are you well?" he asks, eyes tracing over my skin, spellbound. "You have scales!"

“Not scales.” I smile, putting my hand over his. “Human skin does this when we are scared or excited.”

“I scare you?” Daeos says solemnly.

I lift my hand and trace a finger down his jaw, feeling the smooth small scales, the slight ridges of them, marveling as to how the light reflects in an iridescent gleam.

“You excite me,” I breathe.

Daeos is a ball of contradictions, but underneath, he is strong and brave and true. He would never, ever give me up as a sacrifice to save his own skin.

I’m still not sure I can trust my heart...or my lady bits which absolutely want him. The stupid organ which is thumping in my chest, which I’m absolutely sure Daeos can hear, has been wrong before.

I’ve been wrong before. And it got me abducted.

“Sarkarnii...rut...fate.” Daeos forces the words out, his chest heaving as his eyes dance with fire.

He’s lost his words again, and my heart beats double time because he’s so close, the mere scent of him tipping me over the edge.

“Don’t talk, show me,” I whisper. “When you don’t have the words, you have the deeds.”

So he does, his lips crushing against mine as his forked tongue sweeps my mouth, consuming me. Dominating me.

I slide my hand down his chest, and he shudders beneath my fingertips, breathing my name. I have this entire dragon, this mountain of muscular, scaled behemoth entirely at my mercy.

“What do you want, Daeos?”

“I want to be inside you. I want to fill you, make you swell with my seed. I want to breed you until you can’t speak for pleasure,” he murmurs, kisses covering my face and sliding down my neck.

Now he gets his words back...and I’ve lost mine.

I arch my back, pressing myself into him, feeling the hard, heavy bulge against my leg. I move my hand lower, brushing the palm over his crotch. I feel the edges of an opening and the tip of something very large.

“Cock...pouch,” Daeos rasps.

I slip my hand inside, and he groans as if the devil has him. “Opal!”

What I touch, what swells in my hand, is huge and emerging from inside him. I look down and gasp out loud.

Daeos grasps his massive cock. Even in his big hand, the thing still looks

enormous. Pearly pre-cum spills from the slit in the vast, hooked cock-head. He pumps himself twice, his eyes locked on mine.

“Let me take you away, little treasure. Let me mate you among the stars.”

He scoops me up, and in a single bound, he leaps from the pool, claws cracking on the marbled crystal surface, and in several short strides, he takes me into a side room, filled with warmth and where there is a deep depression in the floor, smoothed like water has run over it for eons.

Daeos lays me down in the depression. It’s warm and slightly soft under me. He kneels next to me, tail curling around us both, wings outstretched.

“Taste me,” he demands, his dripping cock only millimeters from my mouth. “My seed is made for your pleasure.”

I lean forward and swipe my tongue over the end in a bold move. I’m not sure who is more surprised, me or Daeos, because he actually jumps at my touch before uttering the deepest groan I’ve pulled from him.

Which is swiftly followed by mine. His cum tastes salty sweet, and as it runs down my throat, my entire body heats until, with a rush of utter desire I was not expecting, my pussy floods with moisture and my body feels like it’s swelling.

“What is it?” I say, hoarsely.

“My seed makes you ready to take me. I am big and you are small,” he murmurs as I take another lick, and this time his hips snap greedily towards me.

“You are big.” A smile stretches over my face as my head fills with all the delights I can imagine. “Very big.”

Claws scrabble at the bandeau around my breasts, easily slipping it free, before he settles between my legs, huge arms scooping my thighs up, and I’m jerked up to his face where he slowly, slowly laps at my skin, eyes firmly on mine until, without any warning, he shoves his nose directly into my clit and inhales deeply.

My entire body explodes, bucking up at him as his tongue swipes through my folds and his lips graze my tender clit.

“Delicious,” he rasps, the deep voice resonating as my body shakes with the sudden and unexpected orgasm he’s ripped from me. “Now you are ready.”



DAEOS

The rut roars through me, robbing any last semblance of control. I have to be buried in Opal I have to take her, claim her, fill her.

Only she tastes like nevving star shine, and I want to consume every part of her, lap up her juices until the end of nevving time.

My cock has other ideas. It aches to be inside her, pre-cum pooling beneath me in the rest cradle, designed for Sarkarnii to use in their shifted form following the aquium. My shift is threatening, and I want very much to claim her as Sarkarnii.

But she is tiny with her thighs wrapped around my head, making the best noises I've ever heard. My shifted form has to be too much for her.

Opal cries out, her legs squeezing my face as she lets rip with so much moisture I almost can't lap it all up. Her breathing is rapid, and her body goes entirely limp in my grasp for a seccari which has me panicking.

"Daeos...I..." She lifts her head, and I'm relieved she has words. "That was...I've never...*squirted* before."

"It's good." I grin at her, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand as I rise over her, nudging her legs farther apart, my tail assisting with the process, dipping inside her to find out if she is ready.

My shift threatens with a vengeance as it finds she is soaking. I grit my teeth, doing everything I can not to change. Not yet, not until she has taken me for the first time.

With some difficulty, because my tail is very much enjoying itself plundering my Opal, I slip the tip of my cock into her entrance.

"You are so big." Opal gasps. "I don't think..."

My hips snap involuntarily as her moisture surrounds me, and I thrust myself deep inside.

“Your tight cunt thinks otherwise.” I growl at the pinch of her, slick and wet but gripping on me like she will never let go. “You take me so well, little treasure.”

My tail, never one for being shy, wraps around the base of my cock and slips between her folds, teasing at the sweet treat at her apex, the tasty pearl which sent her pussy into spasm earlier and which I very much enjoyed sucking on.

Opal moans, and her grip diminishes, meaning I can withdraw before sliding back again, sheathing myself in her heat and doing everything I can not to spill my seed too early.

Instead I think about engines and star maps, about how many explosives it takes to deal with a cohort of Kirakos guards, anything so I can enjoy the delicious feeling of being inside my beautiful mate. I circle my hips, withdraw, and thrust back again, rocking and teasing her, teasing myself.

Opal grasps at my arms, at my wings, at my tail, and everywhere she touches burns with a fire nothing can quench. Her legs are wrapped around my waist, drawing me in as she clings to me, calling out my name over and over. It rings in the room, and it is the best sound I’ve ever heard. Even better than the explosion which did for the spaceworms.

My hook forms and with a final snap of my hips, I am caught by her. Pleasure the likes of which I’ve never experienced fires through me as I come with a roar to end all roars, one which surely must have been heard in the rest of the galaxy.

“You are hooked, my heartfire.” My voice is smoke. “And now I fill you.”



OPAL

I can feel every single inch of Daeos' incredible cock, every ridge and node. Nodes which seem to be hitting the right points inside to send me over the edge, along with his tail, the tip of which is doing things with my clit no human man has ever shown an interest in doing. It's complete and utter pleasure overload.

Colors flood Daeos' skin as he starts slowly. The emotions flitting over his supremely handsome face are an absolute delight, the concentration he puts into making every part of my body sing, and yet, at the same time, the sweet, dirty grunts he makes as he withdraws and then thrusts back, his eyes alternatively fixed on me or looking down at where we are joined.

With every movement, he draws me closer and closer to yet another climax. Whatever properties his cum has, my body is loving him within it, my pussy is wide for him, wanting him, needing him, my skin is flaming for his touch. I can't stop chanting his name over and over which pleases him even more, his very bad tail continuing to tease my clit until I can't hold back any longer.

The orgasm which wracks me is like I've been sent to the moon and back, and I clutch at Daeos as he stills for an instant, then he roars like the biggest, baddest dragon, his entire body changing and shifting as he erupts inside me. There's a sharp pinch for a nanosecond and the most delicious warm feeling floods my abdomen, even as my climax continues to make my head light and my body course with pleasure.

"You are hooked, my heartsfire, and now I fill you," Daeos says, smoke curling from his nostrils as his skin lights up.

Not just the neon zaps which run under his scales, flowing and ebbing with his feelings, but this is something different. Thing is, my head still buzzes from what Daeos just did to me, along with my body feeling the burn, literally. He is *very* big.

“My pretty treasure.” Daeos covers me with his body, making sure I am warm and comfortable as his hips continue to circle. “You make me whole,” he murmurs, eyes half-lidded with pleasure and what is most likely sleep, given how much I think he’s come inside me.

I let my hand drift down his arm, and he shudders gently under my touch. Fire flows around his scales, dancing below the surface in the most incredible way. I wriggle against him and find out something...concerning.

“You’re stuck!”

Daeos does his rapid, hard blink.

“My cock has hooked you,” he pants as his hips circle again and I feel a fresh flood of heat. “Until you have swelled, we are locked together.”

“Swelled?” I finally recover my wits enough to look down my body to see my belly has expanded considerably. “This is you?”

My hand traces over where I’m rounded, and it’s covered by a much larger scarlet one.

“You take my seed beautifully, pretty Opal.”

“How long?” I breathe, not entirely sure if I’m turned on or terrified.

“Until my rut decides,” Daeos growls as yet more heat fires into me.

“And what if we want to...mate some more?” I say, cupping his cheek with my hand.

The single blink turns into several in quick succession, any semblance of sleep disappearing.

“You want to mate some more?”

“Don’t you?”

Daeos’ chest heaves, and I feel further heat within me.

“With you, always.” He grins, and it’s filled with happy fangs. “My rut does not end with a single mating. It ends when you are bred.”

His eyelids flutter again, and he yawns impulsively. His tail nudges my leg over his so we’re in a comfortable position, and he spreads a wing over me, lying his head down in the depression, his flaming eyes fixed on me as he gently toys with my hair.

Hair which is more than a little disheveled, soaked with water and sweat. I’m probably going to need another bath after this. Daeos doesn’t seem to

mind. He happily rubs the strands between his fingers.

“Your hair is soft and pretty,” he says with another small yawn.

“Thank you.” I take hold of his hand as he continues to touch my hair. “Do you like how it feels?”

“Yes, it’s like your dress. Feels good. You feel good.” Daeos sighs.

I can’t help but smile. My body is aching in many good ways, but here, surrounded by his warmth, his delicious musky, smoky scent, I’m happy in a way I had no idea I could be. It’s coming from my bones, leaking out into the rest of me. Daeos has crept under my skin, making me trust him in a way I wasn’t sure I could ever do again.

“You feel good too,” I say, swirling a finger over the scales on his chest, marveling at the light within, making him glow a scarlet gold.

But my big bad dragon is already asleep, and it doesn’t take me long to follow him.



DAEOS

I wake as if someone has kicked me in the butt. All my muscles are on fire and my neck aches. I am immediately on high alert, but my sweet female slumbers in my arms.

Opal smells amazing, like my favorite food, edesh, little balls of deliciousness which the Sarkarnii cooked for me back when I was first taken under Draco's protection.

My stomach growls at me as a reminder it exists.

I can't remember the last time I ate anything. I've been consumed by my rut and my mate. What if Opal is hungry? A fear rips through me. I have not provided for my mate!

But I don't want to wake her. Her scent is entwined with mine and her face is so nevvng peaceful. If she is hungry, I cannot tell.

My scales flush with hot and cold as I debate what to do. I've never been faced with a decision so momentous. Also, unbidden, my cock is hard again, pushing its way from my pouch as another distraction. My blood roars with the mating mix. My flight lungs want to inflate, and accelerant burns within me.

Wait? Accelerant?

I haven't been able to produce accelerant since I arrived in the Kirakos. Either it was something the Belek did to me, or my shift reacted badly to the control collar. But here and now, I can feel the burn as my accelerant sacs fill, even as the mating gland pumps more mix into my veins.

"Hello, you." A soft, sweet voice has me looking down.

Opal smiles up at me, stretching out her body and giving my cock a very

good reason to be so nervous hard.

“Hungry?” I force the word past my lips which don’t seem to want to work...again.

“Are you? Me too.” She smiles.

For a seccari, I’m not entirely sure what she means, given her hand is tracing down my abdomen.

“Are you going to stay like that for the time being?” she asks.

I see my claws, my paws, my long sinuous form. My shifted form. My “dragon,” as she calls it. A skin I am comfortable in, but one I did not realise I had taken.

“I have shifted? I hadn’t noticed.” I can’t take my eyes off her.

With some difficulty, and having to ignore my tail which is having none of it, I shift to my biped form so I can take her in my arms and hold her close. Opal giggles and squirms against me.

“If you want to be mated again, you are going the right way about it, little treasure,” I growl.

“Who says I don’t want to be mated again?” Opal replies.

“You require food and clothing and warmth,” I intone like I’m Draxx. “And I will provide it.”

She stops wriggling and cups my cheek. “Thank you.”

“What for?”

“For thinking of me.”

“I can think of nothing else but you, pretty treasure.” I bury my head into her fragrant hair and inhale deeply.

It doesn’t do my rut any good at all. It rages in my veins as if I haven’t mated at all. All my lessons, whether I took them in or not, failed to mention how my skin would glow, my blood would burn, and my shift would be almost impossible to control.

Or how much I want to care for the sweet treat in my arms. How much I want to hold her until the end of time.

Having located her dress and having helped her to wash, which was very enjoyable, now Opal is by my side as we walk through the ship.

“I will make sure you have food, and then I need to check for any further Belek intrusions,” I say as we reach the empty dining barracks. I like it like this. No need to fight other Sarkarnii for food because my fellow warriors always got rather annoyed.

And I got punched in the head a lot. Which meant there were a lot of

fights I had to win.

I always won.

I was always in trouble.

“Hey?” Opal is looking up at me. The slippery, delightful fabric of her dress winds around my leg, and my tail happily twitches at it. “What are you thinking about?”

“Fights. Food,” I say, truthfully. “What it was like when we lived on the *Golden Orion*.”

“I heard you were sort of space pirates,” she says as I take her over to the rehydration stations and dial up things I think she will like.

“We liberated items we liked.” I grin at her. “And we did things for the Sarkarnii in general. I did what I was told. I was the one who defeated the spaceworms,” I say proudly.

I remove the tray filled with steaming bowls and platters of delicious morsels, just like her.

“Wow! That looks amazing!” Opal claps her hands and then jumps up to give me a kiss on the cheek.

I think my rut is about to overflow again. I quickly place the tray on a nearby table before scenting the air.

There is no scent of other Sarkarnii, so my female can eat in peace.

“So tasty!” Opal says, already chewing on some edesh. “I hadn’t realised how hungry I was. Are you going to have some?” She holds out her half bitten edesh, and it takes every atom of my being not to eat directly from her hands.

“I need to check the ship. Drega and Draxx will be here soon.” I feel my brow furrow.

I’ve lost track of time since we’ve been on the ship. Spending it with Opal, mating and hooking her, assuaging my rut, has been the best experience of my life. I don’t want it to end, and time can do what it likes.

Except, when our time here, alone, is over, there will be Sarkarnii near my mate. I feel the growl ripple through me. The sooner I get my job done, the sooner I can take Opal somewhere else where we can be together, and I can fill her until she grows ripe with my Sarkarnling.

“Okay. I’m going to stay here,” Opal says.

Like she has a choice.

“Eat, pretty treasure. You’ll need your strength.”

“And you are a very bad dragon.” Opal laughs.

When I tear myself away from her, it feels as if I've lost a limb.



OPAL

Daeos stalks out of the functional, brushed steel canteen. He looks back at me several times, hesitates on the threshold as if he's going to turn back, but then he walks on until the tip of his tail disappears.

That tail!

It's both naughty and nice at the same time and every bit as unhinged as its owner, possibly more so. It seems like, since we came aboard, he hasn't been able to control how his body reacts.

My heart squeezes in my chest and rolls over in a weird way I don't think I've ever experienced before. Daeos would never drop me.

He would never drop me.

My head wars with my heart. I want to go after him, but also he made me the most delicious food and asked me to stay behind while he went to check for any further sabotage.

It makes sense I stay here. But also, if he needs help...?

I bite down on another of the sweet balls filled with fluff reminiscent of marshmallow and candy floss. The resulting sugar rush goes straight to my head. It makes my thoughts spiral as I think about the huge red dragon, an orphan, feral, who desires the treats I'm eating, who desires me, who wants to *breed* me.

My core quakes at the memory. My heart pounds at the chaos. I thought I wanted steady, easy...boring. What that brought me was a boyfriend who lied, controlled and cheated. So, for all their warnings about Daeos, my heart knows the others were wrong.

He would never drop me.

Three short chimes has me looking around for the source.

“Hello?” I call out.

But no one returns my greeting. With a sigh, I brush the crumbs gently from my dress, an item of clothing which seems somewhat overkill for wandering around a space ship.

Daeos did tell me to stay here, but I don’t see the harm in investigating to see if the others have arrived. It’s not like I’m going to go far.

I walk to the arched opening which leads out of the canteen and into the main corridor, the one which must run from the front of the ship to the back.

“Hello?” I say again.

“Human female.”

I’m going to say I do not like the sound of the voice which surrounds me. I also do not like, at all, being called “human female” by a disembodied voice.

It reminds me too much of being held captive by the Belek and the horrible warthog guards, the Xicop. If they addressed us at all, it was to make us feel small and insignificant.

I still wake up terrified I’m back in their hands. If Dave intended hurting me, he did a good job in filling my nightmares for the next twenty years.

“My name is Opal,” I say, emboldened by the knowledge Daeos is somewhere on the ship.

“*Opal,*” the thing repeats, and if anything, it saying my name is more sinister than being addressed as *human female*.

Fear curls around my internal organs, sending them into spasm.

“Where is Daeos?” I can’t keep the tremble out of my words.

“He is in the aft fuel chamber.”

Which doesn’t sound too bad.

“And the other Sarkarnii?”

“There are no other Sarkarnii on board. We are in lockdown.”

Oh. Not good.

“Lockdown? Why?”

“It was initiated externally.”

Shit! My head races to catch up. This is the onboard computer system... like every sci-fi TV program I’ve ever seen. It’s sentient presumably, and it can understand me, which I’m going to count as a good thing.

“Can you un-initiate it?”

“Negative.”

Fucking great. Most definitely like every sci-fi movie ever, the technology is against us because of logic. All these millions of lightyears and I'm stuck arguing with a machine.

"Who can let us out?" I ask with gritted teeth.

"No one." I jump with shock at Daeos' dark voice behind me. "We are prisoners."

He is covered in some sort of slime. It glows with the internal light he is producing under his scales, the light which started after we bathed. The slime drips onto the floor in a steady patter.

"Daeos? Are you okay?" I take a step towards him.

And he takes a step back. Recognition flares in his eyes for an instant. His chest heaves as if he's been running for his life.

My heart screams. I hadn't even considered a rejection as simple as moving away from me would impact my soul.

"Daeos?"

"Unclean. Stay back," he says, his words deserting him once again.

He is rigid as he stares at me, muscles bulging with stress and something else.

Not fear, but rage.

"We can get clean. We can go to the aquium again?" I suggest.

Again, that recognition flares before dying away.

"Pretty treasure," he says dully. "Not for Daeos."

I'm about to approach him when a shrieking rips through the air, and my big brave warrior grows a pair of wings, a set of horns, claws, and fangs, all of which are so close to him becoming an actual dragon, I nearly retreat.

Is this corridor large enough for a fully shifted Sarkarnii? Given it's their ship, I'd hope so, but at the same time, I've never been in a confined space with one.

"Go," Daeos growls. "Me. I go."

With a flick of his tail and wings, he stalks away.

I hesitate. Do I follow him? Do I stay? The alarm—I am assuming the horrible shrieking is an alarm—is continuing to sound, but it also seems to be following him.

"Er..." How does one address an alien computer system? "*Golden Orion?*"

"*Yes, Opal. How may I assist?*"

Relief flows through my veins, warming my blood and giving me a spark

of hope.

“What is the alarm?”

“*There is a buildup of plasma in one of the engine core functions. Daeos is being taken to the problem,*” it says.

“Is that...normal?” I swallow down my concern, well aware that rockets from Earth are basically just big bombs ready to go off.

“*It is not within normal tolerances. It requires his expertise.*”

“Is it safe?”

“No.”



DAEOS

I was told my fellow Sarkarnii had been working on the engines, ever since the one which was wired to a Belek trap exploded.

What I have found is something else entirely. And the fact the ship has gone into lockdown is another icy set of claws wrapped around my guts.

Draco did not like me near the engines when we roamed free on the *Golden Orion*. I admit, my obsession with them was concerning to many of my superiors, only because I liked things which explode and I am good at destruction. But I liked the engines too.

The sound, a constant low hum—it made my heart beat slower and my mind clearer. I liked the intricacy of how all the components worked together, and I enjoyed learning about each one. The same as learning about the star map, how it slotted together, how it could be retrofitted to the ship.

How it could provide an improvement to engine power, speed, and efficiency, although it didn't appear Drega was aware of what else it could do.

But then no one expected me to be capable of assisting with the star map, and certainly, after the sabotage, no one was going to let me near it.

Except there are far more problems than I anticipated. The fluid filled plasma cooling system has been filled with whatever I'm covered in, which may be partly to blame for the original problem. I located the source and have dumped the contents, but even so, the new alarm is concerning. Until everything is fixed, the ship will not release us.

Additionally, the more I have moved around the ship, the more I can scent my fellow Sarkarnii. The faint remnants growing in my worries about

the fueling and cooling systems are being disrupted by the rut and the mating mix which not only makes it harder not to shift, I think it's somehow increased my muscle mass overall. The more I get their scent, the harder it is to concentrate on anything other than getting back to Opal and burying myself within her.

Coupled with my accelerant sacs filling and yet my flame not burning, I am a mess. I had to see my heartfire in order to, at the very least, satisfy my rut for a short time.

But seeing her and not being able to touch her sent everything spiraling. I couldn't let my treasure get close as the fluid I'm covered in could be toxic to her, and I couldn't tell her because I lost my words. Again.

The current alarm has me hurrying through to the rear coupling links. I'm going to have to get deep inside the engine to fix this problem. As I'm somehow bigger and unable to stop parts of me shifting, I have to hope the muck covering my body makes me slipperier than usual.

"Daeos!" I am half inside the conduit when I hear her voice.

"Do not touch," I growl out, sliding free.

The sight of her sends my mating gland into overdrive. The dress she wears is almost a perfect match for my now glowing scales (something I'm not even going to think about, given it is a new phenomenon).

"Is there anything I can do to help?" she says, her breath hitching in her chest.

Opal's eyes sparkle, but I'm not sure if it's because she wants to help or something else. She doesn't smell right, and all I want to do is take her to the aquium again.

To be when it was just us, me sheathed in her as she called out my name, over and over. I don't want to be here, listening to her breathing rasping in her chest, an alarm blaring as my body burns and aches.

"Go...back...barracks. Safe."

I hate my words have deserted me, but the light in Opal's eyes fills me with renewed energy. She needs me as much as I need her to calm the raging rut and to clear my head.

"Once done, will be free," I force out past my fangs.

It takes everything I have to turn away and return to the conduit. I do not want to leave her, but I have to get to work if I don't want the entire engine to be inoperable for the foreseeable future, or worse, cause the reactor to go into spasm and potentially kill us both.

It is a long way to the relevant section, filled with the pinching of tails and, unbelievably, wings which refuse point blank to shift back. By the time I'm in position and able to start work, the position I'm in is cramped and freezing as the coolant used in this area is the correct form.

I have no idea how long I work or how long plasma drips on me from the backed up engine. All I know is eventually, the alarm stops sounding, even if my head keeps ringing and finally, finally, the hatch below swings open to allow me to exit.

Only I'm too cold to move, my limbs and tail too sore to pull free from the pipework and lattice where I've been clinging on.

All I know is, the ship is saved and my Opal will be safe. What happens now is in the wings of the ancestors. A darkness creeps in at the edge of my vision, a darkness which terrifies me but which I have no strength to fight.

I cannot go into the darkness. It is not what I was promised when I found my mate. Finding your heartfire should be light. Going to the ancestors should be so bright I can hardly see.

I do not believe I deserve the dark, but the last thing I hear as it carries me away is the low, filthy moan of the creatures waiting for me.

And the bright, beautiful song of the female who wants to save me this time.



OPAL

“Where did he go?” I demand, glaring up into the ceiling, because obviously that’s where the computer is.

Where else should I look?

“*He is in the plasma conduit.*”

“And what’s happening?” I grit my teeth. “Can’t you show me?”

I mean, if we have CCTV everywhere on Earth, alien tech must have it too, surely?

“*There is too much interference in that quadrant.*”

Of course there is. I curl my hands into fists, I really, really want to punch someone. Or something.

“Are you sure you can’t open up the ship?” I ask. Again.

“*Only Daeos can give the command.*”

Which I’m sure he will not do, not while he’s trying to prove himself to the others. I curse softly under my breath, wishing I hadn’t even had the “helpful” idea which has put us in this position. If I hadn’t encouraged Daeos because I wanted to see a space ship...

I pace around the dining area. While I do, small robots, some flying, some beetling around on the floor, come and clear away the remainder of the food.

Time ticks by with me asking on and off for a progress report. After each one is the same, I begin to lose hope. Daeos is *still with the coupling*, and the damn computer will NOT tell me any more.

“Where is this coupling?” I eventually demand. “Where is the engine? I want to go and see it.”

“*If you follow the green line, it will take you to the engine,*” the ship says

in its irritatingly calm voice.

A line appears on the floor, pulsing as it leads me out the door and down the long corridor in the direction Daeos took before it turns a sharp left, and I find myself back in the atrium. Predictably, the flowing green line takes me to the lifting platform which has nothing to hold onto.

“Is there any other way down?” I ask.

I get silence and the flowing green line. I have no option if I want to get close to Daeos. Because I can’t leave him alone any longer, not while there is no one else on this entire ship.

So, I take the step out onto the platform, and it moves, swiftly but without any suddenness which could knock me off balance. It glides easily, rather like Daeos when he wants to, to a halt three long, long floors below. I do my best to concentrate on the slow moving lights as I drop. I do not look down.

In fact, the platform is stable enough, I don’t even realize we’ve come to a halt until a flash of green catches my eye.

And an alarm sounds. A deep, dark squelch of a noise which hits me in the stomach.

“What’s wrong?”

“*Daeos requires assistance,*” the computer says, as impassive as ever.

I swear under my breath as I race to follow the green lights, down twisting, blowing corridors until they turn from a bright silver to much darker and dirtier. The lighting is inconsistent, save for what I’m following, so when I round a corner and see the dark shape in the center of a pool of what looks like oil, I come to an immediate halt.

“*Sending assistance,*” the ship intones.

“Daeos?” I approach the huddled thing on the floor, whipping up my long dress and tucking it around my waist as I enter the puddle of goo.

Above us is a large opening, through which I can see lights flashing as if something is firing up.

The bundle groans.

“Daeos!” I’m on the floor beside him in an instant.

He is almost entirely covered in the dark oily substance which has a sharp, unnatural odor so strong I can hardly breathe. Where I can see his scales, they seem somehow disrupted. At the sound of my voice, he attempts to sit up and fails.

“Don’t move. What has it done to you?” I want to touch him, but I don’t dare in case it causes more damage.

“Too much,” Daeos says, the words hissing through his teeth.

I know the Sarkarnii have healing properties, but Daeos doesn't look like he's healing at all. The glow coming from his scales and even the little neon lights which usually flicker there are gone.

His eyes close.

“Help!” I call out. Losing my worry for hurting him, I lift his head and upper body out of the goo as best I can, brushing it away from his eyes, nose, and mouth. “I need help!”

My voice cracks.

“Stay with me, my love,” I whisper. “You have to stay with me.”

Daeos coughs, and his eyes roll open. “Opal?”

“I'm here,” I say as a hand attempts to grip mine. “What have you been doing to yourself?”

“Fixing...for you,” he says, and a hint of a white fang appears at the corner of his mouth.

It's true, the ship hasn't been telling me the entire thing is about to explode for a while, so Daeos must have done what was needed, but at what cost?

“What happened?”

“Plasma,” he says, shifting with a deep growl.

“Don't move. I need to get you to Drega.”

The growl deepens. “No Sarkarnii,” Daeos says.

“Don't be silly. You need help.” I run my hand down the side of his face.

His incredible eyes are rolling again, and it looks like he's about to lose consciousness.

“Ship,” he murmurs.

“Fucking ship,” I growl under my breath.

I hate the way his breathing has slowed, and his body seems heavier than ever. I can't see how this stupid ship is going to help me at all.

Something bumps into me, and I very nearly go through the opening above us with fright. Behind me is a floating platform, a smaller version of the ones I've seen the guards use in the Kirakos when they dared to venture into the Sarkarnii quadrant.

“*Follow the blue to the healing quarter,*” the ship says.

Instantly, a flashing blue line appears on the wall opposite us.

“Daeos! You have to get up!”

But my big red dragon doesn't move. Even his tail is missing. His eyes

are closed, and the tips of his tongue protrude from his mouth, which would be endearing if my insides were not gripped with fear and my mouth and nose were not burning from whatever it is we're sat in.

He isn't getting up.

"Daeos requires treatment," the ship says coldly.

"I know," I reply through gritted teeth.

"Without it, he is in danger."

"I know!"

I look at his prone body, scales slick with whatever is covering him, his dark eyelashes brushing his cheeks, the tongue, the muscles which seem bigger than ever.

I am not losing him. I am not losing Daeos. He made my body sing and my heart beat again after all trust was lost in the male of any species. He deserves to live.

It takes everything I have, but I heave and heave until I have my arms under his body, then with the last vestiges of my strength, I lift and deposit him onto the platform, panting, stars filling my vision as my skin burns.

"Take us to the healing quarter," I manage to gasp out as everything goes black.



DAEOS

The scent. It fills my head, and it sets a certain part of me alight, a part of which is presently pressing uncomfortably at my pouch.

Only my cock seems to be the only muscle which has any power left in it. The rest of me is distinctly unhappy. Including my eyelids. I flick my tongue instead.

“Hello, you.”

This time, I do get my eyes open and slowly, slowly through a film of exhaustion, I see the beautiful face of my mate.

“Opal.” Her name comes out slurred because my tongue is not keen on behaving itself. “What...?”

“You, well we, were overcome by fumes from what the ship says was an exhaust by-product.” She shrugs. “You also apparently hadn’t been eating and coupled with the rut, along with everything else, your body couldn’t cope. You crashed.”

“Crashed?” I struggle to push myself up and it’s nearly impossible.

A tube runs into my arm and itches. I reach to scratch it, and Opal bats my claws away with her little hand.

“Leave it, Daeos. The ship says you need the medicine and liquid food.”

“I’m fine,” I growl. “I don’t need a healer.” I attempt to roll upright, and everything spins violently.

A pair of strong hands pushes me down.

“I need a healer,” Opal says.

“You’re hurt?” I rock violently in my efforts to get upright, but they’re even worse than before. “Who hurt you?” I snarl.

“The ship hurt me. The exhaust stuff burnt my skin when I was getting you here,” Opal says softly in my ear. “But it gave me some salve, and I’m better.”

“I like the ship, but if it hurt you...” I growl out my threat with the force of several Sarkarnii warriors...I think.

“Daeos, if you continue wriggling about, I will make the ship sedate you again,” Opal says fiercely. “You need to rest.”

Again?

“How long have I been out?” I ask. It could be the stuffing in my head is not the rut but something else.

Opal turns away from me for what seems like a seccari, then she is back with a platter covered in food. My stomach releases a growl which rivals my earlier ones. Mixed with the scent of Opal, the selection could have been sent from the ancestors.

“You were unconscious for a couple of hours. The ship knocked you out when you wanted to get up and run around.”

Given I feel like all my fellow warriors are sitting on my chest, the idea I might have wanted to run around surprises me.

“I wanted to run around?”

“You were muttering something about not letting them take you and you must protect...someone.” Opal gently puts the platter on my lap, takes an edesh ball, and holds it up to my mouth. “You weren’t making much sense, but you were upset.”

I take the food from her fingers. It has to be the most perfect thing I’ve ever tasted. It is absolutely like the ancestors sent it, and her, to me. Unable to stop myself, a deep grunt escapes my chest.

Opal’s face lights up with a smile I never want to stop seeing. She hops up onto the bed besides me and cuddles into my side.

“I have to admit”—she offers me another edesh which I take, wrapping my lips around her fingers so I can taste her too—“you really had me worried.”

“It was just a coupling that needed fixing,” I say, chewing happily as I inspect the platter for the other things on offer. “In an awkward position.”

“Oh, and so it was just you failing to take care of yourself which resulted in you nearly dying?” Opal says, shoving another edesh ball in my mouth. “Thanks for scaring me half to death then.”

“Rut,” I mumble through two edesh balls and a piece of roasted meat I’ve

managed to sneak in.

“That’s your excuse for everything,” she grumbles. “And it doesn’t mean you can do silly things which get you injured.”

“M’sorry, pretty treasure.” I put both an edesh ball and a savory one in my mouth at the same time. The flavor is divine, and I add a couple more until I have to concentrate on chewing and swallowing.

Opal reaches up and gently swipes her thumb over the side of my mouth, brushing some crumbs away before she cups my cheek in her hand, her thumb sweeping over my jaw. I cram in some more tasty morsels while I enjoy her touch.

“They were taken from me.” My words tumble out as my stomach fills and my blood warms through. “I tried to stop them, but I only had my claws and could not shift. She screamed and he roared, but there were too many and then I got frightened, and I ran.”

“Your parents?” Opal says softly.

“I see it whenever I close my eyes. I hate the darkness.”

All my limbs feel heavy, so heavy. My head is filled with Opal, her touch, her scent, the food she has brought, the weight of her, so light at my side.

“You were just a child, Daeos, a Sarkarnling. You did nothing wrong, sweetheart.” She runs a hand over my forehead, her touch light, cool, perfect.

“I fight...should fight...they were killed.” My words are harder already because I’m sated and sleepy, and I want Opal to stay with me forever. “My heartsfire?” I whisper. “No one will take you.” I extend a hand filled with claws. “I can fight. I fight. I fight for you.” A snarl ripples through me. “No one hurts my heartsfire.”

“And no one hurts my Daeos.” Opal is curled in my arms, the food gone, just her and me. “That I promise.”

I’m not sure what happened, and a growl snaps in my chest.

“Relax.” Opal is smiling at me. “You need to sleep. I won’t let the darkness take you. I will never let it take you.”

And I sleep.

And the darkness doesn’t come.



OPAL

If there was one thing I was glad of when it came to the automatic functions of the ship, it was the cleansing.

Presumably it's not one the Sarkarnii use much, given the size of the aquarium Daeos took me to. But at least when I made it back to consciousness, I was clean and so was Daeos. It even cleaned up my dress.

I'm watching him sleep again. He needs a lot of sleep, according to the ship. He hasn't been eating properly, and the rut burns through calories like nobody's business apparently. I've learnt a whole load more about Sarkarnii anatomy...other than the stuff I already know (yes, I mean dragon cock).

And now I know what swirls in Daeos' head. The murder of his parents and his guilt at not being able to do anything. But why was he left alone, if that was indeed what happened?

Those gorgeous eyelashes sweep over his cheeks, the scales glowing happily again and little bright red neons snapping between his scales. He has a half smile on his sleeping face and damn it, he looks so handsome I could cry. I sweep a lock of his long silvery hair back behind his ear and the smile deepens.

Can I ever be enough for him? He's larger than life, willing to hurl himself into the guts of a starship engine in order to fix it. He let the plasma burn him, the exhaust goo nearly kill him, and he kept on going, all while dealing with something which apparently completely changes a Sarkarnii male's physiology, if what I've been told in the medical quadrant is to be believed. And then he was willing to destroy the same ship because it might have hurt me.

How in the heavens do I deserve Daeos?

“*Daeos can be moved to his quarters,*” the ship says loudly, interrupting my thoughts and causing my big male to grumble but not wake.

“I’m not waking him up,” I retort.

The ship doesn’t respond. Instead the platform bed we’re on glides out of the healing quadrant and moves silently down the corridor.

It seems the Sarkarnii have a wealth of technology, or at least they did, before they ended up in the Kirakos, and so far, I’ve been amazed consistently, especially as in comparison, we’ve been living like savages. But the more I think about our living arrangements, the more I can see what a sophisticated society the Sarkarnii are and how they have adapted to their circumstances.

All except my Daeos.

The platform glides to a halt outside a door, which opens, and we slip inside.

“Lights. We need lights!” I call out into the darkness, holding Daeos close.

Fortunately the ship responds, and a soft glow illuminates the interior as Daeos’ eyelids flutter and his nostrils twitch.

“Opal?” he rasps, smoke curling from his nostrils.

“These are your quarters.” I smile at him as he goes from sleepy to at least partially awake. “The ship brought us here.”

He looks blearily around the room, which is oval and contains a big bed and little else, before his face lights up, along with his scales, glowing in the dim light.

“Mine.”

He’s not looking at the room anymore. He’s looking at me. Sleep has gone, and it’s been replaced by a clarity in his expression I’m not sure I’ve seen before.

“Mine.” He growls deep in his throat, and it shakes through me, right down to my core.

“You’ve been sick...” I start and then stop because Daeos is getting larger before my eyes.

He reaches for his arm and pulls the tube out, eyes on me all the time. I feel like something small and squeaky caught in the gaze of a predator so many times bigger than me. It means I cannot move as he reaches for me too, huge clawed hands curling around my shoulders. He lifts me up as if I’m a

mere feather, and I'm deposited on his chest with a core quaking groan.

"My treasure smells like she needs mating," he says, any difficulty he's had with expressing himself long gone. "My treasure smells ripe for my seed."

I've gone very hot, pressed against his chest. My thighs are already slick even if I'm still worried about him. Then Daeos licks over his lips with that dark, forked tongue, eyes dancing with fire, smoke curling from his nostrils like the bad dragon he is.

I'm lifted into the air as a pair of huge wings and a long tail appear. My dress disappears in a snap of claws, and I'm entirely naked as he places me down on the bed. His cock is fully erect and damn, it is a weapon of vaginal destruction!

"I need to claim you, pretty treasure," Daeos murmurs as he kisses me to oblivion before that talented tongue works its way down my body, pulling at needy nipples, my hips firing up to meet with his abs as his hands encircle my waist, holding me back. "My Sarkarnii needs to claim you, take you as it should, fill you and breed you."

He reaches my mound and traces a claw through the little wisp of hair. I can't stop the shudder which pulls through me.

"You are my everything, Opal. You were there when I opened my eyes. You send me to the ancestors and you pull me back again. You make me want to spill not only my seed, but my heart."

Before I can answer, he licks through my folds and right up to my clit, which his tongue tweaks with perfection. I grab for his hair, his...horns and hold on. Tight.

Daeos plunders me with gusto. The noises he makes as he plucks an orgasm from me as easily as breathing are obscene, and I love every single second, especially the ones when my vision sheets white and I can't catch my breath for an instant.

When I open my eyes, he towers over me, his cock running with silvery pre-cum.

"Taste me, pretty treasure." He dips his hips so the tip of his cock is touching my mouth, and I eagerly lap at the salty sweetness.

The warmth, the desire, the need for him, it all intensifies within me, and I feel my body change, become receptive to anything my big, bad dragon has.

"I want you. I want your Sarkarnii inside me, Daeos," I rasp, my voice all but gone. "I want you to breed me."

“You want to grow ripe and round with our sarkarnling? You want me to fill you over and over, to enjoy your gorgeous mated body, to make you come over and over as you birth?”

I explode at his words, my pussy pulsing at nothing as another climax rips through my body. Daeos scoops a huge hand under me, places another on top and carefully flips me over.

“I want to be gentle,” he rumbles, his huge body covering mine, his tail sliding underneath my abdomen to prop me up, while the very tip slowly circles my clit. “But I need to hook you so badly.”

His massive body trembles against mine because he is holding back. Huge hands circle the globes of my arse as he notches his cock at my entrance. I feel the tips of his claws pressing into my skin, and it sends waves of pleasure coursing through me.

With a low, guttural groan, Daeos eases inside me, his massive cock-head breaching my channel and stretching me oh-so-wide. Even with all kinds of delight circling in my veins, he is still huge and in this position, I can feel every single inch as he presses slowly, slowly deeper and deeper, his tail keeping up the exquisite pressure on my clit, sending floods of moisture until he is finally seated within me.

“I am sheathed in you, my little treasure,” he murmurs, tracing one hard, heavy claw over my back. “Now I will claim you.”

Daeos withdraws and thumps back inside me. I come immediately, my back arching as he takes full advantage, thrusting and pumping, plundering and enjoying me.

“So slick, so wet,” he groans. “So needy for my seed.”

He is relentless, and my body bucks and squirms as he holds me in place with his massive body. His tail, such a naughty, talented appendage, gives no quarter, and again, I’m convulsing in climax, stars filling my vision, my pussy clamping down on him as he groans out my name, over and over until, with a pinch and a roar, molten Daeos fills me, heating me from within as he hits his orgasm.

“My pretty treasure.” He wraps his arms around my torso, pulling me against a hard, muscular chest as I feel him continue to pulse inside, more heat filling me.

His hands slide down my front until he’s covering my stomach, already expanding with the amount of cum he’s pumping into me. He shoves his head in the crook of my neck and purrs in my ear. “You are claimed, little jewel.

You belong to me, and I will never, ever let you go, not even if the galaxy implodes or all the worlds collide. I am yours even if the stars go out.”



DAEOS

Opal's scent is incredible. It surrounds me in a way I didn't think possible. It invades every sense I have. My being is hers, only hers.

"Ask me for the moons and stars, my heartfire, because they are yours. I will pluck them from the sky if only to see them hung around your beautiful neck," I whisper in her ear as I cuddle her close. "Then I can tell everyone my mate's beauty outshines even the galaxy."

Opal sighs in my arms. "I love you, Daeos," she says, her voice so quiet I can hardly hear it.

She loves me?

I can't have heard her correctly. My ears must have been affected by the exhaust fumes. My mate has accepted me? Without envenomating me? Can I be such a lucky Sarkarnii to have been given my heartfire and not be bitten by her?

I always thought if I ever found a mate, I'd spend endless days and nights wracked with poison running through my veins. I was hardly worthy to be called a warrior, let alone be a mated male.

But Opal does not want to bite me. She loves me.

I'm pretty sure my heart is going to burst out of my chest. It pounds there, rattling my bones, chattering my teeth as I snuggle into my mate and attempt to consume every part of her into me. I don't know if she can hear it, but I hope she can because it tells her I live. And I live for her.

Gradually my hook subsides until finally I can withdraw, even though I don't want to. Once she is free, I gather my sweet mate in my arms and carry her through to the small aquium adjacent to my quarters, where I help her

clean up, mostly with water, but also quite a lot with my tongue, which, if the squeals and other delicious noises she makes are anything to go by, the process was enjoyable.

It was especially enjoyable for me, and I can feel the muscles in my face aching from all the grinning (among other things) my mouth has been doing.

“You need food,” I say to Opal as I guide her back through the ship to the dining barracks.

“You need to eat too, but...” Opal presses close to me, “the ship said you were the only one who could unlock it and I think you’re going to have to let the others in.”

Nev! I’d forgotten the shipwide lockdown which kicked in as soon as there was a problem with the engine. I groan out loud.

“Drega is going to be nevvig livid.” I put my hand on my forehead. “He’s going to think I deliberately locked them out.”

The rut has clouded everything, then being poisoned by the exhaust fumes and the plasma burns and the stuff from the cooling system—none of it has done my sense of time and place any good. Not that it was great before.

“You fixed the ship! Again!” Opal growls. “They can’t be angry with you.”

I raise my eyebrows at her.

“I have form. They will be angry.”

“Oh will they? I told the ship to record everything which happened,” Opal says, looking at her little pink claws. “They only need to check with it, and you’ll be exonerated.”

She squeaks beautifully as I lift her up in my arms and hold her tight.

“I never thought of doing that.” I laugh. “You are such a clever mate!”

Opal laughs too, and I want to keep the sound in my ears for the rest of my life.

“So, are you going to let them in?” she asks.

I cock my head on one side, then capture her lips with mine, our tongues tangling as I enjoy every single seccari of the kiss which leaves her gasping for breath.

“Do you think I should?” I murmur. “I like it here with just us. It makes my head clear. It makes me feel whole.”

“And being around other Sarkarnii doesn’t?”

I shove my face into her neck, snuffling at her hair, enjoying the way her scent sends my mating gland into overdrive, how the mating mix makes me

feel, the fact I want to shift and protect her from everything and anything.

“Other males might come near you.” I growl into her soft skin. “I do not want that.”

Opal grips my neck, and I go limp under her touch. She pulls me out of my fog of scent and delight, glaring at me, her bright, beautiful eyes studying my face.

“We don’t have much choice, Daeos, sweetheart. And I need to see my friends again. The other humans, remember?”

Of course I remember. Being with the other females, helping them, is important to my Opal.

“I suppose,” I grumble before brushing my lips over hers again and delighting at the way her knees buckle, and this time I get to hold her to me.

“*Golden Orion?*”

“*Yes, Daeos?*”

“Unlock the ship.”

“*As you wish, my lord.*”

“My lord?” Opal queries.

I shake my head. “Must be something wrong in the programming. I’m sure I didn’t touch anything important when I was crawling through the conduits.” I shrug.

“This stuff is so sophisticated, I wouldn’t have thought it would get bugs,” Opal says.

I feel my scales rising and shivering at the mention of bugs.

“I hope there are no bugs,” I growl. “I am not being fumigated again.”

“What?” Opal looks at me with horror. “You were *fumigated?*”

I feel my hide growing cold. My history is filled with unpleasantness no mate should have to deal with.

“It’s nothing,” I reply.

A small hand grips my chin.

“It is not *nothing*,” Opal says, her eyes filled with concern. “What happened?”

“I had scale mites when I was found. I had not shed for some time. I didn’t know how. The mites, they itched, they hurt so badly.” I scratch absently at my leg, unable to help myself. “When I got to the High Bask, they put me in a cage and sprayed me until the bugs were gone.”

Opal pulls my head into the crook of her neck, my favorite place in all the galaxy.

“I hate they did that to you,” she says quietly.

“I felt better after. I even shed. I quite like shedding,” I say, my voice muffled in her hair and against her warmth.

My scales prickle again, but not because of bugs...

“Daeos,” a male voice intones. “What have you done?”



OPAL

At the sound of Drega's voice, Daeos lifts his head away from me. Behind him are several Sarkarnii, including Draxx. They all look pissed.

Really pissed.

Anger rises within me like a volcano. After everything Daeos has been through, they considered him a valuable enough warrior to bring him on the *Golden Orion*. He has enough within him they allow him to fight and to fix things.

As far as I can see, Daeos has proved himself many times over, and yet he's still worried he will be in trouble even when he's done something good.

Slowly, he turns to face Drega, tucking me behind him, his tail curling around my ankle possessively.

"I was showing my *szikra* the ship and checking it for further Belek sabotage. There was a problem with the coolant and exhaust system which meant it went into lockdown," Daeos says evenly in the face of all these angry warriors. "It is fixed and ready for the star map to be installed," he adds.

Drega snarls loudly. "You were expressly told you could not enter the ship alone, Daeos. You disobeyed a direct order from Draco...from me. There will be consequences."

He crosses the difference between us in a couple of huge strides, the rest of the warriors following him. I feel Daeos tense and growl. Things are about to go sideways in a very unpleasant way.

I'm not having it. With a tremendous effort, I extract myself from his tail

and push in front of him.

Drega and Draxx, huge mountains of blue and green scales, do a comedy halt, very nearly falling over each other as they eye me and then Daeos, lips rippling with big fangs.

Daeos snarls and growls as if both of those things are in short supply and he needs to use them up as quickly as possible. A clawed hand grips at my shoulder, and I place mine over the top of it.

“Daeos saved the ship from further damage at some considerable risk to himself,” I say as loudly and clearly as I can without my voice giving up on me.

Drega and Draxx, especially Draxx, are formidable, and I’ve only ever really encountered them when they’ve been with Jem and Ruby, at which point they are sort of Sarkarnii lite and not scary at all.

They are scary now.

“And I was the one who persuaded him to show me the ship before everyone else got here. So, if anyone should bear any consequences, it should be me.” I fold my arms because I don’t want them to see my hands shaking. “Daeos did nothing wrong. You can check with the ship, it recorded everything.”

Drega looks at Draxx and then turns on his heel, stomping out of the dining hall.

“Watch him,” Draxx fires at a giant of a Sarkarnii, taller than them all, his scales glowing dark purple under the lights.

They leave in a sweep.

“Drasus,” Daeos hisses under his breath. “Do not come any closer to my mate.”

Drasus, who hasn’t actually moved any closer, smiles with a hell of a lot of fang.

“So, this is the female?” He inclines his head, his multiple heavy ear piercings clanking together.

“Mine,” Daeos growls, and a huge hand pulls me into him.

Not only is his tail in evidence, but he has wings too, clearly trying to look as big and formidable as possible without turning into a dragon. He also doesn’t stop with pulling me closer. Not at all, instead I find I’m lifted off my feet into his arms as he cradles me protectively.

Deep in his chest is an ongoing, deep growl.

“She’s certainly yours.” Drasus rasps a laugh.

“Daeos is mine too,” I squeak.

My voice has lost any strength it had a moment ago, and I’m absolutely loving being pressed to Daeos’ hard chest, breathing in his smoky spice.

“I can see that.” Drasus’ smile is wider, with less fang. “Given he’s not going to put you down anytime soon, how about I get you a meal?”

He strides off towards the weird cupboards where Daeos obtained food yesterday. I find myself unceremoniously deposited on a chair as Daeos races after him, shouldering Drasus out of the way with some force. I’m on my feet, ready to intervene again.

“I will get food for my female,” I hear him growl, claws extended.

He’s looking around wildly, at me, at Drasus, at the doorway, unable to focus.

“Warrior.” Drasus grabs Daeos by the shoulder, shaking him until Daeos meets his gaze. “You are in rut. You will feed your female. There is no harm in another Sarkarnii providing you with assistance. It means you are a good mate, being helped to provide for her.”

“It does?” Daeos rasps. His gaze slips from Drasus and back over to me.

“It does,” Drasus says firmly, turning Daeos around and giving him a shove towards me.

Daeos walks back, checking over his shoulder, hesitating, then finally he’s next to me, sits, and without a word, I’m pulled onto his lap.

It is absolutely my favorite place to be, I’m not going to lie.

“Hey?” I whisper at him. “Are you okay, sweetheart?”

He gives Drasus a long hard glare, but finally, he swivels his head to look down at me. I’m not entirely sure he heard my question, so I stroke over his cheek, and he leans into me, eyes fluttering closed for an instant.

“Mine,” he murmurs.

“Yours,” I reply.

Drasus puts a platter at the end of the table and slides it towards us with a flick of his wrist. The noise has Daeos immediately on high alert, and a whole symphony of snarls rips through his body until the platter spins to a stop in front of us.

Then he smiles a great big fang smile, and his scales start to glow from deep within again, the little neons running riot over his body.

“My pretty treasure, my heartfire, allow me to provide you with sustenance,” he says as seriously as he can while reaching for the platter.

Drasus retires to another table, watching Daeos closely, presumably

because he was told to. The distance between the two males seems to please Daeos who settles into his seat like a broody hen, holding up a piece of roast meat to my lips.

I pick up one of the sweet dough-like balls and hold it to his mouth. He makes a deep rumbling sound of contentment, smoke curling from his nostrils as he takes the treat in one single bite, and I do the same.

Whatever happens next, I know one thing. I will be by his side.



DAEOS

I have Opal as close as possible to me. She is enjoying the morsels I am giving her, and Drasus is far enough away my rut is relatively assuaged.

Not quite enough to stop a lot of my shift, but enough I can sit still and make the most of what I have. When Drega comes back, I might have to protect Opal, and it won't be pretty.

I will kill them. All.

But for now, I'm in a state of bliss. She fills my belly as I filled hers and with every food item she consumes, my mating gland pumps more mix into my veins. I'm absolutely sure I've never felt this calm or clear-headed. Perhaps the mating mix isn't such a bad thing after all.

"Ugh! I'm full!" Opal groans as she lies back against me and rubs her stomach.

My cock makes its presence known in my pouch at the action. However, my hand helps me swiftly polish off the rest of the food, along with the tankard of ale-wine Drasus also put down for me. I smack my lips in appreciation.

Drelix appears at the entrance to the dining barracks, and I clutch Opal to me, wanting to hide her but at the same time not wanting to.

She is my mate. No other Sarkarnii would dare challenge me.

"Steady, sweetheart," Opal murmurs in my ear. "Let's show them how wrong they are."

She slips her hand down onto my crotch and *into my pouch*. I stifle a groan and do everything I can to stop my eyes rolling in my head because I have to keep them on Drelix and Drasus. The big Sarkarnii gets up and

follows Drelax, leaving us alone.

Immediately, I lift Opal off my lap and place her on the tabletop, flicking at her dress until she is exposed to me.

“Daeos!” she whispers loudly.

“You are my mate, and I will taste you, here and now!” I grip under her thighs and lift her delicious cunt up to my mouth, making sure every inch is tasted.

Opal’s arms flail, and she squeaks and protests before giving in, her low guttural moans at having my tongue stuffed in her pussy taking over. She says my name many times, and I love hearing it on her lips.

“I need to mate with you, little treasure,” I murmur, flicking over the sweet bean at her apex which gives so much pleasure.

My mouth is flooded with her sweet juices in response. Given my cock is fully emerged and she is so wet, I lower her to the tabletop and slip the tip in her entrance.

Opal fixes her gaze on me.

“What if the others come back?” she asks, voice breaking with desire.

I slide a little farther in, and she arches her back, her slickness coating my cock. I grip her hips and push all the way inside her, sheathing myself in her heat, luxuriating it.

“Then they will see a Sarkarnii mating his female, a completely natural act,” I growl as she pulses over me. “One I fully intend to persist in it, because it brings you so much pleasure.”

Opal throws her head back and swears in her human language.

“Call for me, pretty treasure. Call out my name and I will hook you, claim you, fill you.”

So she does, and I’m unable to hold back, thrusting and thrusting within her as she grips my cock in an embrace it never wants to leave. Her body quakes under my touch, gasps, such perfect gasps escaping her lips as I drill deeper and deeper, my hook forming and my climax rising.

I shouldn’t hook her, not now, but my rut is taking no prisoners. I want her, I want my sarkarnling in her belly. She has to be hooked often.

With a sudden burst, Opal floods me, grips me, and releases me. I am unable to stop, unable to speak, unable to think of anything except the orgasm which rockets through me. My hook slips home, my seed fills her womb, and I am gone, lost in the perfection, delight, deliciousness which is my heartfire.

“Nothing else matters, not what’s gone before, not what happens after. There is us, entwined, locked, as one,” I murmur as I enclose her with my body, my wings and tail draped around us both because I cannot control my shift. “You are the stars which shine into my soul, heartsfire.”

I’m drawn back into reality by Opal touching my face. Water hovers in her eyes. Ice washes through my abdomen.

“Did I hurt you, pretty treasure?” I rasp with concern.

“No. The exact opposite,” she says.

Outside the dining barracks, the shouts of other Sarkarnii ring out. Opal laughs as she wriggles over my cock.

“We’re stuck, aren’t we?”

I nod.

“And what do you propose to do about it?” She raises her eyebrows.

I gather her in my arms.

“I propose to do nothing other than enjoy filling my mate.”

Opal’s beautiful eyes widen, then the most delicious smile I’ve ever seen sneaks over her lips.

“Oh, you do, do you?” She wraps her legs around my waist and grinds her hips against mine.

Her long dress hangs down, covering any evidence of our mating. Her arms are linked around my neck, and she gazes up at me, her little pink tongue sweeping her lips as the smile I adore tweaks at the corners of her mouth.

“Daeos!” Draxx’s voice rings out across the dining barracks.

“General,” I growl, unable to pay any deference to him, given I have trapped myself in a sheath of delight.

“If you’ve quite finished,” he says, flashing a fang.

“Not quite,” Opal calls out.

Drega enters behind the general and clears his throat, his nostrils flaring.

While he might not be able to see, like every Sarkarnii on the ship, he will most definitely be able to scent our mating.

“The ship confirms your version of events.” Drega tries and fails not to stare at Opal and me, her wrapped around me and my hand enjoying the feel of her sweet ass through the slippery fabric of her dress. “You were correct, mistress.”

“I’m pretty sure Ruby has told you females are always correct,” Opal says.

Draxx looks at Drega. “My female has told me this,” the fearsome general says sagely.

“She’s also told you to wear pants,” Drega growls. “And you are not.”

The general doesn’t wear pants much, something I quite understand.

Draxx’s gaze doesn’t waver from his brother. “Pants are optional,” he says. “And sometimes I believe you forget who saved us from the spaceworms, in the end.”

Two pairs of eyes turn on me and my mate. Unable to stop myself, I growl, until Opal cups my cheek in her soft hand and everything goes fluffy in my head.

Drega shakes his head. “Everyone deserves a second, or in your case, Daeos, third or fourth...or maybe fifth...I’ve lost count, chance.” He sighs.

“Then you need to continue to check the *Golden Orion* for Belek sabotage before we install the star map.” I stalk past both warriors with Opal in my arms. “My mate and I have a rut to see through.”



OPAL

Daeos was deadly serious when he said we had a rut to ride out. I'm not sure if we surfaced for much over many days, save for food and to visit the aquiums. And our visits were *not* confined to bathing.

All of which has resulted in a big bad Sarkarnii male snuggled in my arms, snoring softly, his chest, that glorious set of abs rising and falling, tail occasionally flicking as he slumbers. Smoke curls lazily from the corner of his mouth as he huffs slightly, and his scales glow with the deep inner light I've come to know as part of him.

I comb my fingers gently through his hair, scratching over his scalp in a way I've come to know he loves. Daeos also enjoys having his wings washed, someone playing with his tail, and mating.

He likes mating a whole load more than anything else, which my slightly aching stomach can attest to. Along with a burn in my thigh muscles which has to be better than any work out.

And his aftercare is something else...with a creative use of his tongue which could teach any male anywhere in the universe a thing or two.

But rather than being exhausted, I am exhilarated. Being with Daeos has placed a warmth within my chest I can't get enough of. My heart constantly pounds for him, jumping into my throat as if the organ alone wants to take a peek at the piece of dragon deliciousness I have somehow managed to snag.

I'm aware of a pair of fiery eyes trained on me.

"Hello, pretty treasure," he says, voice thick with sleep.

"Morning, sweetheart." I trace my hand down the side of his face. "You want me to go get some breakfast?"

“I get you food, not the other way around,” Daeos says.

“Perhaps I’d like to do it for you, for a change?” I suggest. “As much as I enjoy being waited on hand and foot, sometimes I like to do nice things for you too.”

“You do nice things for me all the time.” Daeos smiles, and it’s filled with fang. The quirk of his mouth coupled with the naughty light in his eyes means only one thing...

If I’m not mated in the next three seconds, we will not get any breakfast at all. I scramble out from underneath him, and I’m at the door to his quarters before he can wrestle his wings and tail into submission.

“Get me some edesh!” he calls as I slip out the door. “Please?” he adds as it closes behind me.

The ship is quiet, save for the ongoing hum as it has been slowly brought back to life. There were at least two other issues, most likely caused by the Belek. I have made sure Daeos’ name was completely cleared of any wrongdoing (other than probable exuberance when he first got back on board).

I want my dragon to walk with his head held high, to not feel like he is held back due to his past. Daeos is a warrior who should command respect, and I’m going to make damn sure he gets it.

The dining barracks are on the same floor of the ship as Daeos’ quarters, and it only takes me a few minutes to reach the place. Fortunately it is empty. Most Sarkarnii are not staying on board, so little time is being spent eating here.

I make my way over to the food cupboards, although apparently they rehydrate items stored somewhere else into food. I already know what Daeos and I like, so I punch at the symbols which denote his favorite sweet treats, along with a few other breakfast items and wait as the machines whirr to life.

“Little female?”

After nearly levitating in surprise at the sudden interruption to my thought processes, I spot Drasus, the big purple Sarkarnii dragon mountain, sat at a table to one side of the food station.

“Holy shit, you scared me!” I put my hand over my pounding chest. “How any of you can be stealthy amazes me.”

“My apologies,” Drasus replies. “It was absolutely not my intention to startle you, as I do not wish to have Daeos incinerate me.”

“You didn’t scare me that much.” I laugh.

“Do not underestimate a Sarkarnii’s sense of smell, especially when he is in rut.”

“Daeos could scent if I was scared?”

“He would not be much of a mate if he could not,” Drasus says sagely. “How long has he been able to create a kiralii glow?” he asks with studied innocence.

“What’s a kiralii glow?” I respond, mimicking his level of disinterest.

“When his scales light up, like they did when we got back on board the *Golden Orion*.”

“I’m not sure,” I reply as the cupboard hisses to denote the food is ready. “You’d be better off asking him.”

Whatever this glow is, I don’t want it used against Daeos, and I’m going to need to warn him about it. The fact Drasus is interested and attempting not to be has my hackles up. I really want to trust males other than Daeos, but it is proving difficult.

I open the food chamber, and the scent which hits me sends all my taste buds into a flat spin. I want to gobble it all up.

“I will ask him,” Drasus says. “Once his rut is over.”

The words spear me in the heart.

What will happen once Daeos’ rut is over? I’m not sure he knows. I mean, nothing changes, does it? My friends are still happily with their dragons, but then they’re all pregnant.

And this is the problem. I have a secret, one I should have told Daeos from the first time he mentioned breeding. About the one thing which kept me safe on earth and the one thing I don’t know how to explain to my chaos Sarkarnii. A secret I’ve stupidly been keeping.

From wanting to eat everything in sight, my stomach churns with rejection.

I need answers, and I am not asking questions of Drasus.

“I need to get back,” I mumble, pulling the dishes out.

“Of course.” Drasus takes a step back with something akin to a bow.

I hurry away, my own glow tainted with confusion and worry. Something I’ll need to throw off when I get back to Daeos, or I’ll be responsible for ship-wide destruction.



DAEOS

I stick my head out of the conduit as I hear my name called.

“Daeos?” The call comes again.

“Here,” I reply as a warrior comes into view.

“Drega wishes to speak with you about the installation,” he says.

I nod and persuade my tail to let go of the metal strut it’s been attached to while I’ve been hanging upside down threading fibers for the mapping system and fixing occasional issues caused by the *Golden Orion* being unused for so long. I land with a thump next to the warrior who, to my complete surprise, doesn’t snarl.

Instead he gives me a grin.

“Where is Drega?” I ask.

“He’s in ops,” the warrior replies before heading in the opposite direction.

I make my way through the various passages to the area within the control section of the ship which has been designated operations for the star map, when we finally get the thing installed.

Drega and Drasus are working on a console—one I don’t recognize—in the center of the room. The pair of them are prone underneath it. The sight of the unfamiliar item sends my shift rippling, wings extending, and my tail, never one for behaving, whips behind me in agitation.

I stalk forward, ever ready to deal with the new item with extreme prejudice.

“There you are,” Drega says through teeth gritted around a psi-driver. “We think this should give us the best access to the map and the ship at the same time.”

“What is *this*?” I say, unable to disguise my vexation at the new item.

Drasus lifts his head and studies me carefully. I’ve been working with all the other warriors on the *Golden Orion* for the past thirty ticks without incident.

Without serious incident. There has been the occasional snarling contest if I felt any of my fellow warriors were too close to my Opal, but in the main, I have eaten, slept, and mated with a newfound joy I didn’t even know existed.

The way the rut has improved me shows in my scales and my form. I’m bigger, broader, stronger than ever. I still can’t control my shift, but that’s another matter. I’m not sure I want to control it, given how much my mate enjoys it.

“Oh, Daeos...” Drasus’ rasping breaks into my thoughts. “Kirakos to Daeos?”

“What?” I attempt to snarl but fail.

I can’t snarl if I’m thinking of Opal and of mating her. Instead my shift recedes, save for my tail.

“Is he still in rut?” Drega says through his mouthful of psi-driver. “It’s a wonder he gets anything done at all.”

“He’s still in rut.” Drasus flashes a set of impressive fangs at me. “Which is a good thing. If he wasn’t, we’d probably have all been blown to the ancestors by now.”

Drega grunts. “There’s still time.”

I snarl at him, but I don’t mean it. Drega peers at me out of one eye, and a smile splits his face as he spits out the driver and heaves himself into a sitting position.

“Daeos in rut—who but the ancestors would have ever thought it?” he says, shaking his head and wiping his hands on a rag. “How are you getting on with the fibers?”

“Mostly complete. There has been other work needed. I’ll need a few more evs,” I reply, holding out my hand to Drega.

He looks at it, then at me before taking hold of my forearm and allowing me to pull him up.

“You’ve done well, warrior. Draco is impressed with your work and the speed at which you have completed your tasks.”

I have a strange feeling in my chest, like a swelling around my heart. I look down at it, expecting to see something expanding within, but there is

nothing.

Drasus claps a hand on my shoulder, and for once, I don't flinch at his touch.

"Not used to praise, warrior?" He laughs.

"General Draxx has congratulated me in the past on a job well done." I furrow my brow.

"I bet he has," Drega mutters. "Did it involve your speciality?"

"Yes." I feel my frown deepen and my confusion widen. "And the spaceworms."

Drega groans out loud. "Don't remind me, nev it! I nearly lost my tail!"

It appears it is my turn to grin. Drasus flicks a wing across the back of my head. "Don't you have a mate to get to?"

"My Opal is in the Sarkarnii quadrant today. I took her this morning." I smile at the thought of our trip back, when she clutched at me, head buried in my scales, refusing to look anywhere or at anything until we landed back in the main square and I was able to persuade her we had arrived.

She was soft and fragrant and perfection itself. My heartsfire glowed from within.

"Then you should collect her. Once we're finished here, there will be less time for mating." Drega laughs. "Although not much less." He winks at me, fangs on display. "My mate is with sarkarnling, and she is insatiable."

"Females need more mating when their bellies are full?" My own belly warms with the thought, the heat transferring almost immediately to my pouch.

"The way you're going at it, you'll find out soon enough." Drasus raises his eyebrows.

"I need to go get my mate." I'm already out of ops and heading to the exit ramp, my shift filling the corridor as I hurry to get into the air and back to my Opal.

Her belly needs filling, and my rut is still roaring in my veins. I can't wait to have her in my arms again.



OPAL

Amber lowers herself into the chair at Mistress Kiki's with a groan, hand over her stomach.

"I am absolutely ready to give birth," she moans.

"If I have to go two more months..." Ruby and Jem chorus with laughter.

"You laugh," Amber grumbles "Both of you are going to find out how much fun a Sarkarnii pregnancy is in the later stages soon enough."

The gales of laughter come thick and fast as it seems neither Ruby nor Jem have any such concerns. Jem is almost as big as Amber in any event.

I step behind a curtain to wriggle out of my pants and top. The last few weeks spent with Daeos in his cabin on the *Golden Orion* have been amazing, but as we did nothing other than eat and have sex, certain items have gotten tighter than they should be.

"Daeos was such a cutie when he dropped you off this morning," Coral calls out. "Not his usual over-caffeinated blunderbuss of a Sarkarnii at all. What have you done to him?"

"Mating." Jem giggles. "It tames any Sarkarnii."

I pop my head out from behind the curtain. "And how would you know?"

"I'm mated to the male who believed pants were entirely optional. Believe me, I know what mating does to a Sarkarnii," Jem says.

"Draxx still thinks pants are optional," Amber says sagely.

"Not as much as he did," Jem replies, and everyone nods.

"It's so sweet everyone is prepared to work with Daeos now," I reply, hiking up a new pair of pants which still prove to be a little bit too small when I try to do them up.

“It’s down to you, Opal. You’ve let everyone see his true nature.” Ruby says, her voice filled with smile.

“Which turns out to be significantly less violent than they all thought,” Coral says thoughtfully.

“Power of mating.” Jem coughs into her hand.

“Daeos has had a hard life.” I sigh. “Anything I can do to make it better is what I want.” I pick up another pair of pants and inspect them for size.

“He needs to look after you too,” Jade says, sewing furiously.

“Jade is correct,” Mistress Kiki chimes in, carrying over another armful of clothes for me, depositing them on a small stool with a long hard stare in my direction. “The Sarkarnii male should be dutiful at all times.”

“Given we’ve hardly seen Opal for the last month, I’d say he’s been *dutiful*,” Jade grumbles.

“I missed you too.” I blow her a kiss. She huffs, but I see a hint of a smile. “Anyway, once the ship is all fixed up...” I hesitate. I probably shouldn’t be telling everyone the plans. “I mean, once it’s all fixed up, you’ll have to come and see it.”

“Given it’s all Draco talks about, I am definitely coming to see it,” Amber says, pouring herself a glass of water.

“I’d like to see some technology which isn’t being used to kill us.” Jem agrees.

“And I’d like to see some technology which is good at killing.” Ruby cackles as Coral rolls her eyes and shakes her head.

I pull on another pair of pants. These ones fit much better, but I’ve already decided more exercise is needed, although given the acrobatic workout Daeos gives me several times daily, I’d have thought there was little need.

Apparently there is, especially if I’m going to have to keep coming back for more clothing. Not that I mind, even though I do mind leaving Daeos on his own.

He’s still glowing, but only when we’re alone. I’ve not seen him do it again in company. Part of me wanted to mention it to him, but he was so deliciously sleepy and sweet when I got back after speaking with Drasus, I didn’t want to upset him.

I never want Daeos to have another sad day for the rest of his life. My heart squeezes in my chest at the mere thought of his bright scarlet scales and the lopsided smile he has only for me.

“Oh, she’s got it bad,” Amber says.

“Sarkarnii fever.” Ruby laughs.

“What can I say? I know what you all think, but Daeos is sweet and kind, and he would pluck a moon from the sky if I asked him.” I wrap my arms around myself. “I won’t though because he really, really would,” I add seriously.

All my friends laugh, and I’m not sure I’ve ever felt so happy as I plonk myself down next to Jade and elbow her in the ribs as everyone starts chattering about life in the Sarkarnii quarter.

“Stop it,” she snaps half-heartedly.

“I’m sorry I’ve been gone so long.”

“You were busy. I understand.” Jade bends back over her work.

“Doesn’t excuse me not coming to see you.”

“Doing the horizontal mambo with a dragon excuses you.” She doesn’t look at me.

“Horizontal mambo?” I snort-splutter. “What makes you think it was horizontal?”

“Who are you and what have you done with the wide-eyed innocent Opal I knew?” Jade laughs at me.

“Has he said he’ll dance for you?” Ruby interrupts as she sits down next to me, and I notice she is sporting a little pregnancy bump.

Which means I have to let out a squeal of joy. “When were you going to tell me?” I ask, putting my hand on her stomach.

I think spending time with Daeos has left me with no filter, and it’s freeing beyond belief.

Ruby looks at Coral. “I’ve only recently found out. I was going to tell you as soon as I saw you.”

“So, all of you are...?”

There are three nodding heads.

“It doesn’t necessarily follow we’re all compatible with the Sarkarnii,” Coral says loudly.

Mistress Kiki makes a funny choking noise.

“The Ragad think we are,” Jem says. “In fact they deliberately designed this entire place, including the star map, around the fact that Sarkarnii and humans can...be together.”

“You mean have sex and babies,” Ruby says. Everyone looks at her. “What? I prefer to call a spade a spade. And it’s not like you can miss a

Sarkarnii in rut, is it?”

There is general agreement all round.

“You don’t need to worry too much.” Coral takes my hand. “Either way, whatever you want or don’t want,” she says kindly.

I realize they’re all concerned for me, given I’m now the center of attention.

“It doesn’t matter. I have a coil,” I say quietly.

“A what?” Amber asks.

“An IUD...you know the thing which goes inside the womb. Birth control.”

“Sneaky,” Jade says. “I never would have guessed that of you.”

“Well,” I dip my head, not looking at the others. “I had my reasons on Earth.” I blink back the stupid tears threatening.

“I should get back,” Amber announces and levers herself to her feet.

“Me too,” Ruby says as Jem also gets up.

Yep, I’ve managed to put a downer on things, and now no one wants to be around me.

“I’ll see you later,” Jade says as she puts her sewing away.

“You don’t need to go...”

“You’ll be going back to the ship soon. So, I’ll see you later.” Jade gives me a supportive smile.

With a chorus of goodbyes, everyone leaves.

Everyone except Coral.

If I didn’t know better, I’d say she arranged it.

“Does Daeos know?” Coral asks me. “About the birth control?”

The tears I was holding back burst forward, streaming down my cheeks. “No. I don’t even know if I still have it, after everything which has happened. I don’t know how to tell him because now it seems like I should have already said something, and I didn’t. I can’t hurt him, I just can’t.”

Coral remains stoic in the face of my stream of consciousness and tears.

“What makes you think you might not still have it?”

I hiccup to a standstill and study her. “Surely someone has told you what...happens, when a Sarkarnii mates with you?” Her face is a mask. Obviously, no one has. I beckon her closer. “Their...appendage...hooks through the cervix.”

“Holy shit!” Coral springs back with her exclamation, the expression on her face one of horror. “I can’t even...what?”

I can't help myself, I'm laughing through soggy sobs at her reaction. Finally, her professionalism reasserts itself.

"I can see how it might dislodge an IUD, but there's only one way to find out if it's there or not." She gives me a long stare.

I hiccup the last of my laughter at her seriousness and swallow hard. Do I want to know or not?

The curtain covering the door is thrown back in a violent motion, and Jade shoves her head through, looking around wildly before she spots me and Coral.

"Opal, come now. It's Daeos. He's gone mad!"



DAEOS

I scrape my hair out of my eyes. It's soaked in blood which I don't think is mine. Three warriors surround me, sporting injuries which I know are not life-threatening.

I know because I put them there. If I wanted the warriors dead, they would be.

"There. Is. A. Rak," I force out through fangs which are far too large for my mouth.

The foul tentacled side stepping creatures should not be in our quadrant, or at all, given they answer only to the Belek.

I've managed to keep my shift from happening, at least no more than wings and tail. If I shift, no one will assist me, and I have to get the enemy away from the Sarkarnii quadrant. I eye the explosives belt which is out of my reach behind the line of warriors.

"There are no Raks here," one of the warriors snarls. "You're seeing things, as usual."

"Not," I grind out, attempting to see past them to where I saw the foul creature scuttle into a passage, and I'm sure it's still there. "RAK."

More warriors come running and fear rises within me. If they are here, then the humans are unprotected including my Opal.

"He's seeing things." The irritating warrior shakes his head. "Draco is going to hear of this, Daeos. You can't rampage through the quadrant with explosives. You know you can't."

"There is a RAK!" I bellow at them all.

"You can keep saying there's a Rak as much as you like, it doesn't mean

it's there, Daeos." One of the warriors sniggers. "You're neevving hallucinating like always. If there was a Rak, we'd all know about it."

I actually want to kill them all. I would kill them all because they are endangering my mate, but if I did that, there would be no one to help me with the Rak. Instead I charge at the cheeky younger warrior and send him flying.

"I want to see Draco!" I roar. "I want him here, and I want you nevvvers to go protect the quadrant."

In a pincer movement I should have seen coming, four warriors pile in on me, claws, elbows, wings, and shifts all combining to hold me down. I bite. Hard. There is a howl of pain, and a gap opens up enough I can use all my strength to burst free of the pile of warriors.

To land at Draco's feet. I look up at my leader, who has his arms folded, his tail lashing in obvious agitation.

"I was led to believe we were past all of this, Daeos," he says, smoke curling from his nostrils. "That there was no more destruction." His eyes flick briefly to the explosives belt, then back to me. What I see within them, I do not like at all. "I was told you were mated and that you had found your heartfire and peace."

"Rak." Yet again, my words are leaving me as my chest heaves and my head spins with the need to get to Opal.

Draco lifts his head and scents the air. His eyes narrow. "Drasus!" he bellows without moving.

The big Sarkarnii appears by his side and all I see is disappointment in his face.

"This warrior is your problem. He's seeing things which do not exist. Deal with him."

Draco huffs out a stream of smoke and sparks before he turns on his heel and stalks away. Drasus shakes his head at me.

"This is it, Daeos," he says, and all around me it is if the air has cooled and I have become ice. "You'll need to spend some time in the pit."

"Pit? No!" I scramble to my feet. "Mate."

But Drasus has me by a wing, my shift too ingrained for me to change my form. I swipe out at him and very nearly connect as he snarls at me, lifting his hand, ready to return the favor.

"Daeos!" A sweet, perfect voice rings out, piercing everything, causing me to go limp in Drasus' grip.

He belts me anyway and I guess I deserve it. My head rings with the

blow, and I see two of my beautiful Opal standing in front of me. Her face is filled with concern.

“Heartsfire.” I grin at her and then have to spit out the blood.

“What’s happening?” She addresses her question to Drasus, who has not relinquished his grip on my wing.

“He has assaulted a number of warriors and taken weapons and explosives from the armory without permission.” Drasus lists my transgressions easily, too easily. “He is to spend time in the pit to consider his behavior.”

“No!” Opal cries out, and she rushes at Drasus, pounding her little fists on his scaly purple hide.

The growl I dredge up from somewhere within me is one the ancestors would be proud of. “Do not touch him.”

Opal steps back, eyes wide. “I won’t let them put you in the pit, sweetheart. I won’t!” She has her fists tightly curled by her side.

“I must accept my fate.” I squint at the big warrior who still has me in his grip. “If you are to do this to me, if there is no other option, please ensure my Opal is protected.

“From the Rak?” Drasus asks, his eyes narrowing.

“There is something here which isn’t right.” I do my best to be as deferential as possible to Drasus. I have to ensure my Opal remains safe, whatever happens to me.

Because if I go in the pit, regardless of my skills, I might not return. It was always a risk, every time I went in, either to find Draxx because I was asked to or to deal with my own desires for violence and destruction I could not contain, there could always be one last fight.

“And I need to be sure my *szikra* is secure.”

Drasus growls under his breath. “Daeos, you will be the death of me.” He scans the other warriors, noting their injuries. “Of all of us, probably.” A sigh rips through his chest. “Very well. You can’t avoid punishment completely, and I can’t have you loose in the Kirakos, so you will be confined to the *Golden Orion* while I investigate. Then there will be pit time, regardless of what I find.”

The relief I feel is short. With Opal so close, all my rut wants to do is ensure she is safe, to have her in my arms and away from all the males. Unable to stop myself, I snarl. “I want my mate.”

“You will get what you are given, warrior.” Drasus slams a fist into my

solar plexus. “And right now, the fact you have not been thrown in the pit immediately is one you should be grateful for.” He thrusts me at the waiting warriors. “Take him to the ship. If he tries anything, he will be confined to the pit, and I will not look into his allegations. Do you understand, Daeos?” He lowers his head, bright eyes glaring at me, challenging me.

“Yes, Drusus,” I say with the least amount of growl I can muster.

And I’m given over to the warriors who make sure I receive several more blows which I don’t react to, instead keeping my eyes on Opal until she is out of sight.



OPAL

“You did well, little one,” the massive purple Sarkarnii intones. “Without you, I thought I was going to have to deal with Daeos differently.”

“Perhaps if you believed him in the first place, you wouldn’t be in this position now?” I snap.

I mean, Drasus could easily bite me in half and not even notice. He’s twice my height and built like a tank, complete with camouflage given the way his scales glitter in this light. I would not win if it came down to a fight.

But I am so angry, I don’t care.

“You, of all Sarkarnii, know where he came from. You know how damaged he is,” I continue, despite Jade plucking at my clothing in alarm. “He deserves kindness and compassion. He deserves to be heard.”

Drasus leans down, and down, until his face is level with mine. A curl of smoke rises from his mouth as he studies me.

“I have heard him, and I will investigate, little creature. I have also promised to keep you safe, even if you are as annoying as he is. But in the meantime, he cannot be free as any trust earned has been lost.”

I want to kick the big guy right in the shins, but it’s not going to do Daeos any good.

“Fine. But do it quickly,” I retort instead.

Drasus pulls away from me, presenting me with a wall of muscled abdomen and leaving me gasping at my close call.

“I will. And I expect you to return to the human quarters, all of you, immediately. Do not leave without a Sarkarnii escort.” He strides away, leaving us in a cloud of smoke.

“Oh, great. Way to go, Opal,” Jade grumbles at her loss of freedom.

I turn to her. “If Daeos thinks we’re in trouble, then I believe him, and I’m going to do as he says.” I spin around and march back towards the main square, not caring if the others follow or not.

The anger I have inside me I know is not all for Daeos and his treatment at the hands of his fellow warriors. It’s at me, for keeping a secret when I hate secrets.

I kept how my ex treated me a secret from everyone and it did me no good. It got me abducted by aliens. Secrets are wrong. I should have told Daeos from the outset about the birth control. Instead I let it slide, and now it’s a secret so big, it could destroy us.

So, my anger is not for him, it’s for me, and that makes it worse. I used it to stand up for Daeos, and yet I’m the one who has betrayed him the most.

And it burns at me so badly.

Coral catches me up, matching her steps to mine. I don’t look at her, and for a while we walk in silence until we reach the human quarters, when she moves ahead and goes down the stairs. By the time I enter, she’s in the small food preparation area and is pouring out cups of the hot herbal drink we all like.

She pushes one of the cups at me and then one at Jade who has followed me in.

“He’s dangerous,” Jade says.

“Don’t.” I put my cup down on the counter hard, and some of the liquid slops out. I ignore it. “Just don’t. Daeos is...” I search for a way of describing him. “He’s vulnerable.”

“He’s trouble, not vulnerable.” Jade snorts into her cup. “He’s red for a reason, Opal. It’s a warning—don’t touch!”

“You don’t know anything about him,” I say quietly. “I’m not excusing his behavior, but there’s a reason he is how he is, and once he knows he’s safe, he’s a different male.”

I daren’t meet the gaze of either of my friends because I know what they’re thinking. They think I’m delusional, they think I’m in thrall to Daeos, who they just witnessed fighting with a number of other males, covered in blood which wasn’t his and then being led away to his fate.

“I know you’d do anything to help someone,” Coral says evenly. “But I worry it’s to the detriment of yourself, especially with a dangerous male like Daeos.”

“All Sarkarnii are dangerous,” I reply. “Ask Amber or Jem or Ruby. Being dangerous is the point of a Sarkarnii. It’s not like they ended up in this prison because of their charity work.”

Jade coughs out a laugh and deliberately doesn’t look at me.

“What?” I fire at her.

“I believe it was their desire to *liberate* items from their former owners which resulted in their incarceration in the Kirakos. I suppose you could call it a form of charity work,” Jade says.

“If you consider the Sarkarnii themselves a lost cause,” Coral adds.

“Oh, funny. You’re both hilarious,” I mutter. “Daeos isn’t dangerous, or at least he isn’t dangerous for me. I don’t know how to explain it, but I’ve never felt like this about anyone before. He fills my heart with lightness I didn’t know was possible. When he smiles it’s like the entire universe is looking down on us and making things right.” I shake my head and stare into my cup. “I don’t know how to explain it.”

There is silence from Coral and Jade. It lengthens, and I wonder if I’ve said something wrong, so I look up. Coral is smiling at me, and a tear is hovering in one of her eyes. Jade blinks rapidly.

“You’ve explained it, Opal,” Coral says. “You’ve explained it perfectly.”



DAEOS

I *have to trust Drasus. I have to trust Drasus. I have to trust Drasus.*

I keep the chant going over and over in my head as my warrior captors take me farther and farther away from Opal. I can almost feel the physical distance as a thin wire stretching out between us.

I need her. Without my *szikra*, my thoughts are in turmoil once again. Thinking straight is a problem. Even putting one foot in front of the other is hard.

It doesn't make moving me easy for my captors. The air is filled with huffs of smoke as they keep me moving but try to keep out of the way of my claws.

I have to trust Drasus.

"Daeos." A warrior called Dynos captures my attention with a wave of his hand in front of my face. "Concentrate for a seccari. Drasus knows what he is doing. He will take care of your mate."

I can't quite focus on what he is saying.

"Mate. Heartfire," I growl.

"You are a lucky Sarkarnii." Dynos grins at me.

"Don't." I struggle to find my voice. "She is not yours." And when they come, they come filled with fangs and snarls.

Dynos holds up his hands in supplication. "I wouldn't dare even look at her for too long, Daeos. I saw what you did back there when you thought she was in trouble," he says.

My chest heaves with the effort of breathing, of being in the moment, keeping everything together. I want to go back to get her.

I have to trust Drasus.

“You can trust him.” Dynos is close to me now. “He will never let anything happen to the humans.”

Up ahead there is a long, low whistle, and I see Drelix leaning against the entrance to the former Xicop barracks.

“Nev it!” I swear. He’s the last Sarkarnii I want to see.

“Drelix.” Dynos dips his head at the older warrior.

Drelix nods to him and grasps at my shoulder. I flinch away but he persists. His eyes burn into mine.

“Drasus?” I query.

He nods and then flicks his head in dismissal at the others. They exchange glances but given Drelix is with me, they all obviously decide they’re well rid of their charge and melt away, including Dynos.

“What does Drasus want?” I snap at Drelix. “My mate is in danger, there’s a Rak in the quadrant and no one believes me. I need to go back. I can’t be confined to the *Golden Orion*.”

Drelix sighs deeply and gestures ahead of him but not at the entrance to the barracks and the way to the ship, to a small rock where there is a pile of weapons.

My weapons. The ones I liberated from the armory earlier, minus, to my chagrin, the explosives belt.

“Drasus believes me?”

Drelix nods.

“We have to follow the Rak.” I make a move towards the weapons, but Drelix pulls me back and gets a snarl for his trouble.

He shakes his head and points down the left fork of the main entrance to the old barracks. He mimics the Rak’s sideways movement with his hand before holding up the other and showing me three fingers.

“Three? In there?” My shift ripples through my body and smoke fires out of my nostrils.

Drelix stares at me, then at the smoke.

“I can make smoke now,” I say, proudly.

Drelix raises his eyebrows.

“Maybe my flame will follow?” I add, with less certainty.

Drelix shrugs and then walks to the weapons, picks them up, handing me a pulsar and, irritatingly, keeping the psi-rifle for himself. I don’t care he’s the better shot, I liberated the weapons.

Drelix ignores my growl, instead shouldering the rifle and heading off into the dark. I hesitate, checking back over my shoulder towards the Sarkarnii quadrant. My mate is there, maybe in danger from a Rak.

I have to trust Drasus.

I've never trusted anyone in my entire life. There's never been anyone to trust. Sure, I've followed orders because I didn't want to be sent back to the place where the skeletons lie gathering dust and memories. Following orders meant I got to do things I liked, a full belly, the chance to leave the planet I hated and be among the stars I loved.

There was no one to trust until I met Opal. Her presence warms me from within, it gives my heart a reason to beat. She gives me a reason to exist.

There is a threat to her, but from what Drelix has indicated, the threat is much bigger elsewhere. It ties into the fact I'm sure the Belek have not vacated our part of the Kirakos, or even the Kirakos as a whole, which my superiors believe.

Finding a melabuk is one thing—the creatures are native to the Kirakos and make for good eating providing you avoid their poison. Finding a Rak or more indicates something else is going on.

Something bad.

Something which threatens my mate and my fellow warriors, even if Draco is not prepared to consider it true without evidence.

So if he wants evidence, I will get the Raks for him and drop the foul things at his feet. Draco will need to believe me then.

Up ahead, there is a flash of flame and the way is lit. Drelix stands in the flickering light of a burning torch, waiting for me.

There is no darkness if I am protecting my Opal. There is only the light, which burns for her, in the center of my being.

I spot something lying just behind the rock where Drelix placed our weapons. It seems my explosives belt has made it to me.

I can trust Drasus.

Picking up the belt, I slip it over my head and follow Drelix into the bowels of the Kirakos.



OPAL

When I discovered I had been abducted by aliens, finding myself in my current position was a worry. I didn't, however, ever expect to have consented to it.

"Comfortable?" Coral queries from the business end, where she has my knees flopped out and a sheet over the necessary area.

"No," I reply. "Is anyone ever?"

"No," Coral admits. "But I'll be gentle."

"I should think so. You are within kicking distance," I say, and I very nearly put my hand over my mouth, stunned at the words which have snuck out.

On Earth, I would never have been so bold. Meek was my default, even when I was seething inside. Is Daeos rubbing off on me?

"All done," Coral trills, patting my knees. "You can get dressed now."

All of this is unpleasantly familiar. I sit up and grab my underwear and pants, heaving them on.

"And you are pregnant. There's no sign of the IUD, so either it's come out or been taken out, or..."

I halt what I'm doing, heat and cold flowing through me as I slowly topple forward and Coral has to catch me.

"I'm pregnant? But I've only been with Daeos...I don't know, time in this place is skewed, but it's not long."

"When was your last period?" Coral asks as she washes her hands.

"When was yours? This place is stressful," I retort.

"Point taken," she says, not meeting my gaze. "You're at least six weeks

pregnant.”

Six weeks.

“Then it must have been the first time...” I gasp.

“What can I say? Given the conception rate so far of humans being with Sarkarnii, all I can assume is they are a particularly fertile species.”

“You make it sound like they should come with a warning.” I giggle because my mind is working overtime, and I’m not exactly in the moment.

“They probably should, but then apparently it would make it less fun,” Coral says drily.

“I can attest to the fun,” I reply.

“Yes, so can Amber, Jem, and Ruby...and now you.”

I’m not entirely sure, because I’m not exactly concentrating, but I think Coral shudders.

“Wait—if the IUD hasn’t been removed, where is it?”

“It may be inside you. Which is not a good thing. If we were on Earth, I’d arrange for a scan to see if it’s there.”

“And if it was?”

“I’d try to take it out. But there’s no sign of the strings, so unless they’re just inside the cervix, I’d leave it in place as it could damage the baby.”

I go lightheaded.

“Shit!” Coral exclaims, catching me again. “Sit the fuck down, Opal. Tell me what’s wrong.”

I don’t want to cry. I’m fed up of crying. I’m fed up of secrets. All I want is for things to be okay. I take a deep breath.

“On Earth, I had split up with a man. He wanted to control me. So, the IUD was something I had done to me in order to ensure I wasn’t tied to him for life. Now, it is threatening what I want more than anything, Daeos’ happiness.”

“What about your happiness?” Coral asks. “I know how much you love to help everyone, but your happiness has to factor in somewhere. You do want this baby, don’t you?”

I haven’t even thought about it. What with the worry I couldn’t get pregnant and it was something Daeos wanted, to actually being pregnant almost instantly and now the baby being at risk—it’s overwhelming.

“I need to tell him.” I sit bolt upright, pulling away from Coral. “Daeos needs to know.”

“Right now? I mean, you’ve only just found out. There’s no rush.”

“Coral, I never told him about the IUD, and I should have. I’m not keeping this from him. I had enough secrets and lies when I was on Earth, and I don’t want them here, with him.”

“Fair enough. But given he’s been taken away by a whole load of vicious looking Sarkarnii, how are you going to get to him?”

“I’ll ask to see him. The Sarkarnii are honorable. They won’t deny Daeos a visit with his mate.”

“They were happy enough to cart him off though.”

Anger burns within me at the memory. “They were wrong, I know it. Daeos wasn’t dangerous or vicious when we were on the ship, with me or with anyone. Once Draco and Draxx found out he was mated, they let him participate in fixing the ship. He got on with his work, and he loved being trusted by Drega and Drasus, who were pleased with the progress he was making. It was all he ever wanted, Coral. There’s no way he’d jeopardize how far he’s come by seeing things which are not there.”

“It doesn’t sound like the Daeos from earlier,” Coral says, tapping a finger against her lips. “Like you say, he wants to be with you, he wants to do good for the Sarkarnii too, unless he’s hallucinating...” She gives me a glance. “I don’t understand Sarkarnii physiology or psychology, of course, but from what you say and what I’ve been told, he’s been through a hell of a lot, Opal. I can’t see how that could change overnight.”

“I refuse to believe he was seeing things,” I say, my fists balling up. “The way he was acting, what he said, there was a genuine threat.”

“If you believe in him, if you truly do, then you’ll need to speak with Drasus.” Coral sighs.

“Drasus? I don’t think he’s best pleased with me right now.”

“He’s as honorable as they come,” Coral says, picking at some non-existent lint on her arm. “When he wants to be.”

“Then I need to find Drasus.” I pull on my boots. “Before Daeos really does kick off and do himself an injustice.”

I see Coral’s incredulous gaze.

“I know you think my head is filled with pink fluff, Coral, but it isn’t.” I head towards the door. “I know I can’t ‘fix’ Daeos, but I can love him and support him. I can fight in his corner when it’s needed, and I can tell him when he’s being a dick. It takes all of these things to make a relationship work, and I just wish I’d known it a long time ago.”

“But then you wouldn’t be here,” Coral calls out.

“No, so I guess it all worked out in the end.” I grin and then climb the steps into the main square, ready to do battle with all the Sarkarnii.

Daeos is going to know he is to be a father if it's the last thing I do.



OPAL

The main square is quiet. I spot a warrior heading over to the dining area and follow, hoping, if nothing else, he can tell me where Daeos is.

“Female.” A deep, dark voice has me stopped in my tracks.

“Draco.”

I face up with the leader of the Sarkarnii. Other than my recent encounter, I’ve only met him when he’s been with Amber, and the dark golden warrior is normally too absorbed with her to pay me any attention.

But now I’m caught right in the center of his dark gaze.

It’s not a great place to be, but I have Daeos to think of, so I straighten up and lift my chin. I can’t look him in the eye, he’s far too tall, but I can put on a good show of standing up to him.

“Where is Daeos?” We ask each other at the same time.

I put my hands on my hips. “You should know. You told Drasus to deal with him. Where is my mate?”

Draco’s lip hitches to reveal a fang.

“Are all humans so tiny and fierce?” he asks, but I don’t think he’s looking for an answer. “I do not know where your mate is, fiery creature. I had hoped you might know, since he was so keen to protect you from his imagination.”

“What makes you, and everyone else, think he was making it up? Perhaps he was right, perhaps he did see something. He’s been working so hard for you, and you treat him like an idiot,” I fire out, warming to my subject. “All he ever wanted was to be accepted by you, and the second he does something you don’t like, he’s taken away and punished, which was the last time I saw

him.”

Draco glares at me for what seems a very long time. I can feel myself wilting under his scrutiny.

“Such a little ball of flame,” he finally says, snorting out a long stream of smoke and embers. “Protecting her mate.” He folds his arms. “Not that Daeos needs protecting.”

“Regardless of what you think, he should be treated, at the very least, like all other Sarkarnii warriors and believed.”

Draco examines me, and I feel rather like a mouse in the paws of a cat as he does.

“If Daeos hadn’t tried my patience on more than one occasion, your suggestion would be reasonable. If he could prove himself to be consistent in any other area than chaos, your suggestion would be reasonable.” He hesitates, arms unfolding slightly, his posture changing. “But as he is a mated male, your suggestion...is reasonable.”

He takes a step back from me.

“Has anyone seen Daeos?” he bellows, and although I already guessed, he has an impressive set of lungs on him, causing me to cover my ears.

A number of warriors appear, as if out of smoke, including Drega and Draxx.

“Daeos is missing?” Draxx asks, and for the first time, I don’t see anger from any of the Sarkarnii, only concern.

“His mate has not seen him since Drasus took him away,” Draco says to his brother. “Has anyone else seen him?”

There are murmurings, but it seems the answer is in the negative.

“Has anyone seen Drasus?” Drega asks. “He was supposed to be assisting in the star map installation, but I have not seen him since earlier today.”

Draco huffs out an impressive amount of smoke. “It would appear I was wrong about Daeos,” he says, dropping onto one knee beside me. “Please accept my apologies, little female. I will make this right, upon my honor as a Sarkarnii and a member of the High Bask.”

I study his face. He is deadly serious, but then Draco is always these things, both serious and deadly in equal measures.

But it doesn’t stop the fear taking hold of my heart.

“What do you think has happened to him?” My voice is annoyingly hoarse. I wanted to be stronger for Daeos.

Draco rises, shifting out his wings, and his brothers gather.

“We didn’t accept his explanation because he is Daeos, that’s what happened, little one,” Draxx says. “An error we will correct.”

He barks out orders to a number of warriors who scurry away in different directions.

“I do not like this, at all,” Drega says to Draco. “We should not leave the quadrant.”

“We have to look for the Rak Daeos said he saw first. Then we will make the decision about leaving,” Draco says.

“You’re not going anywhere, Draco,” Coral pants, running up to us. “Amber’s in labor. You’re needed.”

“My sarkarnling is coming?” Draco says, and for probably the first and last time, a flicker of fear runs over his stark features.

It could be me, but do his scales pale a little too?

“Yes, and Amber needs you, Draco,” Coral snaps before she hurries away.

Draco glances at his brothers, says not a word but takes off at a run towards his quarters, scooping Coral up as he goes. I hear her protest at the indignity, but Draco takes absolutely no notice.

Draxx grins at Drega, who rolls his eyes.

I get the impression they’re used to their brother’s dramatics.

“Now, little female, we need to get you and the others somewhere safe,” Draxx says with rather too much fang for my liking.

“I’m not going anywhere until Daeos is found,” I retort, folding *my* arms and tapping my foot.

Both Drega and Draxx edge very slightly away from me, as if I’m some sort of ticking bomb.

These are males who have been well trained.

“I mean it,” I add, somewhat unnecessarily but not willing to lose the possible upper hand I have.

Draxx looks in the direction Draco took as if searching for inspiration.

“Jem would be the same about you.” I’m wheeling out the big guns...and I have no shame.

I’m absolutely sure Draxx swallows hard at the mention of Jem’s name.

“Allow us to make sure there is no Rak in this quadrant, then we will look into finding Daeos,” Drega says carefully, his eyes not leaving me for a second.

“Perhaps, if you could speak to our mates, explain what’s happening?”

While we do this task?” Draxx asks, palms held out flat, almost in a manner of pleading.

I consider my options. It includes the squirming in my gut which makes me want to be with Daeos this instant. Something which is clearly not possible. At least I can be of some help...telling the others what is happening will take my mind off Daeos being missing.

“Fine.” I give the pair of them the benefit of a good glare. “But I want an update very soon, or I’ll go looking for him on my own.”



DAEOS

The clacking up ahead can only be attached to one species in the universe. And it's the one thing I hate the most.

When we were first brought to the Kirakos, we were separated. The loss of my fellow Sarkarnii was bad enough, but collared, the Belek had a Rak torture me until I was weak with blood loss and lack of food and sleep. Then it tortured me some more. Sometime between not being able to move, speak, or see, my fire was taken from me.

I hate the Rak as a burning pit inside me, the one I no longer have. Any tick I can tear a Rak apart is a good tick.

And it looks like it's going to be a good tick.

Drelx clamps a hand over my mouth, which is when I notice the growling. I wrench myself away from him and glare.

Only he's not growling, I am. I narrow my eyes at Drelx, brazening the whole thing out. He shakes his head and pulls his rifle from his shoulder before indicating I need to go ahead of him.

I move forward as stealthily as my tail will allow, given the nevvng thing is thrashing from side to side in what seems to be an element of self-sabotage. As I reach the end of the passageway, a blue-white light glows, and I grab at one of the pulsar grenades on my belt.

Drelx leaps ahead of me with a hiss, hand batting at mine as he fires his rifle, surging into the opening. With a snarl dredged up from the pit, I follow him because there is absolutely no way he's getting all the violence where the Rak are concerned.

They're keeping me from my Opal, and they nearly got me banished to

the pit. The Rak are going to pay for everything they've done.

I unfurl my wings and let rip with several plasma bolts as I roll across the floor into the open area. To my intense irritation, Drelix has taken out one of the Rak, but he is wrestling with the second, his rifle just out of reach.

"Need some help?" I query as I take in the strange machine in the center of the space, the one shaped like a column, emitting the light, humming. It is what the Rak appear to have been worshipping. Maybe.

I don't like it much. I don't like the noise it's making and the light hurts the back of my brain. I pick up Drelix's rifle and, as I do, he makes a strangled sound, which I ignore as I slam the butt of the weapon into the thing.

The hum increases but the light flickers. I do it again and the noise stutters, slows, and then, along with the light, it ceases.

Behind me there is a cracking, and without even looking, I flick into the air, shift, and hurl myself at the remaining Rak with all claws extended. Accelerant boils in my chest and, not even thinking, I release a sheet of flame which could rival any Sarkarnii warrior, even Draco. All around me, things sizzle as the fire burns and burns.

Until, at last, I have no more to release. The smoke clears. Drelix stares at me. In one hand, he holds a Rak pincer.

"Where did it go?" I demand, ready to chase down the thing and end it.

Drelix spreads his arms and it's then I see the walls of the circular chamber. They are dripping.

The Rak, it seems, went everywhere.

"Good," I say with a shrug.

Drelix grins at me. The silent nevvver actually grins, with fangs and everything. Then he walks over to the strange pole, now dark, and inspects it with a shaking head.

"What is it?" I ask, risking a step closer to the thing, given it is no longer making a noise.

Drelix pokes at it with the disembodied Rak claw. The column fizzes unpleasantly, and my wings shift and flare.

He walks around it and picks up his rifle, inspecting it for damage, glaring at me out of one eye and then putting it back over his shoulder. He points at the column.

"I want the other Rak first. Then we take this back to Draco," I say as I pick up the Rak pincer Drelix abandoned.

Drelix looks around the space, then he points at the passageway leading farther into the Kirakos.

I don't know what the strange column is or why three Rak were either guarding it or worshipping it. All I know is, where there are Rak, there has to be Belek.

And if there are Belek back in the Kirakos, before we've had a chance to install the star map on the *Golden Orion*, then there will be trouble.

Trouble being mostly me.



OPAL

I sit and stare at Ruby and Jem. They stare back at me. Jade stares into space.

I'd usually fill this silence with something, but my mind is going at a hundred miles an hour. Where is Daeos? Is Amber okay? Is a Rak, one of those horrible half lobster half squid things, about to burst into our quarters and snap us all in half? Where can I get a weapon?

"What are you talking about?" Jade says.

"Who?"

"You. You're muttering. It's like you're taking on the form of Daeos."

"I don't think he mutters."

"I think he does," Ruby says. "Sometimes, when he's stressed."

I feel my heart being wrenched out of my chest, stomped on, and then shoved back in the wrong way up. Why have I never noticed it? I know he struggles to find words when he's excited, but muttering to himself...

"Where are Drega and Draxx?" I snap. "They said they'd come and find me once they'd made things safe. How long does it take to make things safe if you're a massive dragon?"

I get up and start to pace. Three pairs of eyes follow me.

"Is everything okay, Opal?" Jem ventures.

"Does she look okay?" Jade retorts. "Sit down, hun, you're making us all dizzy," she adds in a softer tone.

"I need to see him," I say through gritted teeth. "I need to know he's all right. He needs to know..."

Suddenly, despite a lifetime of oversharing, I don't want to share my

news with anyone other than Daeos. I clamp my lips together.

“He needs to know what?” Ruby asks.

“He needs to know how much I care about him.” I hiccup out the lie with an ease which surprises me. “And I can’t do that if I don’t know where he is.”

Ruby stands up with an immediacy I wasn’t expecting.

“Right,” she says, in the manner of someone on a mission. “I’ve had enough of this shit. Drega thinks he can keep me out of the way because I’m pregnant. Well, he’s wrong.” She holds out a hand to me. “Come on,” she says, the other hand spiriting a ray gun out of seemingly thin air. “Let’s go find the Sarkarni ‘A Team’ and see if we can’t hurry them up.”

She gives me a smile which is terrifying in its seriousness.

“O-okay,” I stutter out, taking her hand.

“You two.” Ruby waves the ray gun somewhat recklessly for my taste. “Cover for us.”

Jade gives Ruby a smart salute. “B Team acknowledges the order, ma’am,” she says, and Jem collapses into giggles.

Together with Ruby, I mount the stairs out into the main square. Once we’re at the top, she presses a dagger into my hand.

“Draxx doesn’t mess around when it comes to my safety, so he must have his suspicions, even if everyone thinks Daeos is trouble.”

I open my mouth to defend him, but Ruby holds up her hand.

“I know he has a good heart, Opal. So does Draxx and in his own way, so does Draco. They treated him like a younger brother, I believe. A younger brother with anger management problems and issues around hygiene, but a sibling nonetheless. They do care about him, and they won’t let him come to harm.”

The sentence hangs in the air for a short while before Ruby continues.

“Daeos can take care of himself. I’m sure you know that.”

“I do. The thing is...I don’t want him to have to, not anymore.” I give her a wan smile.

“Then he’s a very lucky male and I hope he knows it.”

I think of the new life growing inside me, the one he wants and the one he doesn’t yet know about.

“He will.”

Ruby raises her eyebrows. “A Sarkarnii convert?”

“One hundred percent.” I laugh. “Although it wasn’t like I had anyone on Earth who could ever hold a candle to a massive dragon warrior. My ex

would have shit himself, like he did the night I was abducted.”

Ruby gapes at me. “He was with you when you were abducted?”

“He was the reason I was abducted, Ruby. He offered me up to the aliens who took me.”

She makes a deep growling noise in the back of her throat, her eyes flashing with anger.

“Then I recommend, if you ever get the chance, you get him to hold a candle up to Daeos, as I’m pretty sure he’d end up with more than just singed eyebrows.”

She looks so fierce, I want to laugh. I also want to cry. But most of all, I want to be brave. I’ve told my first human how badly Dave treated me and rather than feeling ashamed, I feel liberated.

“Actually,” Ruby says, looking thoughtful, “don’t tell Daeos anything. He’ll most likely take the *Golden Orion* back to Earth and cause a sensation trying to find him in order to kill him.”

“The Sarkarnii are full on,” I say, my chest tightening.

“Wait until he wants to dance for you.” Ruby cackles.

And my chest tightens further.

“Do you think he’ll want to?”

“Fucking hell, Opal. You’ve been in your little love nest for the past forever, he’ll hardly let you out of his sight—of course he’ll want to dance for you. But it’s Daeos, so the fact he wears pants most days surprises the hell out of me.” Ruby’s serious, fierce look is back. “You might find you’ll have to prompt him because I suspect he’ll be too scared to ask you.”

I think of my big, bold dragon warrior. I think of the sleepy Daeos in my arms when we wake. I think of the look in his eyes when he told me how he watched the creature from the forest kill his parents and how he watched over their decaying bodies for so long he forgot who he was.

“Then, when I find him, I’m going to ask him,” I say firmly as I grasp the dagger in my hand. “Because he is my mate, and I want him to be happy.”



DAEOS

Drelix, for all his nevving silence, is good company. Being with him stops my thoughts going wild because I have to concentrate.

And being with him means there's someone at my back while I think about Opal.

I need her.

Not because of the rut. It drove me to give her pleasure. No, I need her because she fills a space in my soul. I want to tell her everything, I want all my words to come tumbling out in any order, any time because she will listen and then she will kiss me, and then...

All the darkness melts away. There is just me, and her, and the...

Drelix coughs. My hips twitch again. He stares at me in the gloom created by the glowlight we took from the Rak, a corner of his mouth hiked up in an amused smile. He flicks his hips in a parody of mine.

"I'm dancing?" I say out loud because the idea seems preposterous in the extreme. "My mate...Do you think Opal wants me to dance for her?" I ask him. "I'm hardly the best mate for any female. I'm scared of the dark, I can't control myself half of the..."

Drelix coughs again, harshly.

"Most of the time?" I side eye him. He nods solemnly.

Then he walks up to me, tracing his hand over my chest without touching me. I look down to see my scales glowing, like they do when I'm with Opal. Not the striations all Sarkarnii have, but a deep glow which always fills me with contentment.

It fills me now, even without her by my side. The thought of her, the

memory of her scent—it is everything.

Drelix makes a low stuttering noise, deep in his chest. It's probably the closest the nevvver gets to uttering words. He gazes knowingly at me and smiles.

"I should dance for her?" I ask.

He turns on his heel with a huff of smoke and walks away.

"Is that a yes?" I call after him, but he has disappeared into the gloom.

"I should dance for her," I say to myself, in the hope it makes it real.

My hips do some practice flips which aren't so bad. Opal might accept all of me, after all.

Ahead of us is a light, presumably some sort of exit, which is very welcome as these passageways are making my scales itch. As I catch up with Drelix, I nearly fall over from the wall of scent which hits me. The foul stench of Xicop, Belek, and Rak all combined.

The smell I've caught, on and off, since we were supposed to have routed them from the Kirakos. Something I could never quite believe and yet was unable to provide any evidence of to my superiors.

Drelix is stock still too, as affected by the odor as I am. He glances at me. I hold up my pulsar and give him the benefit of my best, and most unhinged, grin.

"This is what I've been waiting for, a chance to even things up." I pull the explosives belt over my head.

I leap forward, shifting as I go, my claws hanging on to my pulsar and my belt as I release a sheet of flame and luxuriate in the feel of it burning through my accelerant. Behind me, I hear sounds of a psi-rifle, and presumably Drelix is following me into the unknown.

Below is a vast cavern and it is filled with the enemy. My heart swells. This is my time, this is what I do best. The pulsar goes in my mouth as I beat my wings hard, pulling off the individual charges and sending them spinning in all directions, the resulting explosions sending my pulse racing with abandon.

This is what it is to be alive, to have a female, to be mated, and to be a warrior. I spit my pulsar back into my claws and laugh, sending fire burning into the air as below me the scent of destruction rises.

My scent.

Because I am the warrior. I am the Sarkarnii. I can do this. I can prove I am worthy to my fellows and most of all, to my mate, whom I want to dance

for. I spiral in the air, catching the briefest glimpse of Drelix's iridescent scales. The Belek are done for. I will be a victor.

Which is why, when I'm hit with the blast and the pulsar net, it comes as a bit of a surprise. And the ground seems to be coming up to meet me awfully fast.



OPAL

This isn't quite going how I planned. Ruby went in one direction, I went in another and found myself surrounded by Sarkarnii warriors who clearly did not know what to do with a female.

Instead, they kept sniffing the air, backing off, but blocking my way when I tried to go any farther. It would have been funny if I hadn't really wanted to be taken seriously.

"Look, I want to find Daeos. When I do, he'll look after me, okay?" I plead with one of them. "Or maybe you could find Drasus?"

But it doesn't work, and I find myself slowly backed into the main square.

"Opal!" Ruby comes running up. I'm not sure I like the look on her face.

"Have you found out anything?" I gesture to the group of Sarkarnii who are attempting to melt into the background. "These haven't been helpful at all."

"Drasus and Drelax are also missing," Ruby says, catching her breath. "Come with me."

She leads me over to an entrance I've never used before, and we descend down a dark staircase. At the bottom, it opens into a large room, and standing some way ahead are Drega and Draxx. Neither of them look happy as they examine a six-foot column made out of some white material.

My heart plummets into my boots. "What's going on?" I ask, trying and failing to keep the tremble out of my voice.

None of this looks good, along with the refusal by the other warriors to let me go.

“It seems he has taken Drelix, some weapons, and gone into the old warden-controlled area, most likely after the Rak he believes he saw,” Drega says, his expression dark. “Drelix wouldn’t go on such a quest lightly.”

“What are you trying to say?” I half-whisper. “He made him go?”

“Drelix knows Daeos, far more than Daeos will ever let on. They were contemporaries in the tenth battalion. He was so proud when Daeos was promoted,” Draxx says wistfully. “And then we had to bring the pair of them to this place,” he adds with a dark growl. “Drelix would accompany Daeos to the ancestors. He would never have to be forced to follow him.”

“Daeos was promoted? What was he?” I ask, quietly.

“He was my second,” Draxx says. “Before his inability to follow orders and his predilection for explosives took over. Before the Kirakos robbed him of the nobility we’d instilled in him.”

“*You* instilled in him?” I burst out, not caring if Draxx is close to eight feet of green-scaled muscle or that my friend is his mate. “He was desperate to please you, desperate to do well, and yet he still had nightmares.” I’m yelling now. “He *was* noble. None of you could see it, and it’s driven him away.”

I’m not crying. Tears are not enough for how I feel. The one person in the entire universe I care the most for is missing because he wants to protect me from any danger. In all my life, even when I had Dave controlling me, I’ve never felt so alone.

Ruby puts her hand around my shoulders. I want to shake it off, but I don’t. It won’t help anyone, let alone Daeos.

“So, what are we going to do?” I finally say, quietly, my teeth clenched.

“This is a portable wormhole generator,” Drega says. “These are hugely expensive and beyond the reach of most mortal species, except the Belek.”

“Which means...?” My stomach hits my boots. I want to throw up.

“The Belek are here. And they’ve been using the wormholes in order to avoid tripping any of the Kirakos’ systems showing entry or exit the usual way,” Drega says, grimly. “It looks like Daeos and Drelix have gone after them.”

“What!”

“They’re capable warriors,” Draxx says. “But we don’t know how long the Belek have been using the wormholes or how many of them are here. If they intend retaking the Kirakos, then Daeos and Drelix could be in trouble.”

I take a couple of paces back. “We have to go after them.” I gasp, looking

wildly at Ruby, who I'm sure will back me up.

"We have to wait until Draco is available, then we need a plan," Drega says, clearly trying to be kind.

"Can Daeos hold out that long?" My voice is weak, and I don't want to be weak, not for him.

But I am weak. I am not a warrior. I am a human female in a world I don't know, and what's worse, I'm pregnant.

And the father has run headlong into the trap to end all traps.



DAEOS

My head hurts. I pinch open one eye to see Drelix sat propped against a rough stone wall across from me, a collar around his neck and his eyes closed.

I put my hand to my neck and growl as I touch cold metal. The control collar whines and gives off a low hiss.

My vision goes multi-colored as something scratches at my scales. Drelix groans, eyes rolling open but his arms still limp on the auburn dirt floor beside him.

“W-” My words have not deserted me this time, instead my tongue doesn’t want to comply with the decision to speak.

My head hurts less, but it’s probably because it’s filled with air, expanding and contracting as I attempt to focus on anything.

Drelix manages to lift a hand, to pull at his collar which chimes and flashes three lights. Then his hand falls away and a very un-Drelix like smile covers his face.

This has to be paraxio. I don’t recall what it was like the last time I had it. The nevvng stuff is enjoyable but knocks me out. Or at least I think it does because my memories of the drug are hazy to say the least.

Although, if it is paraxio, it’s making me feel very good, like I could do anything. Other than things being more brightly colored than normal, I’m fine.

I’m completely fine.

I lean forward and drop onto my hands, crawling over to Drelix and shaking him by the shoulder.

He snarls at me and then adds a fang filled, wet smile.

“D-” he rasps.

Drelix speaks? I don't remember the last time I heard him say a word. I know it was long before we got to the Kirakos. Maybe when we were on our planet, Kaeh-Leks? He used to joke with me. He even took me to meet his family, something I was reluctant to do. His parents welcomed me with open arms, and I was wary but surprised. But I didn't go back.

I didn't want to bring the wrath of the ancestors down on his family, like I did with mine. And, ultimately, it didn't matter. Not when the Liderc destroyed everyone.

Save for those Draco is so keen to track down with the star map.

I'm not sure why I'm recalling all of this now, but also I'm not quite sure why I'm drooling on the floor either. I wipe at my mouth and miss.

It's possible the paraxio might be having more of an effect than I realized.

“Drelix!” I shake his shoulder harder. “We...have to...get out of...here. Belek.”

For the first time, I attempt to concentrate on where “here” is. It's not like any other cell I've been in, to my knowledge. It's roomy, for a start. More than enough space for numerous warriors. The walls appear to have been carved out of a red mud, and along with the floor, they are smoothed as if trampled by many feet. At the far end, it even looks like there may be water and a place for food. There are small depressions which could be used for sleeping, with three to four warriors per den for warmth.

It looks like...a pen for Sarkarnii.

“Drelix!” Drool flicks from my mouth as I attempt to get us both upright and on our feet. “Out. Sarkarnii.”

His head rotates to me, and his massive pupils shrink slightly.

“This place,” I force past my tongue. “Belek trap.”

It seems to give him some impetus to assist me as we stagger against each other.

“Nev. Paraxio,” I say.

Drelix snorts out a curl of smoke and makes a choking noise. His claws ring against the metal of the collar.

“I know, we need to...” The word I want isn't forthcoming. I shake my head violently. “Free but don't touch.”

I pull Drelix's hand away from the collar before any further damage can be done to either of us. He leans against me heavily.

His warmth seems to reinvigorate me, and I get a good hold on the big warrior. Together we limp around the room, looking for the way out.

Until I spot a large bundle in one corner, and in a weaving motion, I steer Drelix towards it. Moving around seems to be doing us some good as he's not using me as a prop as much and his feet aren't dragging like they were.

We reach the bundle.

It is not a bundle.

It is another Sarkarnii. A big, purple scaled nevver. I let go of Drelix, who stays upright, and I drop to my knees.

"Drasus?" I rasp.

He groans. There is a long strip of skin hanging from one arm and the collar around his neck is far too tight, biting into his skin. Drasus has suffered at the hands of the Belek more than me. The last time they had him, he had to stay shifted for a long time.

But unable to shift here and now, with these injuries, he's in trouble.

Drelix thumps a hand into the wall next to us. His color is rapidly draining and I'm sure it's not a trick of my eyes. He wraps his free arm around his stomach and groans before he drops to his knees and vomits up some foul smelling black liquid.

I have two downed warriors and we're Belek captives. Given what I've seen so far, we're not expected to stay here alone for long. Not only do I have to get them out of here and get help from Drega, but I have to warn Draco.

The Belek mean business and they mean to take us all.



DAEOS

I hold the cup to Drelix's lips, and he takes a small sip.

"You require more, warrior. Please, drink," I exhort him. He takes more of a gulp and then lies back, eyes closed.

I've lost any sense of time. It's taken up trying to keep my warriors alive. Both Drelix and Drasus are in bad shape. For Drasus, at least, it's obvious what ails him. The injuries to his body, the constriction of his collar and inability to shift in order to heal, are slowly killing him.

As for Drelix, he can't tell me what is wrong, and he's fading before my eyes.

I whirl around the vast room, every atom of my being on fire. I need my Opal. She helps me think clearly. I need her, I rut for her, I want her.

But I'm here, and I may as well be on another planet because, even if I did find a way out, even if I could escape, we're automatically doomed. I can take my brother warriors with me, but the chances of us getting far, collared and sick, are slim to none.

I've never been one for odds. I've never cared about my own. But I want to get to my mate more than anything I've ever wanted in my entire miserable life. The mere thought of her, the touch of her skin against my scales, her scent, her voice.

It's driving me insane.

So, I circle the room, snarling, muttering, glaring at the walls, the floor, the ceiling. My scales itch like crazy, and occasionally I throw myself on the floor, wriggling and writhing in an attempt to gain some relief. Other than covering me in red dust, it does nothing, and I am angrier than ever.

I conclude a circuit, shaking the dirt from my hair to see Drasus inspecting me from his prone position, only one eye open.

“Shedding, warrior?” he asks with a rattling chuckle.

“No,” I grind through too many fangs. “Rutting.”

The chuckle increases but turns into a cough. I grab the water and lift him up. He bats my hands away and takes the cup, his shaking hold spilling half of it, much to my annoyance.

“Let me help.”

“Nev off!” Drasus growls weakly and takes a long draught.

“Nev you then.” I pace away, down the long room, my innards in turmoil, hating everything.

Most of all, hating myself. If I’d thought for a moment my choices would take me away from my heartfire, I’d have changed them in a seccari. I’d do anything for her to be in my arms and for us to be warm in our den again.

Something scuffles in the wall. I halt. I look down at my feet in case it was them making the noise. It comes again.

There is something in the walls...

“BELEK SPY!” I roar and slam my claws into the surface, ignoring the whine of my collar and the inevitable hiss of the drug delivery system, a drug which I’m pretty sure has stopped having any effect, given how many times a tick I activate it.

I expect only pain from the hard surface, but to my utter amazement, my hand disappears into a hole, one which rapidly crumbles, revealing a much larger one, and a creature hanging limp from my claws. I pull it towards me, but it doesn’t fit.

I slam it against the opening. It protests, but with each violent movement, the opening is larger, until I can pull it through and shove it onto the floor where I can take a good look at the thing.

It looks like a Mosum, all striped fur and three gimlet eyes, only its tail is longer and there is a sleekness to its fur, even covered in red dirt, which a Mosum doesn’t usually have.

Once freed, it looks around wildly with large green eyes, trying to find an escape. I step in front of the opening I’ve made.

“Belek spy,” I growl, folding my arms and gazing down. “Explain your presence or I will eat you.”

I don’t actually think I would eat the thing. Mosum are hardly palatable after all, although this isn’t a Mosum, and it is quite small. But the only food

we've been given for ticks has been grey Nutri-cubes, and I wouldn't say no to a platter of roast tralu.

"Please!" The creature holds up a pair of clawless paws. "Don't eat me. I am not a spy."

"Then what were you doing skulking in the walls?" I snarl, taking a step towards the thing, as it scuttles back, huge eyes terrified, the central one blinking rapidly. "That's what spies do."

"I am not a spy!" it wails. "I was looking for you."

I stop my advance on the thing, puzzled.

"You were looking for *me*?"

It looks me up and down with somewhat of a critical gaze. "Well, not you individually, but for the Sarkarnii which were rumored to be in the labyrinth."

This admission takes some of the accelerant out of my sacs.

"What did you want from the Sarkarnii?" I growl, recovering some of my composure, such as it is.

"We need warriors. We have a way to defeat the Belek, but we cannot do it on our own," the creature says.

I narrow my eyes. "What are you, and why do you want to defeat the Belek?"

"My name is Sachi. I am a Cirmos." Sachi watches my reaction warily.

"Never heard of your species," I say dismissively. "You look like a skinny Mosum."

Sachi visibly bristles, his fur flicking up and down, like a Mosum for an instant. "I am NOT a Mosum. I am as far from a Mosum as it is possible to get."

"Probably why you need a Sarkarnii then. Mosum fight dirty but they're terrible warriors." I look at my claws before looking back up. Sachi is clearly taking in my dirt-streaked scales. I hold his gaze. "None of this tells me you are not a spy or gives me a reason not to eat you."

"I can get you out of here...get help for your friends," Sachi says quickly, looking between my legs to where Drasus and Drelax are incapacitated.

"Do not look at my warriors," I intone. "And prove you're not a spy."

"We work with the Ragad from time to time because we're known for our mining ability. They noticed an anomaly in the air pressure within the Kirakos and asked us to investigate."

It dawns on me, slowly. I'm encountering another inmate of the Kirakos.

“You’re from a different quadrant?”

“Well done,” Sachi snaps and rolls his eyes. “Yes, we’re from a different quadrant. I was told the Sarkarnii were intelligent,” he mutters to himself.

I step forward with a growl and the muttering stops.

“My apologies, brave warrior.” He holds up his hands in a gesture of peace. “I meant no disrespect.”

“Oh, but I think you did,” I say, exposing a lot of fang and letting the collar whine to show my violent intentions. “But then I’m not *intelligent* enough to care what a snack thinks of me.”

I take another step towards the Cirmos and he cowers. “There is a tunnel behind the wall, and you can use it to escape. There are others like me who can help remove the collars,” he garbles out. “All we ask is you assist us in dealing with the Belek.”

I look over my shoulder at Drelix and Drasus. This creature might be a spy, but I don’t see how I have any other options left to me.

“Then, upon my honor, I will deal with the Belek. Come help me,” I order, striding over to my warriors. “And be quick about it.”



OPAL

The not so little bundle in my arms waves a pair of pudgy hands. The claws are pink like human fingernails and soft, but they are still claws. A pair of slit pupils gazes up at me. Then he fills his lungs and wails.

“Oops.” Amber reaches for him as Draco looms. “He does that, sorry.”

“He is an absolute darling,” I tell her with the biggest and most genuine smile I can muster.

“Xander is a warrior, not a ‘darling,’” Draco growls.

Amber instantly puts the baby into his arms and the massive warrior sits, his craggy, terrifying features softening completely as Xander gurgles up at him.

“He’s smitten,” Amber whispers to me, completely unnecessarily.

“How can you tell?” I whisper back, and this time my smile is genuine.

Amber flops a tired hand at me, placing it on my shoulder for a short while. She had a long labour, and Xander was a big baby, according to Coral. It’s been a few days, but she still looks tired, and I know Draco, for all his brash, brusque, bombastic self, has been doing his fair share.

“If there’s anything I can do to help,” I say, almost automatically.

“We are fine.” Draco lifts his head to growl at me. “I can take care of my mate and my sarkarnling.”

“Opal knows that, Draco.” Amber rubs his arm, and I see the flow of little neons gather under his scales at her touch “It’s what humans do. They help each other, or offer help, whether it’s needed or not.”

Draco looks at me and nods.

“We do not require help,” he says, haughtily. Amber pinches him, and he

sucks in a breath. “Thank-you-for-asking,” he rushes out before checking with Amber, who gives him a smile as one might a toddler.

She is one hundred percent cut out for parenting. I, on the other hand, feel completely and utterly unprepared.

“You’re welcome.” I get to my feet, ready to leave the new parents alone. “I need to speak to Drega and Draxx about Daeos anyway.”

I very nearly sway on my feet. I am so tired. Not only have I not been sleeping, but it seems the second Coral confirmed I was pregnant, ALL the stupid symptoms have rushed in to remind me.

Daeos is not here. I’m on my own, and wherever he is, he doesn’t know about our child, the one he wanted, the one he practically begged me for.

Hot damn, I miss him.

“Tell my brothers I will be with them shortly,” Draco says, nuzzling at Amber and gently rocking the baby.

I do everything I can not to let the tears squeeze from my eyes at the scene in front of me.

“Of course I will,” I say.

Amber mouths at me to indicate he will not, in fact, be doing anything of the sort, and I leave their quarters, my feet feeling like lead and my mouth tasting like an armpit.

Morning sickness is badly named.

Or maybe it’s because I miss Daeos so fucking much all I want to do is cry. I’ve railed against him, thumping my pillow in the darkness, swearing at his empty space because he left me and then I’ve sobbed because I think so little of him, I’d blame him for simply wanting to protect me.

Instead, I’ve been doing what I can to keep busy, to keep on at the Sarkarnii to go looking for Daeos.

So far, there has been only that one sign, the damaged portal column and a couple of dead Rak, which I am assured is Daeos’ handiwork.

There was even mention of flame. A part of himself Daeos had lost but had found again. It means the hand around my heart tightens until I don’t think I can breathe.

“Drega wants to see you.” Ruby bounces up.

She’s taken to wearing a belt with two ray guns attached. I keep the dagger she gave me concealed in my boot. The last thing I want is for anyone to say they’ll take it away.

“Has he heard anything about Daeos?” I burst out.

“I don’t know.” She gives me a wild grin. “Let’s find out.” She grabs my hand and I’m towed from outside Draco’s quarters at breakneck speed to where the Sarkarnii seem to do most of their planning.

As Ruby has to be considerably more pregnant than me, I’m marveling at her energy, even if I am protesting.

“Slow down!” I whine.

“Come ON!” she exhorts, not out of breath at all.

I think I could end up hating humans.

We reach the command center, and she ducks inside, still with me in tow. A number of warriors are standing around, and they all take a step back when we enter. Drega strides over to Ruby, and it seems like all the air is sucked out of the surroundings as he takes her in his arms and kisses her.

My heart is at once warmed and chilled in a weird way which sends my stomach flip flopping. I am so happy for Ruby, like I was for Amber, but at the same time, I wonder if I will ever actually be happy in my own soul again.

My world is empty. It has a huge scarlet alien warrior shaped hole in it.

“We’re ready to go get Daeos,” Drega says to me once he’s released Ruby.

“You know where he is?” My heart is drumming in my chest, the blood shouting in my veins so loudly everyone else must be able to hear it.

“Not exactly, but regardless, we can’t let any Belek incursion go unchecked.”

This time the grip on my heart is for my friends. Drega and Draxx are about to go into the unknown, for me, for Daeos.

It’s what I’ve been wanting since I lost him, but now...seeing Ruby with her mate. Can I even ask this of them?

It’s then, in the gloom, I see all the warriors surrounding us. They have weapons at the ready. This is what they do best.

“Are you ready for us to go get your mate?” Drega asks as I remain silent.

Because I can’t speak. I can’t bear to voice the hope which is blooming in my heart. Eventually, after what seems like forever, the power returns.

“Yes, please save my Daeos. Please do everything you can to bring him back to me.”



DAEOS

For a small Mosum, the Cirmos doesn't smell nearly as bad. Which means I can follow it without too much of an issue, a warrior over each shoulder.

"Is it far?" I query.

"Depends," Sachi replies.

"On what?"

"On how much you complain."

"I think you'll find it depends on how much you'd like to keep your tail attached to your body." My snarl fills the passageway.

Sachi puts on a noticeable burst of speed. Weighed down by Drelax and Drasus, I can't exactly move at pace, but I do my best.

"Here." Sachi comes to a halt and knocks on what seems to be a blank wall.

"Nev 'here.'" I let rip with a kick which smashes through the wall and then follow up with the rest of me.

There is a significant amount of squeaking as I barrel through into a well lit metal corridor, which is very much incongruous to what we've exited.

Coughing and rubbing at their eyes are three Cirmos. As they individually notice my presence, they shriek and attempt to dash in different directions, running into each other.

"There's more of you," I say to Sachi as he flaps dust from his fur.

"Why did you have to do that, you big...Sarkarnii?"

"I didn't know what you were doing, and it seemed to be taking a long time." I lean into him. "I don't have time," I rasp as I gently lower Drasus

and Drelix to the floor.

Drelix staggers to his feet, blinking at the Cirmos.

“This one has been poisoned,” one of the Cirmos bursts out. “Look at his eyes.”

I grab Drelix and stare into his face. Each eye is filled with green spots.

“Fix him,” I snarl.

The Cirmos step forward, and the tiny creatures take hold of Drelix, one on each side, steadying him and lead him down the passageway without any further discussion.

I scoop up Drasus, who groans softly.

“Not much longer, warrior,” I say to my old mentor. “I have found help.”

“You have?” Drasus murmurs. “Will wonders never cease.”

I leave Sachi scratching his head at the destruction and follow after the other Cirmos. They disappear through a screen of light, and I charge at it, bursting through into an area filled with more of the furry creatures, who all look up and begin chittering.

“I need this collar removed, now!” I roar out.

Striped bodies run everywhere, many small paws reach for Drasus, and after a slight resistance, I let him go. He is spirited over to a bench where tails wave all around him.

A hand pulls at mine. I look down to see the tiniest Cirmos yet. It stares up at me with huge green eyes. The central eye blinks.

I blink.

It holds up a flat key.

I grin.

It squeaks in fear.

“I will not eat you, little one.” I drop to my knees.

It brings me slightly closer to the little Cirmos, but not by much. I hold out my hand. It stares at me, then rubs at its little black nose, sniffing.

“But I need the key. My neck is hurt, see?”

I angle my head to expose where the collar is biting into my scales and where I’ve been scratching at it, even though I know I shouldn’t.

The tiny Cirmos gasps, and before I can stop it, it runs up my leg and jumps onto my shoulder, pressing the key to the back of the collar which screeches and drops away. I reach for my throat and encounter tenderness. The control mechanism was buried pretty deep within my flesh, as the blood running down attests.

“Thank you, little one.” I pluck the Cirmos from my shoulder and place it back on the ground.

“Now your warriors are being treated, are you willing to help us?” Sachi appears, staring at the collar on the ground.

It hisses. I snatch at the Cirmosling and shove Sachi to one side with one word on my lips. “Paraxio!”

Slamming my foot down on the collar, I grind it into its component parts.

Sachi picks himself up from where he fell and glares at the thing. “That’s how they were controlling you?”

“Paraxio, yes. Among other things.”

I put the little Cirmos on its feet, and it scampers away with a brief look over its shoulder. I find my lips twitching involuntarily upwards.

“You saved me...and Ithus,” Sachi says, still staring at the collar. “Paraxio is as poisonous to us as the enhanced melabuk venom is to your warrior.”

My neck twists so fast to where I last saw Drelix it’s amazing I don’t shift...save for my tail of course. He’s standing and his color is significantly better. As I watch, his collar is removed.

“Enhanced venom?” I query.

“A particular favorite of the Belek, I understand. Once in the body of any creature susceptible to it, it causes death painfully and slowly, but it is undetectable. The way they’ve conquered many a planet and species.”

“The Belek? Conquerers?”

Sachi squints at me. “Surely the Sarkarnii knew of the Belek before they were put in the Kirakos?”

I shrug. “I am a warrior, not a leader. I do what I’m told, and I take no notice of anything else.”

“Save for your mate,” Sachi says slyly.

Which means he is levered into the air by his neck and brought to my eye level.

“What do you know of my mate?” I snarl, smoke firing from my nostrils along with the stray ember which lands on Sachi’s fur.

“You are a mated male. Anyone with eyes can see it.” Sachi chokes.

“Impossible,” I snarl. “If you or your kind has touched a single hair on my heartfire’s head, you will all die.”

“Your scales, they glow. I can see it. All Cirmos can see it. Can a Sarkarnii not?”

I drop him and look down at myself. My usual flashes are present but as for a glow...

Sachi rasps at my feet, coughing wildly. "She is safe, warrior, I have no doubt."

She is safe.

It's then I see it, a glow, starting in the center of my abdomen and spreading outwards, chasing my flashes until they duck underneath.

And as quickly as it is there, it is gone.

I need to get to Opal.

"Show me the way back to the Sarkarnii quarters," I bark at Sachi. "It's time to show you what an honorable warrior can do."



OPAL

Did I want to go with the warriors into the dark and unknown? Hell yes! I'd have given anything to go with them. Stood next to Jem and Ruby, watching Drega and Draxx depart at the head of a group of heavily armed warriors, I wanted to run after the motley crew, beg them to take me.

The sensible side of me knows such a desire is idiotic. I'm not a warrior. I don't even know how to wield the dagger Ruby gave me. If I go with them, I'll only slow the whole thing down, and deep within my heart, I know Daeos would not thank me for putting myself, or his unborn child, at risk, even if he will go plunging into the unknown in order to protect me.

But then he doesn't know about the child, and I have a lump at the back of my throat which won't shift. I've run all the emotions, from guilt at myself for not telling Daeos about my birth control, to utter shock at being pregnant by him, to abject grief at having potentially lost him.

So, after they've all gone, I make sure I take Ruby and Jem over to the dining area where I work with Mistress Leoni to make them some sweet treats including the edesh balls. Jade and Coral join us and soon it's a party of sorts.

"I do not envy any of you," Coral says, popping another edesh ball into her mouth, clearly the sugar rush getting to her. "I didn't want to have a baby on Earth and having a Sarkarnii baby..."

She doesn't quite finish the sentence with a shudder, but she may as well have done.

"Maybe yours won't be a Sarkarnii." Jem grins at me and Ruby. "Maybe

it'll be one of those squid-lobster things.”

“Exactly,” Ruby joins in. “You might end up...on a Rak!” She practically falls off her chair laughing at her own joke.

Coral gazes at her with a professional dispassion which even has me impressed. I've always worn my heart on my sleeve and can't even imagine not being able to react.

“All I'm saying is I query the compatibility between humans and Sarkarnii,” Coral says.

“Then you're wrong. The Ragad engineered us to be compatible,” Ruby says, sobering. “They just never expected us to actually meet.”

Coral contemplates this for a moment. “Nope, you've not convinced me.”

“Fair enough,” Jade says. “I, for one, am not going to be convinced by hulking scaled males with abs that go on forever and a growl which practically makes my ovaries explode.”

“What?” I stare at her. “Have you found a mate?”

“Fuck off, Opal.” She snorts. “Just because you're loved up doesn't mean the rest of us have to be, eh, Coral?” She elbows the doctor in her ribs.

My chest stabs. Jade might be including me in the “loved up” section, but I have no Daeos, and the hollow feeling inside me gets deeper.

I leave it as long as I can before I make my excuses and leave the gathering. At least Jem and Ruby are in good spirits with their mates away.

What passes for night has fallen within the Kirakos, a strange gloom caused, I understand, by some internal workings installed in the prison maze designed to replicate, within limits, some rhythm of day and night.

Presumably at some time, the wardens considered it worthwhile providing their charges with something approximating a natural cycle. Before they decided they were better experimenting on them and using them as unwilling contestants in a rigged death race.

So the semi-darkness makes the main square glitter with lights and deep with shadows. It is at once beautiful and intimidating, like the rest of the Kirakos, like my situation, being a helpless creature at the mercy of all others.

Although the Jiaka have little in the way of defense and yet they flourish. Could it be possible to be as soft as a human and still make it here?

I'm musing all of this to myself as I make my way across the square, at least until the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and I become aware of something watching me.

The way my pulse races, it has to be something malevolent. Another two-

headed neon snake? A Rak? I look wildly around me to see if there are any other friendly bodies nearby.

There are not.

I slowly bend and pull the dagger from my boot, attempting to conceal the blade up the inside of my wrist as I straighten.

The Kirakos will not beat me. I refuse to let it. After everything I've been through to get here and to find my sweet Daeos, I'm not prepared to die.

Not yet.

Not if I have breath in my body and a baby to protect.

The dark growls.

I growl back.

And Daeos steps out into the light. His scarlet scales are the last thing I see as the night closes in, and my consciousness gives up.



DAEOS

Opal crumples before my eyes. In a single stride I catch her before she hits the ground.

I have her in my arms. But the Rak which is staring at me clacks its single claw. I growl again. Not only have I returned to the Sarkarnii quadrant to find it almost empty of warriors, but the Rak no one would believe in is still here.

And my mate, my *szikra*, my reason for living lies still in my arms. I don't know what is wrong with her and my heart pounds in my chest.

"Heartfire?" I whisper, trying to brush her long gold hair back from her face without using my claws. "My heartfire?"

She is quiet, unresponsive, her face a mask of white. I do not know if she is alive, or if the Rak has, in some way, hurt her.

A white heat rushes through me, sounds I never forgot filling my head, my heart, echoing through my muscles, my shift, my entire world.

I cannot lose her. I can't see her destroyed like I did all those years ago as a sarkarnling. I am bigger, I am better, I can fight.

I can fight for her.

"Opal?" I rasp, but her eyes remain stubbornly closed, her body horribly limp, and the heat becomes something else.

If I cannot have her, then no one can have the Kirakos, no one can have life.

No one.

I rise, shifting like I have never shifted in my life. My Sarkarnii is something terrible, my accelerant sacs fill in anticipation of the destruction I

will bring on everything which tried to take my mate from me.

Everything.

The Rak loses the cocky demeanor, and it shifts from claw to claw, tentacles thrashing. I release my first burst of flame into the air above us, burning it until I'm sure I can be precise.

Because when things die, I want them to know my wrath. I want them to know they took something from me and now they are paying with their lives and the lives of everything around them.

“Daeos?”

Her voice cuts through the red mist which surrounds me.

“Daeos, is that you?”

I risk a glance.

Opal is on her feet, hand at her temple, looking up. In a seccari, I have shifted and have her in my arms, my head buried in her fragrant skin, my heart still attempting to burst from my chest.

“I thought you were gone,” I murmur, unable to gather any strength in my voice. “Like they were gone.”

“I'm here, my love,” she says, arms tight around my waist. “I wouldn't go anywhere without you.”

“You are my guiding star, my heartsfire. All the brightness in the galaxy I love is vested in you. I'd see it all go dark before giving you up.”

“I think you are the one who is lit up,” she says, her fingertips tripping over my scales.

My glow is back, and this time it is stronger than ever. I can't quite fathom how I didn't notice it so much until Sachi pointed it out.

“You set me alight, pretty treasure.” I shove my head farther into her hair and her neck, inhaling deeply. “But your scent is the balm my unquiet soul needs.”

“I have something to tell you...” Opal says, but before she gets any further, I hear the unmistakable sound of a Rak attempting to get away.

I snatch a kiss from her sweet lips. “I'll be back in a seccari, my pretty treasure.” I grin at her. “This Rak has an appointment with its ancestors.”

Shifting has always been easy, but to transform into my new Sarkarnii is like a delicious shed and a rut all in one because I have my Opal, alive and well.

As I expected, the one-clawed Rak is sidling towards a crack in the maze wall. I flame and it has no option but to creep in the other direction. I swipe

out with a huge fist, knocking the thing off its legs.

My accelerant sacs fill, and I'm ready to unleash a flame like no other Sarkarnii ever has when a furry body flings itself in front of my enemy.

More furry bodies appear, and a net is thrown over the Rak. It goes rigid and then, limp, it drops to the ground.

"Sachi!" I growl in a voice like star-thunder. "Get out of my way."

"Daeos, we need one. We need to find out what the Belek are planning," Sachi yells up at me.

"I don't care," I spit through too many fangs. "It threatened my mate, and it has to die."

"Not yet." Opal moves next to Sachi and all my scales lift. "Drega and Draxx have gone after you. If there's a threat, we need to know and we have to warn them."

My shift falls away. I glare at Sachi for spoiling my fun, but my heart clenches. "Drega and Draxx are looking for me?"

Opal slips her hand around my waist and my scales slide back into place.

"Of course they are. Of course they would help you and Drelax and Drasus."

"My warriors were injured but they are recovering," I say with conviction.

Sachi snorts, shakes his head, and walks over to the fallen Rak.

"You'll need to gather your warriors, Sarkarnii," he fires back at me. "That means getting them back from wherever they are. The Belek will not wait."

I lift Opal into my arms.

"Make sure the Rak is fully immobilized. I need to ensure my mate is as far from it as possible."



OPAL

I'm in a daze. Daeos is really here, his lips on mine, his strong arms holding me. He came back, for me.

We also nearly had squid barbecue and, as my stomach is delicate, I am endlessly thankful for the tabby cat like creature which stopped him.

Daeos snuggles himself into me with a happy sigh as we make our way across the main square to the control center.

“Did you miss me?” I ask with the laugh which has been bubbling inside me since I recovered my wits and saw the massive dragon bursting out with a sheet of flame.

And I knew it was him.

“Miss you?” Daeos lifts his head briefly as he strides into the control center. “Without you the universe has no shine, no purpose. There is nothing but the dark. With you, I can do anything.”

“So...?”

“Yes, heartfire, I missed you.”

And there it is, his lopsided smile, the one he has only for me, the one I adore and cannot get enough of. The one I thought I might never see again. Tears spring to my eyes.

“Opal?” He whirls away from the stunned looking warriors who are stood next to a large pile of weapons. “You have water in your eyes. Do you need to visit the aquium?”

He places me on my feet and cups my chin, studying my face. I can't help but laugh, albeit soggily, at the worried look on his face and his complete confusion at my tears.

“No, Daeos. Although a visit for you wouldn’t go amiss.” I trail my finger through the dirt on his shoulder. “The water in my eyes are tears. Humans do this when they are happy or sad.”

“Happy or sad?” The expression on his face is one of confused fear. “Which ones are these?”

“These are happy. I’m happy you’re here, with me, with us.”

The confusion on Daeos’ face grows, his brow furrowing as he gives the other warriors a sidelong glance and a blood curdling growl.

“Daeos!” The deep voice comes, not from the other warriors, but from the doorway where Draco stands, arms folded and a face like thunder. “Why have my brothers gone to search for you and yet you are here?”

Very slowly, Daeos puts himself between me and Draco, clawed hand gently pushing me back behind him.

“Draco.” He dips into a shallow bow, his head not moving, eyes on the big male. “The Belek have returned. Drelax and I were captured, as was Drasus. But we had some assistance in escape, and we need to return, in full force, in order to stop them.”

“The Belek will always want to take back the Kirakos, Daeos. Tell me something I don’t know,” Draco says, far more evenly than his body language suggests he’s taking the whole thing.

The other warriors have disappeared, and I feel like the entire place has darkened since he arrived. Daeos shouldn’t be in trouble for escaping and making it back here. Every hair on my body seems like it’s on end and I’m shaking, but it’s not with fear.

It’s anger.

“There’s a Rak. There was always a Rak,” I burst out. “You didn’t believe him then, but he was right. Why do you continue to disrespect him?”

I’ve crossed the line, but I’m absolutely incandescent with rage at how Daeos is being treated. Draco is wrong, and I’m not going to let him continue to do my mate a disservice.

Draco’s attention turns on me. Daeos lets rip with a peal of growls which wouldn’t be out of place on a dinosaur movie. I see the big golden Sarkarnii’s lip curl as I shake, my arm across the muscled abdomen and scarlet scales and glowing skin of Daeos.

A thick, heavy silence descends on the control center. I’ve challenged the biggest, baddest of all the Sarkarnii. I’ve called him out. Yet again, Daeos slowly pushes me behind him, squaring up to Draco, an almost constant

growl reverberating around the room.

Then Draco sighs. “This is what having a sarkarnling does to a male.” He steps away from us both. “When I found you, you were but a sarkarnling yourself, barely of age and so feral.” He shrugs. “I didn’t think you would ever be tamed.”

“You wanted me tamed?” Daeos extends his claws and Draco laughs.

“I didn’t want you tamed, warrior. Far from it. I wanted your fire, your purity. I wanted you to find yourself, eventually, *Kiralii*.”

Whatever the word is, the nanobots in my ears don’t translate it. Daeos stiffens.

“*Kiralii*?” He says, voice hollow. “No.”

“You remember your lessons, warrior? The ones I tried so hard to get you to pay attention to?” Draco takes a seat, his tail not particularly wanting to co-operate, but he manages it with aplomb nonetheless. “The ones about how a warrior ascends to the High Bask, or how a Sarkarnii becomes a member?”

“Don’t remember,” Daeos says gruffly, his foot twisting on the ground.

“I think you would, if it was something which was important to you and your mate.”

“My mate!” Daeos snarls. “Mine!”

“I have no interest in your mate, Daeos. I have my own, I have a sarkarnling of my own.” For a second, I almost believe I see Draco go misty eyed, but then I decide it has to be a trick of the light. “But I do have an interest in you. I always have. Because the place we found you was the *Kiralii* palace, and your parents were High Bask. You are my brother. In a way, you always have been.”

Daeos takes a step back, and I take hold of his arm. He swivels his head to take me in. I slide my fingers in between his and snuggle into his side as supportively as I can.

“Brother...?” he says, clearly struggling with his words.

“The day you defeated the spaceworms was the day I knew.” Draco smiles and it is a little bit scary. “*Kiralii* and brother.”

“What does he mean?” I ask Daeos who hasn’t taken his eyes off me.

“It means I am of the High Bask and...”

“It means he is—how do humans put it?” Draco is grinning now, and I am in fear for my life. “It means he is roy-*alty*.”

“Daeos is royalty? Like a prince or a king?” The way I have two furrowed brows means neither of those words translate either. “He is a

leader?" I try.

"He is my den brother, as much as Drega and Draxx are," Draco says. "The kiralii glow proves it."

In a couple of strides, he is across the room and has his hand on Daeos' shoulder. "I gave you all the chances I could, brother, but I never thought you would be mate material and we would know for certain." He shifts his gaze to me. "But it turns out I was wrong about that too, and fate found a way."

Daeos' eyes burn into me, and a muscle in his jaw ticks. His hand tightens around mine.

"My fate...Opal...heartfire." He stumbles over the words.

So, I press my lips to his, and he doesn't have to think about speaking anymore.



DAEOS

K *iralii*? I don't believe it. I don't want to believe it. My memories of the time when my parents were alive are hazy at best. I don't remember there being any *kiralii*, or any visitations from Draco or his imposing father, Drekk.

Memories which were robbed in the aftermath of what killed them and how a young Sarkarnii survived. Mostly I remember being found, being scared beyond belief at the sight of such huge, scaled warriors. Being taken from the only place I knew, bones or no bones.

But then there are Opal's lips on mine, and I am happily robbed of all thoughts around *kiralii*. Being *kiralii* means nothing without her.

I'm Daeos, and she is my heartfire. It's all that matters. My heart thuds slowly in my chest as I lean in to her kiss, taking in her scent, feeling my rut rising again.

"I rut for you, my pretty treasure," I murmur over her mouth, my hands cupping her sweet face to ensure she remains mine and only mine.

"I have something to tell you, Daeos," she says, eyes lowered.

"Yes, my heartfire."

"What do you want done with this Rak?" Sachi bellows from the doorway, and I immediately round on him with a snarl.

"What the nev is this, Daeos?" Draco is composed, but I can tell he is unimpressed by the sudden appearance of the Cirmos.

"*This* is Sachi," I reply. "The Ragad asked him and the other Cirmos to investigate anomalies in the Kirakos. They discovered the Belek incursion, and they know where they are. The Cirmos are spies."

Sachi nearly chokes to death, which causes Draco to study him for a very long time.

“But I have a plan,” I add once the silence gets boring. “We need information from the captured Rak.”

“About time,” Sachi grumbles. “I think it’s about to go off from the smell.”

“Rak always smell bad,” I retort and, taking Opal’s hand, I stalk out past him.

The Rak is bound and lying a short distance from the control center.

“My pretty treasure, could I possibly borrow the dagger you have down your boot?” I ask Opal with my very best smile.

“My pleasure.” She pulls it out and hands it reverentially to me.

I go to take it and she snatches it back. “Unless perhaps, I can assist.”

She strides over to the downed Rak, crouching over it in such a way it has me growling with concern. I can hear her murmuring something to it, but I can’t make out the words.

By the time my initial shock has given out and I’m next to her, she has straightened again.

“What do you want to know?” she asks.

On the ground, the Rak trembles. It’s multi-faceted eyes glimmer with fear. And Opal hasn’t even shoved her knife in its breathing hole, which is how I usually deal with a Rak.

“What the Belek are doing with the portal.” Draco joins us.

The Rak heaves. Opal inspects the tip of the dagger and tests the sharpness of the blade.

“They want the Kirakos.”

“Nev it! We know *that*.” I stamp and grind my foot into the mass of tentacles around its head. It squeals.

“The Belek have a number of contracts which involve both the Kirakos and the Sarkarnii. The contracts are with powerful species. Failure to honor them will result in the Belek being wiped from the universe. An ability to fulfill them will make them richer than they have ever been.”

“It’s always about the money,” Opal muses.

“And the hoard.” Draco grins at me. “Always love a good hoard.”

Opal glances between us both and narrows her eyes.

“How do the Belek plan to take the Kirakos and the Sarkarnii?” she snaps down at the Rak, side eyeing me.

The Rak is silent. I apply more pressure.

“They were intending capturing a few Sarkarnii and using them to gain access to your ship. Once they had both, they intended trapping the rest by offering an exchange, which would not be an exchange.”

Draco aims a kick into the region of the egg sacs.

“Nevving lies. The Belek know we wouldn’t fall for anything so stupid,” he spits.

I carefully draw Opal back from the Rak. They’re pretty good at appearing half dead when they are nothing of the sort.

“The place the Belek kept me, Drelix, and Drasus was designed for many more Sarkarnii than just us,” I say.

“Then we need to talk,” Draco growls. “Put this thing in the pit and come see me.”

He stalks away without a backwards glance. I take Opal into my arms and away from the Rak.

“How did you get it to comply without injury?” I query as I suck in her scent, letting it ground me. “Rak don’t ever give up information without a fight.”

“I told it about sushi,” Opal says, sliding the dagger back in her boot. “I figured the chances of it ever having encountered an armed human were slim and so it didn’t know what we do to seafood.”

I am completely perplexed, so I kiss her instead.

“And what’s all this about hoarding? If you’re royalty, does that mean you have bags of gold hidden somewhere?”

“All Sarkarnii hoard. It’s in our nature.” I reply maintaining an air of mystery.

Although now, along with the early itching under my scales which could be signs of a shed, I have a feeling deep in my stomach. I want to show my hoard to my female. Opal deserves the very best.

“Where’s the pit?” Sachi grumbles next to me.

“Where are my warriors?” I snarl.

“They’re coming, but you want rid of the Rak before anything else,” Sachi replies.

“Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend, Daeos?” Opal asks, giving the Cirmos a smile which I dislike a lot.

Especially as Sachi returns it and it makes me want to rip his head off.

“This is Sachi, a Cirmos and irritant,” I reply. “He saved me in return for

me saving him. The pit is over there.” I point in the general direction he needs to take. “Where are my warriors?”

Sachi snorts. “Pleased to meet you, mate of Daeos.” He gives me a flash of tiny fang. “You have my respect, female, as this Sarkarnii has to be trouble incarnate.”

“I think you’ll find it’s all in the handling,” Opal says sweetly as her hand snakes around me and she nips at my backside.

My cock is instantly hard and pressing at my pouch, and I can think of nothing else but mating her.

Sachi gives Opal a low bow. “Indeed,” he says, his furry lips quirked in a sardonic smile. “I shall deal with your Rak, Sarkarnii,” he says. “And your warriors are here.”

I turn in the direction he nods to see Drelix helping Drasus into the main square from the crack in the Kirakos wall I used previously.

While Drelix looks fully recovered, Drasus limps badly, holding his abdomen.

“We need a healer, but Drega...”

“I know just the human for the job.”



OPAL

I'm not sure either Coral or Drasus were particularly pleased to see each other. The massive purple warrior is incredibly weak, unable to stand unaided, and he clearly hates it. But with Drega away, he doesn't have much choice.

Eventually Coral shoos Daeos and Drelix out of her makeshift clinic. When I hesitate and offer help, I'm chased away too.

Outside, Drelix is doubled over with laughter. Silent laughter interspersed with the occasional snort.

"I told him I'm *kiralii* now," Daeos says with confusion written all over his face.

"I suspect it's going to come as a shock to quite a few Sarkarnii." I wrap my arms around him, leaning into his warm, hard chest and breathing in his delicious spicy scent which has a hint of smoke about it. "But not me. I always thought you were special."

A sigh rumbles through Daeos, one I feel in my bones as he encloses me in his arms and his ever present tail curls around my ankle.

"What are we going to do about the Belek?" I ask. "Amber's had her baby so it's not all warriors and humans. Also there are the Jiaka. Do you think they want to stay here if the Belek are going to constantly try to get it back?"

"Draco's sarkarnling has arrived?" Daeos says with a huge grin.

"Yes, and it hasn't improved his temper," I grumble.

"Not much could. Although, now he has a new brother *and* a sarkarnling, perhaps he will sweeten up." It seems nothing could wipe the smile from

Daeos' face. "Except..." The smile slowly drops, and I see the face I often woke up to on the ship, the one of quiet contemplation, the one where he told me I was the most beautiful thing in the universe.

Right before he railed me senseless.

Which, I admit, I wouldn't mind so much right now, but then there are a million other things we need to do, including...

"Daeos, we really have to talk. I have something important to tell you," I say.

"The ship!" Daeos explodes, grabbing hold of Drelix. "We have to get to the ship!"

In turn Drelix grabs him back, shaking his head.

"The spaceworms," Daeos continues, lit up with enthusiasm, attempting to shake Drelix loose. "Okay, okay, we'll speak to Draco first," he finally concedes with a huff of smoke.

Drelix lets him go. For a second, I wonder if Daeos is going to bolt, but instead his entire body relaxes, and he snuggles up to me with probably the best smile I've ever seen on his face.

"I believe we can trick the Belek like we've done with other species before, when we were...in space." His grin is back and in full fanged wattage.

My heart nearly falls over itself in flipping at the sight of my Daeos, here, in the flesh, with me. I have him back and it is fantastic.

We make our way over to Draco's quarters. Daeos bounds down the steps and barrels through the doors without even announcing himself.

He gets a face filled with flame for his trouble, while Drelix stands back, arms folded, shaking his head.

"Put some nevvng pants on!" Draco shouts at Daeos once he's finished attempting to incinerate him and failing.

It's a bloody good thing I've seen the Sarkarnii do this to each other before and I know it doesn't injure them.

"Yes, brother." Daeos still hasn't lost the happy look on his face. "Do you happen to have any?"

With a growl to rival Daeos' best, Draco stomps off into the rear of his quarters. As we wait, Amber appears with the baby in her arms.

Daeos goes completely still, his eyes fixed on the baby.

"Hi, Daeos. Hi, Drelix. Hi, Opal," she says with remarkable brightness for a lady with a newborn.

Daeos opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. It seems his words have completely deserted him.

“Can Daeos hold Xander?” I ask Amber. “I know Draco can be a bit...”

Apparently I don't need to say anything more as Amber is already handing the baby to Daeos with a knowing smile at me.

Daeos sinks into the child in a way I was absolutely not expecting. I was all elbows and “careful of the head” when I was holding him, but Daeos almost looks as natural as Draco. Xander waves a hand at him, and Daeos offers a claw, which the baby grips tightly.

“It's a meeting of minds,” Draco says in a low voice, coming up behind us both.

I want to laugh and cry at the same time seeing Daeos so absorbed in the baby and, impressively, the baby so absorbed in him. I see his lips move, but I'm not sure he's speaking. All the same, Xander gurgles happily.

“That it turned out he was *kiralii* after all, Drega and Draxx are never going to believe,” Draco rasps. “They're also probably never going to forgive me.” He sighs. “Give Xander back, Daeos.” He raises his voice. “We have work to do.”

A spell has been broken between the two. Daeos slowly raises his head from the baby and blinks, first at me, then at Draco. He doesn't say a word as he silently hands Xander back to Amber. He looks both lost and found, here and not here as if he doesn't know how to feel what he's just been feeling.

Draco holds out the pants and wordlessly, Daeos puts them on before sliding his arm around my waist. I'm not sure I've known him so quiet.

Draco gives us a fanged smile. “Now, about that plan?”

“Spaceworms,” Daeos says.

“What about the nevvng spaceworms?” Draco grits his teeth at the mention of the things.

“We need a distraction, like we did with the spaceworms. We need to send the Belek one way and turn their trap in on them.”

“That didn't work out so well for me, or Draxx, or Drega,” Draco replies, rubbing at his chin as smoke curls from his nostrils. “If you remember.”

“Sort of.” Daeos manages to look slightly contrite.

Draco grunts. “*Sort of,*” he repeats, eyeing Daeos. “I bet you don't.”

“What does he mean?” I ask Daeos. “And what is all of this about *spaceworms*?”

“Daeos took a blow to the head while shifted and was not himself for a

long while after, weren't you, brother?" Draco snarls and laughs at the same time.

I look at my Daeos, and he gives me a weak smile. "I didn't shift back for nearly ten ticks and had to be confined to the hold."

"And fed all the nevvng raw meat we had onboard the *Golden Orion* at the time." Draco groans.

Drelix makes a choking noise which could be laughter, along with a titter from Amber.

"It wasn't funny," Draco says. "We were saving it for a celebration when we handed over the missing pets to their owners. The reward was impressive." It's his turn to show a considerable amount of fang.

"I liked the spaceworms," Daeos says.

"You were the only one," Draco replies. "But while I don't think what worked on the spaceworms will work on the Belek, although given they are almost as handsome as each other, I can see why you think it might." He rubs his chin, making a sandpaper sound as smoke curls from his nostrils. "But, I believe you've given me an idea."

He wraps himself around Amber, tilting her chin up to him. "We're going back to the *Golden Orion*, Daeos. And we'll need your mate. I presume she's a key like the others?"

Before either Daeos or I can answer, he has Amber in a kiss which heats *me* up, never mind her. I drag a spellbound Daeos outside and find Drelix has already left. He's waiting at the top of the stairs.

"I don't know if I'm a good key. Maybe we should get Ruby. She definitely is," I say, wanting to be helpful.

Supposedly all of the humans here have their DNA keyed into the Kirakos which means we can find secret doors and passages hidden within the maze. I've only ever found one.

"No, I want you," Daeos says. "Because I never want to be parted from you again."



DAEOS

Spending time with the little sarkarnling was incredible. I don't think I've ever seen one up close before. I wasn't the sort of warrior Sarkarnii females introduced their young to. It makes my rutting desire to fill Opal even greater.

If only there wasn't the nevving problem of the Belek wanting to take back the Kirakos and enslave us all to deal with, I'd be mating her right now.

I meant what I said when I told Opal I want her with me. I can't imagine being parted from her again. I know I can protect her, and she should be by my side as it is the only place a mate should ever be.

"Let's go get some weapons." I chuckle as I toss her into my arms and head for the armory with her protests filling the air.

By the time we arrive, Drelix is already there, picking carefully over the various weapons. I put my heartsfire down.

"Drelix." I hand him his favorite psi-rifle.

He takes it, checks it over efficiently, and shoulders it before handing me a set of pulsar-mines and a belt brimming with psi-grenades.

"Warrior." I give him a brief bow as I take them from him.

With a huge grin and not taking his eyes from me for a seccari, Drelix executes a deep bow in return, with various flourishes, including a shifted tail and wings.

"Nevver!" I growl.

He doesn't even look back at me as he exits, leaving me alone with my treasure.

"I'm never going to live this *kiralii* thing down," I grumble.

“I think it’s lovely,” Opal says as she wanders around the topmost part of the armory, peeking into boxes. “I wish Draco had told you earlier though.”

“The High Bask has always been the elite, that’s one thing I learned while being taught the ways of a warrior or being sent to do their dirty work,” I reply, checking over my charges and finding a couple of pulsars which I weigh in my hands.

“It doesn’t bother you?” she asks, “to know you’ve been lied to?”

“No,” I say, firmly. “Because I have you, heartfire, and you are true to me.”

“It bothers me,” she says quietly. “I think Draco should have told you of his suspicions. The thought of you...alone...bullied...” Her sweet hands curl into tiny fists. “You didn’t deserve any of that, no matter what your behavior.”

I’m swiftly by her side, spinning her into my embrace.

“Sarkarnii society is tough. We’re a tough species. How do you think we survived up until now? Nearly all of our species was wiped out when the Liderc took our planet, and yet we persist. What’s more, Draco still wants to find any others out there too,” I say, brushing my lips over hers. “He makes no apologies for it, and neither do I.”

“I just think...” She hesitates. “I just think they could have treated you better. Told you what they thought you were.”

“Do you think it would have made a difference to a half feral sarkarnling who needed to be brought up as a warrior?” I murmur into her hair. “I was treated as any other. Yes, it was harder on me as I had no expectations, but had I not been pushed by Draxx and Draco, things would have been so much worse.”

“They could have had more compassion for what happened to you,” Opal says, her voice muffled in my chest.

“Would it have changed anything? Would it have brought my parents back? Would it have taken away evs I spent alone?” I ask.

“It might have made being brought into a world you didn’t know a little easier,” Opal retorts. “Compassion doesn’t cost anything.”

“True, but it wouldn’t have made me a better warrior.”

She pulls out of my arms, marching away, her little fists still curled up, anger rolling from her.

“That is not the sort of society...” She hesitates. “I mean, humans would have *cared* for you.”

“Would they have bathed me, clothed me, fed me?” I ask.

She nods.

“And would they have put me to work?”

“Yes, but...”

“Then Sarkarnii might have a different way of doing things, but the outcome is ultimately the same.”

“I don’t see how,” Opal grumbles, picking over a handful of pulsar charges, the sight of which makes my heart sing.

“Because when I found you, I knew I had found my fate, the female the ancestors had chosen for me, because that’s what I was taught. You are the moon to my stars, heartfire. You are the molten core which makes me spin. You are everything I ever wanted and more.”

Opal pauses in her inspection.

“About that, Daeos.” She looks at me over a pile of psi-rifle boxes. “I have something I need to tell you...”

“Daeos!” Draco barks as he enters and, with little ceremony, shoves two pulsar pistols in his waistband and picks up a psi-grenade belt. “It’s time for us to deal with the Belek, once and for all.”



OPAL

“We are,” Daeos says, pulling himself up to his full height, tail thrashing behind him. He looks at me. “Are we?”

“Let’s go,” I reply.

Surely, surely I’ll get the chance to tell him about the baby when we’re on the bloody ship? At this stage, I’m just about to blurt it out in front of Draco and Drelax, but I love Daeos too much. I want this to be special for him. For us.

And anyway, it’s not a secret which is going to go away any time soon.

I take Daeos’ hand in mine and lace my fingers in with his clawed ones. He smiles at me and my heart flutters like a butterfly.

Outside, the two of them have stripped and shifted, the weapons dangling from claws.

“I’m sorry, my pretty treasure, but the only way we’re getting to the ship quickly is by flight,” Daeos says.

I swallow, hard. “Okay.”

He removes his clothing and then in a whirl of fire and scarlet scales he becomes an enormous dragon who holds out a vast hand, the claws the length of my body. I step closer, and he gently lifts me onto his back.

This feels a lot safer than being carried in a set of claws. At an exhortation from Draco, all three rise into the air, and while I’m holding on to a pair of horny lumps on the back of Daeos’ neck for dear life, I don’t feel like I’m going to fall. The ground becomes distant, and I’m not entirely sure, but I think I can see a pair of pants left behind.

This time I’m able to take in the scenery, such as it is, as we dive through

the hole blasted into the old warden-controlled area, through a high ceilinged, darkened passage and out into the most enormous atrium. All three Sarkarnii change pace, beating hard to gain height until they reach the very pinnacle, and at the point I think they're going to hit the glasslike roof, through which I can see stars, they bank right, and we're flying at pace down an even larger passage than earlier until it opens out into the huge hangar I remember from the first time I flew with Daeos.

The *Golden Orion* hangs easily in this space, looking unmolested. Draco and Drelix are the first to shift back, landing on their feet and checking their weapons. Daeos stays in his Sarkarnii form and gently helps me dismount.

"You felt amazing, riding me," he murmurs, sending heat rolling through my core. "I hope you will ride me again, later."

Such a naughty male!

"Drelix," Draco orders. "Take the lead. Daeos, with me."

With care, we navigate our way up the gangway and into the ship. Draco punches something into a console inside the door and waits.

"Welcome, Draco," the ship says.

"Are we alone?" he asks.

"No."

"Nev it to the ancestors!" Draco grinds. "Co-ordinates?"

"The guards are closing. They will be with us in around half a tick."

"It's time," Draco says. "While part of your spaceworms plan is absolutely not happening ever again, Daeos, you gave me an idea."

Daeos manages to look confused and happy at the same time. "I did?"

"We're going to use the gyik flyers."

"We are?"

I can almost feel the excitement rolling from Daeos.

"Dare I even ask what one of those is?" I ask.

"Given you're mated to the best gyik pilot in the tenth battalion, you do not need to worry about a thing," Draco says unconvincingly.

"I love flying the gyik," Daeos adds enthusiastically.

Drelix snorts.

I put my hands on my hips and glare at all three males.

"Uh-oh, you're in trouble," Draco says conspiratorially to Daeos. "Females who do that are most definitely not happy."

"But I *am* a good pilot, my heartsfire," Daeos pleads. "You have my bond. And I want you to be happy."

I narrow my eyes at Draco, who is clearly very good at stirring things up.

“I am happy, sweetheart. I’m not great at flying, that’s all.” I relax my stance. “But I trust you.”

Daeos’ eyes crinkle at the corners because he is smiling so widely at my words, I forget the others and reach up to cup his face. He’s warm to the touch, and the glow I’m used to spreads from his head down his chest and beyond.

Because Daeos absolutely did “forget” his pants back at the Sarkarnii quarter. Drelax’ eyes widen.

“Yes, warrior.” Draco places a hand on Drelax’s shoulder. “He is *kiralii*. Ancestors help us all.”

Drelax shakes his head, but his mouth is quirked at one corner.

Led by Daeos, we descend into the bowels of the ship. I might have spent some time here with Daeos, but in the main, I’ve only ever seen the living quarters and the aquiums, not much of the rest of the ship. We hit the bottom of the main atrium, and a vast door rolls open at our approach. Inside a number of sleek octagonal titanium colored craft hover above the floor, just like the *Golden Orion* does in the hangar.

Daeos picks me up and races to the first one, the front lifting up as we reach it.

“Daeos, keep your mate safe. Stay in between me and Drelax, and I will lead,” Draco calls out. “Keep comms on at all times. We’ll draw out the guards and get them within range of *Golden Orion*’s pulsar guns. A few blasts of those will make them think twice. Once they are subdued, you go find Draxx and Drega.”

Drelax walks past us and gives Daeos a friendly punch in the arm and a nod before getting into a nearby gyik. Daeos lowers me to my feet and slams his arm over his chest at Draco.

“It is I who should be saluting you, *kiralii*.” Draco beams. “This mission is our last on the Kirakos because of you. Once we deal with the Belek, we are free, and you can take your mate wherever you want.”

“Yes, Draco!”

Daeos draws me inside the little ship and helps me strap in, his clawed fingers dexterous as he unravels strands of metal and crosses them over my stomach.

The hands pause.

“You said you had something to tell me.” He looks up from his work,

those incredible eyes on fire, drawing me into their flame like a moth.

A moth dancing for her moon.

“I do.” I put my hand over his, pressing it against my abdomen. “I wasn’t sure if it was possible, but it turns out it is. I’m pregnant.”

Daeos’ jaw goes slack, but if the rest of him has stopped, his tail has not. It curls around my leg tightly.

“You’re...?”

“I am.”

“A sarkarnling, like Draco?”

I nod, my voice a mere rasp. “Just like Draco and Amber.”

Daeos blinks at me. Once, twice.

A tear rolls down his cheek and onto his lips, and he opens his mouth in surprise.

“What is this?”

“You never said Sarkarnii couldn’t cry.” I swipe my thumb over his jaw. “Are you happy, sweetheart?”

“You’ve just made me the happiest Sarkarnii in the entire universe, my pretty treasure,” he says, butting his forehead against mine, his hand stroking my stomach. “I am going to win this battle for you, and then I’m going to watch you grow ripe and round with my sarkarnling and mate with you every seccari I get.”

He kisses me with the intensity of a thousand suns, heating me from within until I’m about to explode. Then he slides into the seat in front with practiced ease, and the entire craft lights up.

“Are you ready, my Opal?”

I grit my teeth. “As I’ll ever be.”

Ahead of us, light beams in, making me squint and shade my eyes. With a tremendous force, the little flyer slingshots forwards, and I’m forced back in my seat as Daeos whoops like a kid.

I can’t help but love him more for it. Serious when it’s needed and yet taking the delight in anything he can because he could never be sure which day was his last.

And I know, as long as I have him, that day will never come.



DAEOS

The gyik responds to my touch like I've never been away. My heart is already with the ancestors following the revelation by my mate that her belly is full and we are going to be parents.

Our sarkarnling is going to be the best loved in all the galaxy, surrounded by us, but also my fellow warriors and their mates.

Because there is one thing I know is absolute. We will stay on the *Golden Orion* with my new but old brothers. Wherever they are, we will be.

I swing the gyik upwards as we exit the ship and encounter a barrage of pulsar bolts.

"Daeos, where the nev are you?" Draco's voice echoes around the gyik.

"My mate is going to have a sarkarnling!" I sing out over the comm.

"Well done, but nevvng concentrate," Draco barks back.

I know he's happy for us.

"Daeos!" Opal calls out nervously from the rear of the craft. "Can you... er... watch where you're going?"

I turn the craft over, and she makes a very odd noise, but before I can check on her, a further sheet of pulsar bolts heads our way, and I have to do some interesting maneuvers in order to avoid being hit.

Not quite enough, apparently, as the console in front of me indicates one engine is failing.

"Are you between us?" Draco rasps.

"I am, but I have engine trouble." I slot into position.

"Then you need to sit this one out, warrior. Keep your mate safe. Drelix and I will take over, and I've had word from Draxx that they are not far

away.”

My general has deigned to use comms? That has to be a first. And, as disappointed as I am in missing a battle, I’d much rather be curled around my Opal, pleasuring her, anyway.

The engine gives out, and I’m unable to re-ionize the core. The craft tilts as I steer it into a side passage.

“Are we crashing?” Opal asks, her voice filled with fear.

I want to go to her so much it hurts. The fact she is scared spikes through me like a Rak claw through flesh.

“No, my heartfire, it’s just an enforced landing,” I call out over my shoulder. “It’ll be over in a seccari or two.”

The second engine is misfiring, and the craft swings left and right as it catches on the mag cushion and descends rapidly, with me doing everything I can to keep control as we bump along the ground and slide sideways into the passage I was aiming for.

“Are we dead?” Opal’s small voice reaches me.

She’s in my arms before I can blink.

“Not while I have breath in my body, pretty treasure,” I rasp into her hair, holding her close. “Nothing will harm you, and I will destroy anything which tries.”

The craft makes a hissing noise, one I do not like the sound of at all.

“It might be time to get clear,” I suggest to her as I unclip her restraints, subtly checking her for any signs of damage. “I believe there is a plasma leak.”

Without any protest, Opal lets me pull her to her feet, and I slam my fist against the exit console. The front of the ship lifts but then drops again. I grab it and wrench it wide enough for Opal to crawl through.

“Go!” I exhort her.

She gives me a worried glance but complies, slipping out easily as I hold it open.

The hissing sound is getting louder and an alarm sounds. Not a good alarm. I scrabble at the door mechanism, pulling it open and clawing at the relevant components until the thing finally rises enough I can shove at it and roll out.

The alarm screams. I don’t even have time to shift as I sprint away from the gyik. I feel the heat slam into my back and bowl me over and over until things go black for a seccari or two.

I come to my senses lying on my back. Between my feet, I see the smoldering remains of the craft. I flip myself upright, wincing at the lacerations on my back and legs, but I have to find my Opal. I have to make sure she is unharmed.

The air is too heavy with the scent of plasma fuel for me to be able to detect her. I call out her name but realize it's useless if she's been hurt.

Fear rises within me, a complete, abject horror of what has been before.

Opal cannot be gone.

She has to remain.

She is my soul. She brought me back from the brink. She is my entire universe.

Without her, I am a sarkarnling weeping in the dark and knowing no one will come.



OPAL

“Wow!” I sit bolt upright and clutch at my pounding head. “That was some explosion.”

I’m looking at a blank, metal lined wall and sat on a comfortable cushion in what seems to be an otherwise empty room.

Not the roughhewn passage I ducked into when I heard the low *crump* of the explosion.

“Daeos?”

Pain spikes through my leg, and I draw in a breath at the intensity.

“Don’t move.” A Cirmos bustles through a doorway which opens in the metal.

“Where is Daeos?”

“Never mind that, we need to get your leg fixed,” the Cirmos says.

For the first time, I look at it. Then I want to be sick. Mottled purple bruising covers the lower half of my right leg, and there’s a large lump under the skin.

“I need Daeos. Does he even know I’m here? He needs to know I’m here!” I cry out, attempting not to look at my mangled leg and not to throw up with the pain and fear.

“Look.” The Cirmos presses something against my arm and a feeling of bliss slides through me, the pain floating away until it’s simply a fluffy pink cloud high above me. “Your leg needs to be set. I don’t know much about your species, so I can’t say how dangerous or difficult it will be. Then we can get this Daeos for you, okay?”

I don’t agree at all, but my mouth says, “Fine.”

My vision wavers a little as the Cirmos busies itself with a strange contraption which is placed over my leg.

“Sarkarnii?” My brain is attempting to reassert itself over whatever I’ve been given.

“The Sarkarnii are dealing with the Belek, as requested,” the Cirmos says, running its little paws over the lit area of the contraption. “They are winning,” it says with a sidelong look at me as I squirm in discomfort.

The metal door bursts open and another Cirmos appears, looking agitated.

“I’ll leave this to do its work,” the first one says, and before I can do anything, it presses the tube against my arm and everything goes insanely colorful.

I’m not sure how long I’m in my twilight world. I keep hearing voices, and I’m sure I call out for Daeos.

If he doesn’t know where I am, if he can’t find me...If he’s dead or injured...or alone.

I don’t want any of those things for him, but I also don’t want them for me. We are one, our hearts entwined to be whole. He completes me, makes me feel strong and able to take on the universe because he is in love with me.

Even better, I’ve been able to help him in the best way possible, giving Daeos what he wants and what he never knew he wanted until we met. A family.

“Where is the human female?” a hard voice booms, waking me with a jump.

My head is fuzzy and my mouth is dry.

“Daeos!” I squeak with no power or volume. “Daeos, I’m here!”

A green head pokes through the doorway. Draxx grins at me.

“She’s in here,” he says very loudly without looking away.

He’s followed by Drega who is sporting a fresh gash across his left shoulder and who quickly goes to my leg, checking the contraption over carefully, clucking to himself.

“Where’s Daeos?” I ask, and it feels like I’m not being heard.

“Draco says you are also with sarkarnling, like my Jem,” Draxx continues as if I haven’t said anything. “We’re all having sarkarnlings!”

He elbows Drega with some enthusiasm, which isn’t returned, unless you count the growl of frustration aimed at his brother.

A golden head appears at the doorway, and Draco has the same grin as the other two.

“You found her, then?”

“She is injured, but the Cirmos have been treating her well,” Drega says without looking up from my leg.

“We’re all having sarkarnlings!” Draxx says happily, throwing an arm around Draco’s shoulders, and this time he doesn’t get a growl for his trouble.

“Please,” I plead. “What’s happening with the Belek? Where is Daeos?”

“I can’t imagine what you’re going to be like as a father,” Drega grumbles. “You hardly wear pants most of the time, and after what happened with the spaceworms, you are not a great role model.”

“What’s a role model?” Draxx queries.

“Something my heartsfire told me about. It’s something for a sarkarnling or young warrior to look up to.”

“Warriors do look up to me,” Draxx counters. “I am very big.”

“STOP IT!” I yell. “WHERE IS MY MATE? WHERE IS DAEOS?”

There is complete and utter silence. Three pairs of fiery eyes are fixed on me.

I glare back.

“This is absolutely Daeos’ mate,” Draco rasps, smoke curling out of both nostrils as he folds his arms and leans a little closer to me. “Daeos is finishing the mission I set him. He is fully expected to survive, after all, he did survive the gyik explosion before he brought you here and then found the control center which the Belek had been using to control their portal,” Draco says airily. “He is destroying it as we speak.”

“You sent him on a mission?” My voice is back to being hoarse. “You sent him when you know I’m pregnant and you already told him he did not need to battle? What sort of a brother, a *leader*, are you?”

I know I’m being rude, but I don’t care. I also know being rude to Draco is probably life shortening, but because it means he gets to know how I feel about his treatment of Daeos, I still don’t care.

Drega and Draxx have the funniest expressions on their faces as they watch their brother, half anticipation, half amusement. They’re waiting for his response with bated breath.

“It’s more what sort of brother Daeos is. In fact, what sort of mate he is. He volunteered for the mission. He wanted to ensure none of us would be in any danger from the Belek again. And he was joined by a number of other warriors eager to serve under him,” Draco says, studying his claws. “He is an

impressive leader when he wants to be.” He lifts his head. “When he has a *reason* to be.”

Outside there is a considerable commotion. Draco checks over his shoulder and stands back, putting an arm out to push both Drega and Draxx away from me.

What bursts through the door can only be described as a dragon on fire. Daeos glows with the force of a star, and despite the fact he seems to be covered from the waist down in some sort of green goo, he is absolutely magnificent.

“Heartsfire!”

Daeos doesn’t give the other Sarkarnii even a first glance. He is completely concentrated on me. In a single bound, he’s next to the gurney I’m lying on, but he stops short of touching me, hand hovering at my cheek.

“Heartsfire?”

“Sweetheart, are you okay?” I grab his hand because I can’t bear not to be touching him for a second longer.

He exhales slowly and brings my hand and his up to my face. His hard, muscular body is taut. Despite the dirt, he smells amazing, like my Daeos, all spice and smoke. In a single swift move, he’s on the gurney and I’m in his arms, without disturbing the contraption around my leg.

It feels amazing. There is nowhere else in the entire universe I’d rather be.

“As long as there is breath in my body to scent you and light in my eyes to see you, as long as I can be by your side, I will always be happy, heartsfire,” he rasps. “You are the starfire to my darkness, the jewel in my hoard. You are the flame which burns inside me, forever.”

And I’m in his arms, his lips pressed on mine in a kiss which steals my very soul.

A soul which is most definitely his.



DAEOS

The Cirmos were very annoying. Even Draco levels of growling would not persuade them to let my Opal leave their facility until they had finished healing her leg.

It took half a tick, and it was half a tick too long. My brothers had to physically restrain me at one point. Or at least that was the reason Drega gave for punching me in the side of my head and sending me out into the main area to shift and heal my wounds.

I only went because he's my brother now. Something I'm not entirely sure he's happy about.

"You can take her, Sarkarnii, and get out of our quadrant," Sachi says as I shift back into my biped form.

"I did as you asked," I reply. "A little thanks wouldn't go amiss."

"I saved you first, don't you forget it." Sachi huffs. "But I guess, without you, the Belek might have taken back the Kirakos," he adds, grudgingly.

"Not a chance," I reply and stalk into their healing area.

As I enter, a deliciously familiar scent enters my nostrils just as Opal leaps at me.

I catch her, of course I do, snuggling my face into her hair, knowing my wings and tail have shifted out, but I don't care.

"Hey, you," she says, lips gently brushing mine. "Can we go home now?"

"Home?" I query.

"Back to the *Golden Orion*. I think you have a hoard to show me."

A band tightens around my chest. I have a hoard, but unlike other Sarkarnii, it is not large, nor is it as filled with treasures which would please

my *szikra*.

But I do want to take her “home.”

“Then your wish is my command, my pretty treasure.”

“Daeos.” I have to halt at the sound of Draco’s voice, even if I have a mate to please.

After all, we’re brothers now.

“Draco?” I turn us to face him.

“Report?”

I heave out a sigh and drop my chin to my chest before I catch the eye of my Opal, and she gives me the most mischievous look.

I don’t think she’s interested in the size of my hoard.

My pouch becomes very painful.

“The Belek escaped through the portal, as we expected. The columns have all been located and destroyed. I have spoken to the Ragad and the Kirakos’ control is being updated in order to prevent future incursions.”

“Good...” I cut Draco off before he can continue.

“The Ragad believe, as I do, the Belek still want the star map, and as long as we remain on the Kirakos, it will remain at risk.”

Draco growls under his breath. “As I thought.”

“We need to locate the mated pair who can unlock the map,” I say confidently.

“We do. Are you taking your mate back to the Sarkarnii quarter?” he asks.

“We are returning to the ship.” I gaze down at my Opal. “It is our home.”

Draco shrugs. “Very well, but I expect you to dance for her within the next five ticks, or my mate will most likely gut me.”

Opal’s sweet laugh rings out. “I doubt very much Amber would do anything of the sort.”

“My mate drives a hard bargain,” Draco rumbles. “And in any event, a Sarkarnii with *kiralii* blood should do the honorable thing for his chosen mate.” He gives me a knowing look.

It’s completely lost on me. I’ve always struggled to be a Sarkarnii warrior. The idea of trying to be a member of the High Bask is incomprehensible.

Draco leans into me. “I mean you *should* dance for her,” he says in a very loud whisper.

“Oh,” I reply, still a little confused. “I will.”

“Are you going to ask me?” Opal laughs.

“Will you let me dance for you, heartsfire?” I say, and she laughs some more.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

“I was going to ask, always, my pretty treasure. Dancing for you will be my privilege,” I say.

Opal places a hand against my jaw. “Then I would be honored if you dance for me, sweetheart.”

I think my insides have turned to liquid and my desire to get her “home” ramps up along with the pressure in my pouch.

And the fact my hips are swinging from side to side without any thought input from me.

“You have one tick, warrior, then I expect to be approached for permission for a dance,” Draco intones before his face cracks into a smile the likes of which I’ve never seen. “Now go.” He flicks a hand at me. “Drega and Draxx will finish up here.”

“You trust me on the *Golden Orion*?” I ask.

“Daeos, there’s no one I’d trust more with my ship,” Draco says.

Opal leans her head against my chest, looking up at me with bright, beautiful eyes. “Let’s go,” she says.

And I don’t think I’ve ever moved so fast in my whole life.



OPAL

“Slow down!” I laugh as Daeos speeds through the ship, heading, it seems, towards the aquiums.

“Can’t,” he replies, wings unfurling as he drops us down the atrium to the floor below. “I need to be inside you. I need to plunder your ripe body.”

His words send heat flooding to my core, and he inhales deeply.

“Seems like you require your Sarkarnii warrior, pretty treasure,” he growls.

“I need my warrior to ensure I’m filled completely,” I reply.

Beneath me, Daeos shudders with pleasure, and he’s sprinting down the passage to our favorite aquium.

Once inside, he places me on my feet, and I’m taken in a kiss which carries me up to the stars, while an impatient tail trails up my leg, tickling over my thigh. Claws scrabble at my clothing, and it doesn’t take him long to get me entirely naked.

“You are glorious,” he murmurs, lips trailing down my neck to my shoulder, hands sliding down and over my abdomen. “And soon you’ll be delicious and round with our sarkarnling.”

“Is that what you want, Daeos?”

“I want you all plump and filled so you can ride me, and I can marvel at what grows within you.”

It’s my turn to shake with anticipation, given his cock is soaking my stomach with pre-cum. I drop to my knees and take him in my hands.

“Opal!” He groans as I run my fingers from root to tip, sliding my thumb

over the deepening hook and exploring his weeping slit.

Daeos' hand finds my hair, and he clutches at the top of my head as I make sure he's looking when I slip my thumb into my mouth and lick it clean.

His eyes widen, unsure what will happen next, but as the warmth from his cum sends my endorphins spiraling, I lick over the tip of his cock and do my best to get my lips around the head.

"Opal!" he cries out, and I feel a gush of cum as I continue to lick over his cock and run my hands up and down his shaft. "I will spill!"

Hands grasp at my shoulders, and I'm pulled onto my feet. "And I want to spill inside your pretty cunt, not down your throat."

I'm spun to face the wall, grasping it as he spreads my legs, nudging them apart until he can press the head of his enormous cock into my entrance. His tail, such a naughty appendage, slips between my folds, finding my clit and teasing it as I flood Daeos with my moisture.

"So wet," he moans, breaching me, his hand on my buttock as his tail helps steady me under my abdomen.

His cock slides in, and for a second all I hear is his panting as he holds back. Then he withdraws and thrusts again, at the same time his tail flicks over my little bundle of nerves, and he sends me skywards.

With his cum coursing through my veins, I'm soaking him as he continues to plunder me, slowly at first, his hips circling as he ensures I'm filled by him, and then, once his control deserts him, he speeds up. Our bodies slap together, and with every movement, he grinds himself into me until I can't hold back even if I wanted to.

My body spasms, my pussy clenching tight around him, milking his cock for all it's worth.

"My sweet treasure." Daeos leans over me, his hard chest pressing into my back, arms cradling my body. "You send me to the stars, and you make me rut for you," he rasps, shaking and shuddering as he continues to thrust into me with agonizingly slow strokes until finally, finally, he groans out his climax, and I feel the hot seed flooding into me.

But this time there is no pinch because I am already filled with his child. Instead he curls himself around me, pulling free in a delicious flood of cum.

"My sweet treasure," Daeos murmurs, caging me in his arms. "You make me spill regardless, and I love filling your pussy with every single drop."

He tips me into his arms and wades into the warm waters of the aquium,

where I am thoroughly cleansed before we retire to our cabin.

“My Opal?” Daeos queries as I finish up in the separate bathroom.

“Yes?” I pop my head back around the opening to see a smiling Daeos sat on the big bed.

Or rather, he’s sat on a pile of items on top of the bed.

“And what do we have here?” I ask, as I take a seat next to him.

He has an eclectic mix of items, his tail curled around his hoard, which includes, I notice, a set of what appear to be grenades and a ray gun, along with golden goblets (which look suspiciously like the ones the warriors drink from in the Sarkarnii quarter), a selection of silky scarves in a similar color to his scales, cushions, and the occasional sparkling item which could be a jewel or could be glass.

“My hoard,” Daeos says proudly. “Your hoard too,” he adds hastily. “Especially...”

His hand comes from around his back and in it is a necklace which drips with what look like raindrops, glittering in the light.

“When I found this, I thought it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.” He inspects it carefully and then his eyes meet mine. “Then I met you, and I knew I’d found it so I could gift it to my heartsfire.”

Tears hover in my eyes as he reaches around my neck, carefully fitting it on me.

He slips a clawed finger under my eye, catching one of the tears before it falls.

“I love you, heartsfire. You make me the happiest Sarkarnii in the entire galaxy.”

“And I love you, Daeos. The day I met you was the first day of the rest of my life.”



OPAL

I smooth the red dress down over my hips and then over my belly.

“Believe me, you can’t see anything, yet,” Jade says.

She’s doing her level best to look grumpy, but I know she’s happy for me and Daeos.

Especially after the word got round about how he’d been the hero of the battle for the Kirakos. It made me immensely proud on his behalf.

I look around the specially erected tent with a smile I can’t contain. Amber gently rocks her baby, Ruby and Jem are fighting over the last edesh, and the only human missing is Coral because she is looking after Drasus. The massive purple warrior is confined to her clinic due to his injuries, and apparently he’s not happy about it.

“You look completely gorgeous, hun,” Jem says through a mouthful as Ruby looks daggers at her.

“Do you think he’ll like it?”

I spin slowly on the spot. This dress is the same scarlet as Daeos’ scales, but with sparkles within the fabric that are like sequins but they glow, just like him.

“It’s a dress fit for a queen.” Amber grins at me.

“Daeos is High Bask, not exactly a king.” I laugh. “And no one was more surprised about it than him.”

“From what Draco has told me, it’s entirely possible he’s related to an ancient line of the High Bask, which might make him a king,” Amber says in a matter-of-fact voice.

“Daeos is a king?” Jade snorts. “King of destruction presumably.”

“I think he’d prefer that title.” I smile to myself. “He’s just happy to have found he has brothers who care for him.”

“I think they’ve always cared for him,” Ruby says, producing, magical assistant style, another platter of food. “But now they get to punch him with love when he misbehaves.”

I can’t help but laugh. My Daeos is so damn happy to be accepted. I love it for him.

I love him.

“He gets to punch back too.”

“I’m not sure that was ever a concern for him,” Jem says. “But Draxx loves having his sparring partner back, anyway.”

Mistress Kiki bustles in. “The Sarkarnii are ready for you.” She clucks. “And you know how they get if they’re left to their own devices.”

All my friends get to their feet, and one by one they embrace me, whispering their messages of love and support as they file past me and out through the curtained doorway, until I’m alone with the Jiaka mistress.

She fusses around me, checking her handiwork, before she takes hold of both of my hands.

“Your chosen Sarkarnii is the worst one I have ever encountered,” she says. “He is loud, always naked, and dangerous.”

I open my mouth to protest, but she grips my fingers even harder.

“And you have tamed him, little human. I didn’t think he could ever be happy, ever smile, ever eat without spilling most of it down himself, but here he is, today, taking a mate. You are the best thing to come to the Kirakos, you and the other humans. You make this place not be a prison. You make us believe we can be free and find our home.”

The words from earlier are gone. My mouth is open but in surprise and delight. Instead, I sob.

“Ah, do not cry, little human.” She releases my hands in order to grab my face and wipe clean the tears. “Your life is just starting. The Sarkarnii are destined for great things, fate decrees it. And with humans by their side, I believe they will be invincible.”

In a swift movement, she swings me around and propels me out of the tent.

The Sarkarnii are arranged in a horseshoe shape underneath the *Golden Orion*. As I exit, as one, they stand, and the sound of tails and scales reverberates around the huge place.

I should be intimidated, but I've seen Daeos standing in front of his "new" brothers, his scarlet scales standing out against their gold, green, and blue.

He's grinning from ear to ear although it seems like Draxx is holding him upright. From the scent in the air, the ale-wine has been flowing, and I hope he hasn't been partaking.

I walk to the throne-like chair set out for me and take a seat. I needn't have worried about any form of intoxication because the second I sit, he's weaving towards me, hips flipping as the warriors stamp out their beat.

My sweet Daeos does not waste any time. He closes the gap between us in the most mesmerizing manner but with a haste which is tangible, and I'm so glad because by the time he reaches me, I want to be with him so much.

He slides to a halt on his knees as I fling my arms around his neck and am gathered into his arms as I laugh out loud, his wings shifting out to cover us as his lips hit mine in a delicious, possessive kiss.

"Now all the warriors know who you belong to," he growls over my mouth.

"They always did, my love. They always did," I reply as, without further ado, he sweeps me up the gangway and into our ship.



EPILOGUE



DAEOS

I spit the set of tools from my mouth into my claw and shift back into my biped form. There are a number of items needing work on the outside of the *Golden Orion*, which we may as well complete while we're in dock. Like the telemetry the spaceworms ruined, or the outer hatch which always gets stuck.

"You're up early." Drega says, landing beside me and yawning widely.

"Draco wants the ship ready for launch, so I'm getting it ready." I reply.

"Could you suck up to him a bit more? I think his head is starting to deflate." Drega laughs.

I stare at him.

He stares back at me.

"Draco is my *brother*." I say slowly, leaning into an element of shock in my voice.

Drega raises his hands. "Okay, I didn't mean it." He says, his eyes searching my face.

I shift out a wing and slam it into his shoulder, sending him sprawling away across the slippery outer coating of the ship, spinning because he can't put out claws to stop himself.

Bit like the spaceworms.

"Daeos!" He bellows as he finally comes to a stop when he slams into one of the engine struts.

I'm in trouble again. I stand my ground as he gets to his feet and barrels towards me. If Drega wants a fight, he's not going to get one. I have a sleepy mate, her belly filled with a sarkarling, my sarkarling and she is going to

need both feeding and mating very soon.

Not necessarily in that order.

I fold my arms and Drega comes to a skidding halt.

“What no claws?”

“I’m busy.”

“Nev, you actually sound like him.” Drega grumbles. “It’s bad enough having one Draco, let alone a little suck up clone.”

I preen a little to be compared to Draco.

“So, are you going to let me work, or are you going to keep me talking?” I query.

“If I didn’t nevvig need you to complete the star map installation, I’d send you to the pit.” Drega growls.

“Who’s going to the pit?” A flash of green scales has Draxx landing next to us. “Daeos, you are *not* going to the pit. You have a mate, she is with sarkarnling.” He says earnestly. “If you must go, I will come with you.” He adds seriously. “Drega will come too.”

“I will not.” Drega fires out a sheet of flame. “And this is about sending Daeos to the pit.”

I sigh, turn away from the pair of them and get on with my work. They bicker for a while and I tune them out.

“Daeos?”

The only voice I want to hear has me jerking upright, shifting and being in the air in a seccari.

Stood on the entrance ramp is my Opal. She clutches a blanket around her and is rubbing at one eye.

“My beautiful treasure, I didn’t want to wake you until I was done.” I wrap her in my arms, well aware of the audience on the top of the ship.

“I’ve been a little sick.” She says, looking up at me with red-rimmed eyes.

Instantly, she’s in my arms and I’m snuggling her tiny form to me. “Do you need to see a healer? Your human healer or Drega?” I say my new brother’s name through gritted teeth.

“This is normal, sweetheart. I’ll get sick for a while then hopefully, I won’t for the rest of the time.” She gives me a weak smile.

“Would mating help? Or something else?” I ask. “I’ve finished my work on the ship. I think Drega wants to discuss the star map, but other than that, I belong to you.”

Opal laughs and my soul sings at the sound. “Such a serious Sarkarnii warrior.” She runs her fingers over my jaw.

“Serious about you, my heartfire. If I want to blow anything up, I go find Drelix.”

“And Drelix is the Sarkarnii willing to indulge you?” Opal asks, eyes dancing with mirth.

“Until Drasus is well.” I say solemnly. “But I believe he will be well soon.” I brighten.

“He’s got Coral looking after him, my love.” She gives me another stroke down my jaw. “He will get better.”

I’ve missed my old mentor, even if I do have new brothers. Drasus knew me better than I knew myself, which wasn’t saying a great deal, but it meant less punches in the head.

“I believe I owe you a morning meal.” I say. “Where would you like it? On the ship or in the Sarkarnii quadrant?”

Opal thinks for a seccari or two. “The quadrant. I want to see Mistress Leoni and we’ve not been back in a while. But no stunt flying,” she warns, “my stomach is as delicate enough as it is.”

“As if I would do such a thing.” I do my level best to sound hurt, but it’s clear Opal doesn’t believe me as I’m getting a long stare. “On my honor as a member of the High Bask?” I suggest.

“Marginally better.” Opal says, “my prince.” She chuckles.

“M’not a prince.” I grumble.

I’m still not entirely sure what one is. Opal did tell me princes on her planet have access to treasure, but she also said something about having to behave and I don’t like behaving.

So I’m not a prince. But her mentioning them reminds me. I gently let her down until she’s standing, clutching the blanket around her and looking completely edible.

“I have something for you, my sweet mate, can you wait here?” I ask.

“Okay.” Opal looks intrigued. “But after all the...you know...I’m hungry now.” She rubs her belly and my cock threatens an appearance.

I fire up into the air, racing to the top of the ship where I left my tools.

“Looking for this, brother?” Draxx holds out the small jewel encrusted cuff I bartered from the Cirmos.

“Yes,” I narrow my eyes.

“Such a pretty thing,” he moves it so the stones catch the light, “it is a

wonder to have such incredible mates, all filled to the brim with sarkarnlings.” He sighs, holding out the trinket to me.

My initial rut might be over, but my desires for my mate still have my cock bulging at my pouch. Sarkarnii have a number of levels of rut, and occasionally we get stuck in them. According to Drega, Draxx got stuck in his for a long time, which makes me smug as I have not.

But I still love mating with my Opal. And I’m looking forward to my next rut, where I will fill her up all over again.

“I can’t wait to leave here and show Opal the stars.” I say quietly. “The ones which shine like this bracelet.”

“Not long now, brother.” Draxx gives me a fanged grin.

I return it with some pleasure. “No, brother.”

Draxx claps me on the back and I nearly fall off the *Golden Orion*. I’m still coughing as I reach my mate back on the ground.

I take Opal’s hand and clip the bracelet around her wrist. “Stars for the starshine.” I say, pressing a kiss to her lips.

“It’s beautiful, Daeos.” She gasps. “Is it...was it part of your hoard?”

“It is part of your hoard now, my treasure. I’m going to build you one piece by piece, as I am *kiralii*.”

Opal takes my hand. “I love you, Daeos. You don’t need to prove anything to me. I carry your child and I am as happy as I could ever be.”

“I know, but I want to give you gifts, in case my words desert me, or when I have the nightmares, so you know, I am always with you.” I touch her head, “here,” I touch her chest, “and here.”

“And I am always, always with you, my love. You won’t ever be in the dark again.”

Opal crushes her lips to mine, her hands delving into my hair as her tongue sweeps my mouth and I plunder hers. Pantless as usual, I can feel my cock wanting to emerge until there is a very loud growl.

“What?” I pull away on high alert for a yeycock or melabuk.

Maybe even a Rak, although they don’t growl, they burble.

“Sorry,” Opal has her hands over her stomach, one which has in the last twenty ticks, grown rounder, much to my delight, “turns out I am far hungrier than I thought.”

“Then we will eat before we go to the quadrant.” I say, grandly. “And the *Golden Orion* does the best edesh anyway.”

With a sweeping bow, I direct my mate inside the ship which has become

our home and which will continue to be home for many more evs. Until our sarkarnling is born, until I fill her again, until whatever fate has in store for us prevails.

Because fate brought my Opal to me, and I'm prepared to trust it once again.



OPAL

I turn one way, then the other, looking at myself in the mirror. I don't think I look *that* pregnant.

A big, scarlet scaled behemoth comes up behind me and a hand slides over my stomach, holding it as he shoves his head into the crook of my neck and makes a delicious half growl, half purr which goes directly to my core.

My bad chaos dragon knows exactly how I tick. Especially when he...

"Oh!" I exclaim as he drags his fangs over my skin. "Bad Daeos!"

I grind myself back on him, causing my naughty Sarkarnii to groan my name into my hair.

Hair he pulls to one side and then slides his hands around my neck, gently fixing the beautiful waterfall crystal necklace around it.

I feel like a princess, and I have the most handsome prince with his arms wrapped around me and a tail curled at my ankle.

A tail which hardly ever leaves me.

"This is it then?" I say, reaching up to brush his cheek. "Last night on the Kirakos."

"Last night," Daeos grins, "and tomorrow we mate among the stars, little treasure."

"You'd mate anywhere." I giggle at him.

His claws pluck at my dress, hitching it up my thigh. "I would, and I want to mate you now."

"We don't have time and it took me ages to persuade you into those pants, so no, bad Daeos, we are not mating now."

He whines into my hair.

“Please?”

I laugh out loud at my ridiculous, handsome, sweet mate, turning in his grip so I can give him a kiss, a long, long kiss which sets me on fire.

Daeos has his flame again, something he was sure he had lost. He has his shift and I am reliably informed (by Amber), he is the same size as his “brothers” even if they won’t admit it. And he trusts and is trusted. Admittedly, sometimes he is trusted just to make a mess, because he hasn’t managed to change much in that department, but at least he enjoys the aquium with me in order he doesn’t inflict his dirt magnet persona on everyone else.

As for me, I’d do anything for my scarlet dragon. He is my entire world and tomorrow the world changes. Tomorrow we fire up the *Golden Orion* and leave the Kirakos in the hands of the Ragad.

The star map has still not yielded up its secrets, Daeos and I were not the golden couple set to unlock it, as Drega thought we might.

“Opaaaaalllll.” Daeos groans.

“Come on,” I spin away from his grip and he pouts. “It’s time for you to be a member of the High Bask for once.”

He shakes, but it’s not with nerves, it’s with pride. My sweet Daeos has something to be proud of, and he has warriors who are proud of him.

We leave the ship, our home, and get into a gyik flyer, which I’ve persuaded Daeos I prefer to flying with him, but it’s mainly so I can get him to keep pants on. In no time at all, we burst out into the Sarkarnii quarter and he lands the little craft as deftly as himself.

“Oh, there you are, Opal!” Jade comes running up. “Thank the fucks. Coral needs you, both.”

I give Daeos a quizzically look. “Both of us?”

“It’s Drasus. Coral can’t stabilize him. She needs Daeos’ blood for a transfusion, or he might die.”



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FATED MATES OF THE SARKARNII

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DRAXX

DREGA

DRASUS

DAEOS

DRELIX

WARRIORS OF THE CITADEL

SAVAGE PRIZE

SAVAGE PET

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Bane: Alien Warrior's Redemption

Traitor: Alien Hunter's Mate

WRITING AS HB JACKS

Monster Prey Mates - Gargoyle Romance

Stone Cold

Hard Night

Rock Fall

MM Romance

Bonfire Night

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 (less English country garden, more The Good Life) or zooming around the countryside on my motorbike.

Check out my website at www.hattiejacks.com!

