BEGINNING OF CATCHING A STARBEAST

It was something of a lazy day for Kedryzal. There was not anything pressing he needed to do, and he wanted to enjoy what the field had to offer. The sun was shining down, warming up the area. While he did not need the extra warmth, it was nice to not need to use energy to keep himself warm.

To keep himself entertained, he was playing around with the leaves that had fallen off the trees nearby. The color patterns and the shape of the leaves held his interest for a good while before he gathered them up into a pile. The pile was soon ruined by his pounce. It was fun watching the leaves scatter and hearing it rustle under foot.

He then went to gather up the leaves, looking for more to add to the pile before his next pounce.

The dry, rustling sound of the leaves hadn't fallen on deaf ears. It had, in fact, fallen on many ears. And those ears belonged to an interested party.

Three drakiri stood hidden in the forest, watching the crossbreed prance around in the field, raking up leaves and then jumping into the pile. He behaved like a child, but did he have the sensibilities of one as well? Perhaps this would be an easy catch--they could only hope.

Desmonae was the only one there by choice, and she was well aware of this fact. Her companions dragged their hooves about everything she told them to do, but when they did eventually do what they were told they did it efficiently. That was the only reason Desmonae had not outright attacked them for their ambivalence.

Woodwind, the kainu, was faster on land than any kainu Desmonae had met. Fast, agile, and thankfully smart enough to realize he couldn't get away if he tried. He may have been fast on his feet, but Desmonae could fly faster than any land dweller could run.

Then there was Thorn, a mutt who seemed to have lost the ability to speak. She hadn't said a word since she'd been brought into the warehouse, and it was utterly infuriating to say the least. But she was somehow able to calm most drakiri and get them off their guard. This was why she went in first, walking calmly out of the forest toward the playful crossbreed through the crunchy leaves.

Her mane stirred in the breeze as she approached, her eyes calm as she studied the scene before her, a slight smile on her face.

Kedryzal was slowly aware of the three draks watching him as he played in the field. They were certainly well hidden to most unaware draks. It was simply that he could sense their cores, but he had no interest in calling them out. He would find out whether they were friendly or not later.

After his last pounce on a large pile, he had flopped to his side to roll around a bit. That was when he heard the calm crunches of the leaves. Sensing that a core was coming closer, he rolled on his stomach and turning his head to the drak in question.

She was a pretty mutt to say the least. "Hey, lovely day isn't it?" he said in greeting.

Thorn blinked at the other drakiri, the smile spreading on her lips at his gentle greeting. He wasn't afraid of her, he wasn't even wary, she appreciated that. It was difficult having to see suspicion in the eyes of so many who looked at her, especially given the work she was forced to do. Perhaps, if only for a moment, she could pretend she wasn't here to capture this drakiri and only meant to befriend him.

Reality was much harsher than her wishes, and she knew she would have to do her duty. She walked up and pawed at some of the leaves under the drak, finding it a strange sensation to entertain.

She gave her head a slight toss, her impressive grey mane shifting along her shoulders as she stepped aside. This put her on the opposite side of their quarry, looking briefly to the treeline when Woodwind appeared.

"Hello to you as well," the kainu said, voice raspy as if he had spent all his life shouting to be heard. "What brings you out here on a fine, chilly day?"

Kedryzal did notice that she didn't respond having instead walking up to him. As he debated on what to say next, he watched her curiously as she first pawed at the leaves then her mane toss. He only tore his eyes away when a new voice made itself known.

Spotting the kainu, he then heard his question. Giving it a moment of thought, he replied, "Flying around. Or was, anyway. I noticed these trees and haven't seen them before. Not to mention the new leaf shape and these colors." He picked one leaf at random to twirl in his hand. "Your friend over here is pretty quiet though."

He idly noted that the mutt and kainu seemed to be positioning themselves. The most amusing thought he had was that he felt like a prey.

"That's Thorn," the kainu said in response as he stepped forward, looking down at the pile of leaves before them. "She doesn't talk much--or at all for that matter. I like to theorize about why...I don't think we need to go into all that right now though."

They'd learned an important piece of information--this drakiri could fly. Given what crossbreed he was, they couldn't say they were surprised. Dracus crossbreeds almost always could, it was why they always took someone with them with that ability--or wings.

"You out here alone?" Woodwind asked. "Some folks say it's dangerous in these parts. I don't know about all that, but wandering around alone can't be very fun. That why you took to rollin' in the leaves?"

Kedryzal was satisfied by the response in regard to Thorn. It was likely that the mutt was simply mute. He had no idea if that was true but was not bothered enough to press the issue considering the kainu had dropped it.

He raised a brow upon the warning. "No, I haven't heard. As for being alone, I'm quite used to it." He shrugged in response to the kainu's concern about being alone. "Rolling... and pouncing. I was surprised by the crunch they make upon getting stepped on and amused by them flying. Enjoying the little things."

Woodwind looked past Kedryzal to Thorn where she stood, and though she did not speak, they both understood. Neither of them wanted this. But if they didn't do as they were told, there would be hell to pay. Thorn herself had already been harvested from several times, her mane and the markings around her eyes made her valuable enough to take her hide. Woodwind's scales had marked him for harvesting as well, though there hadn't been a great demand for them, so they had given him the option to serve or die. They knew what they were about to put this poor creature through.

"I like your style," Woodwind said, his voice gentle. "What's your name, son?"

The nickname caught him off guard. Had he seemed younger than he actually is? "Kedryzal. And yours?"

Kedryzal...that was a good name, a strong name. More and more, Woodwind felt this wasn't something they should do. He gave his head a little shake and lifted his hoof to introduce himself with a small, polite bow--something that might have been considered old fashioned, but that was just the kind of kainu he was.

"I'm Woodwind, you know Thorn. And we have one more with us, Desmonae come on out," the kainu called, looking over his shoulder.

He could practically feel the rage pulsing off of Desmonae as she stalked out of the shadows, her burning eyes the first thing he could see, the next being her vividly sky blue scales and white mane.

"You are a fool," she spat at him as she walked to stand at a point that would create a triangle between them with Kedryzal in the center. "You talk enough for you and the mute bitch."

Thorn's nostrils flared, but she gave no other indication that the insult had so much as phased her.

"Ked--can I call you Ked?--we're in a pickle here," Woodwind sighed. "See, our companion, Desmonae, she's several kinds of words I rightly wouldn't call a lady. But she knows that, and she wears it like a badge of honor. What I'm meanin' to say here is we gotta do what the lady tells us. And the lady tells us to bring you with us to somewhere I can't imagine you're gonna take very kindly to. I'd sure like it if you came with us without kickin' up a lot of fuss, but if you feel the need, I'd understand."

Kedryzal was glad that he did not have to point out their third party member. His eyes moved from Woodwind to the final drak to appear. It was a winged nightmare, and unlike the first two, she appeared quite hostile. He let his eyes follow her as she spoke and took her position, proving to be a drak not to be trifled with.

He refocused back to Woodwind and listened. "Ked's fine." While he did not move from his lying position, he supported his head with his hand. Only his eyes moved to take stock of the draks' positions and considered what Woodwind said. "You three sure covered your bases." He could visualize how the fight could happen with either the three-to-one on the ground or one-on-one with the nightmare in the air. With the nightmare on the ready, she could easily tackle him out of the air if he tried. All it did was make him not want to fight.

"Well, thank you for not attacking me from the start. I'm not really up for... kicking up a fuss as you say."

"Much obliged," Woodwind said, grateful in ways he wasn't sure he had words for that the drakiri hadn't decided to fight them. They still had to get him home though, but that would be made easier if the potions they'd been given were true to their described affects.

"If you'd be so kind as to drink this here potion, we can get on with our business," Woodwind said, gesturing for Thorn to remove the glass bottle from her saddlebags. She did as she was asked and laid it on the leaves in front of Kedryzal before stepping back again.

"It won't hurt you none, just make things a little easier for us all to get you home," the kainu explained. "Don't you worry, you're of no use to us dead, so we're not just butterin' you up before the slaughter."

Kedryzal glanced at Thorn when Woodwind gestured to her and watched her place the potion on the leaves before raising his eyes to Woodwind once more. He listened calmly, but he was not going to trust on words from a Kainu he have no idea what business these three were from. "Funny term to use for your operation."

Lifting his head from his hand, he moved his arms till they rested in front of him crossed over each other. The potion remained between his paws, but he made no moves to grab it. "So, what is this? Something to knock me out? Or put me in some weird haze to follow orders more compliantly?"

He was living as a mortal drak long enough to know that his body can be affected or react to substances placed on or in the body.

"A little'o both," Woodwind said, cocking his head to the side slightly. "Some draks drink it and pass out right away, others get to walk a ways before they fall down, some don't pass out at all, jus' follow along and we don't even have to restrain 'em. Those are the best ones, less stress on everyone."

A low growl came from Desmonae, her eyes narrowed to slits as her lip twitched up from her teeth.

"I reckon you should drink it though," Woodwind cautioned. "Desmonae's got less patience than a hornet's nest in a fire. I'd really hate for her to decide she's gotta do somethin' to get that there potion down your throat."

Kedryzal could imagine Desmonae flying up to his mouth if she can't reach it by rearing in order to force the potion down. He did appreciate the knowledge of what he was getting himself into. Without a word, he picked up the potion and opened it. The scent was something though he couldn't describe it.

Decided to not dwell on the smell least Daemonae decided to act, he took the potion and downed it in a few gulps. He made a face from the odd taste and texture. He barely set the empty potion down as he felt it tingle down his throat and his sinuses opened up. He stayed quite still.

Only once Kedryzal opened the potion and brought the bottle to his lips did Desmonae stop growling. Even then it was only for a moment as she began to prowl back and forth with impatience, her wings held up in a half-furled position to show her displeasure at how long they had stayed in the same place. Hunting down drakiri was made even less pleasant when they were stuck with Desmonae, but she was one of the only flying drakiri who were available.

Woodwind glanced up at Thorn as he padded closer to Kedryzal, nosing him gently on the side of his neck to encourage him to stand.

"Come on now, on your feet, son. We'll get you where you need to go," the kainu said. His voice was gentle, and he tried to make the interactions he had with other drakiri as easy as he could. He knew what they had to face once they reached the compound, he didn't want to put them through more strain. Especially if they were going to fight. Fighting would only make things worse for them.

Thorn stepped up to the drakiri's other side and lowered her head to nudge his flank, to the same end as Woodwind. They needed to gauge whether he would be able to stand on his own or if they needed to carry him. If they did, they had the materials to make that happen.

Kedryzal barely react to the nosing from Thorn, only slowly looking down to her. Hearing Woodwind telling him to get up along with them nudging his flanks, he responded. With a practice ease, he got himself up on all fours. He seemed slightly unsteady, ready to move to whatever direction they wanted him to go.

Relieved that Kedryzal followed their instructions, Woodwind let out a small sigh and took up his position to the left of the drakiri, while Thorn took the right. They would lead this drakiri back to the compound. It was less efficient to bring them one at a time, but they had been on their way back from an unsuccessful run to begin with. Now, at least, they would have something to show for how long they had been gone.

Thorn and Woodwind walked side by side, their fur brushing Kedryzal's sides and providing support as much as guiding him. They were quiet for the walk, watching Desmonae lash her tail angrily up ahead of where they were. They knew she was impatient, but really they didn't care. She wasn't strong enough to fly him back herself, and neither Woodwind nor Thorn could fly, so she would just have to be patient.

Kedryzal started walking with the others for a time until he slowly started to pick up speed. It seemed he rather not walk very slowly if he could, going at a light trot instead.

Surprised, but not displeased, Woodwind and Thorn picked up their pace to keep up with the drakiri. At first they had thought he was attempting to escape, but that was quickly proven not to be the case, as he didn't continue to speed up to try to evade them.

They kept up that pace as long as Kedryzal was able, Desmonae deciding to take flight after a time to scout ahead and make sure their path was clear. They didn't see anything out of the ordinary, and it was a relatively calm walk back to the compound.

Sasa, an orange and sunflower yellow dracus crossbreed with a lavender mane and tail, stood watch at the gate and let them through without a fuss. Desmonae flew overhead to announce their arrival and get them through reception faster. The gate was open by the time they arrived, and Woodwind avoided looking up at the drakiri whom he knew was only here for the money. But the fact that someone would put their morals aside for riches didn't sit well with him. None of this did. He didn't like that he had set his own morals aside to save is own skin, either.

They led Kedryzal through reception and right through the receiving area. The hallway leading to the production floor echoed their hoofbeats at an uncomfortable volume. Woodwind gave his head a shake to dismiss Thorn and pulled ahead to shoulder the doors open.

Mijhael stood on his podium, overseeing the drakiri who were being washed and sent to stand on the examination diases. He looked over his shoulder, the teeth of his maw clicking together lightly as he adjusted how they settled.

"He doesn't need to be washed, bring him to a dias," Mijhael said, waving his clipboard toward the only available station on his left.

"Slow down now," Woodwind said, moving so he was ahead of Kedryzal enough that his shoulder was in the way of the drakiri, trotting too quickly. He directed Kedryzal to the dias and had him stand there. "They're gonna put some chains on ya, that's for your own protection as much as theirs, okay? Don't worry yourself too much over it, you'll be okay."

He stood back and looked to his right, catching the fiery orange and yellow pelt of a drakiri he had seen before.

"Icarus," he said, and he sounded genuinely enthused to see the other kainu. "Well I'll be, you're lookin' good."

The kainu stood on the other dias, his expression stern and his ears flat against his skull. He was trembling, though it was only noticeable in the quiver of the hair on his chin and the tips of his ears.

"Woodwind," Icarus said, his voice reedy despite his best efforts.

"You've got a harvest comin' up, don't you?" the older kainu asked, his voice low with sympathy. "It's alright, they'll take care of you. Just stay as still as you can, and don't piss anybody off."

Kedryzal had started to slow down once they reached the building, going from a trot down to a walk. If he was uncomfortable with the sounds in the hallway, he did not show it. Once Woodwind directed him to the dias, he looked and listened to Woodwind as he explained what was going on. Ked had tilted his head as if to say something but had decided against it.

Ked listened to the two kainus speaking, seemingly perking up. "I take it this is a parts collection business?"

Woodwind looked over to Kedryzal again, a small smile on his face.

"You're observant," he admired. "It is. But they have methods to keep you from being in pain. Trust the process, stay calm, and you'll be out of here in no time. Well...I suppose it will depend on your choice."

Mijhael descended from the podium and waved Woodwind and Thorn away. "You have other runs to make," he said disapprovingly. "Go on, there's no time to fraternize with the crop."

Icarus glanced aside at the Risker, his trembling increasing as he saw the maw open and close slowly, teeth glittering under the harsh lights from above. His legs were rooted in place with the same chains as those the humans used to secure Kedryzal, but he didn't wear the muzzle that some of the others were secured with.

"Curiosity will not get you far here," Mijhael warned, taking his clipboard and beginning to write down notes. He squinted at the markings on the drakiri's coat that seemed to glow and produced a small, square mirror, turning it around so the black backing faced the drakiri. He held it over the marking and saw that it truly did glow.

"No false glow, that is worth something," the Risker mumbled, jotting down the information. "Your name and sex?"

Kedryzal did not have time to respond to Woodwind when he was shooed out along with Thorn. He finally looked at the Risker he had been ignoring since he got in. He did noticed the teeth covering the underside of the drak, clearly functioning as a second mouth of some kind. It was soon clear that the Risker was a no-nonsense drak, so Ked said nothing to his warning.

The only interesting thing Ked saw was how the Risker determined the glows on his coat. It made him wonder about the coat since it appeared that would be harvested as well. He had no idea how valuable it was and decided that it was not worth the concern when he's clueless about the process. He was aware of how unremarkable he can look in comparison to the more fancy looking draks.

"Kedryzal, male."

He quietly looked about the dias he was on and the chain attached. He was getting a feel for the space he was currently standing in. One thing he was able to tell was this place was not a nice place to be in.

A cooperative drakiri who didn't try to bite, snarl or spit at him? What a nice change of pace.

Mijhael wrote his notes quickly and efficiently, writing in a language no one on this god-forsaken continent could understand--a method he used to prevent others from reading his notes without his interpretation of them as well as ensuring his place in this business so they couldn't simply kill him off.

He didn't speak to Kedryzal for a long time, preferring to transcribe his notes, only removing his pen from the paper to draw the drakiri's whisker forward and examine the end. He let out a little huff of expelled air and glanced over his shoulder.

"If you could tremble in fear a little more quietly, I could better concentrate and get through this quickly," Mijhael said, looking at Kedryzal's lack of scales but speaking to Icarus where he stood on the platform beside them.

"I-I'm sorry," Icarus stammered, moving his hooves a little closer together so the chains attached to them were pulled tight and wouldn't touch the floor and make noise when he shook.

Mijahel frowned and turned his head to stare at the kainu for a long moment. Then he asked suspiciously, "Was that sarcasm?"

"N-No," Icarus stammered again, his voice tense with nervousness now. "I would never--"

"Why not?" Mijhael asked. "You've been rounded up like cattle, brought here against your will, chained like dogs and made to stand in a cold warehouse surrounded by others going through the same ordeal. Why would you not want to fight back in even such a small way as the use of sarcasm? Have they broken you already?"

He waited for an answer, but the kainu's mouth clamped shut, his whiskers twitching frantically at just the ends--a testament to how fearful he truly was.

"And you, Kedryzal," Mijhael said, referring to his clipboard for the name that had been hastily scribbled by the processors. "You are awfully cooperative for someone with very little to offer. Your Firefly marking is the only thing keeping you in this warehouse."

He signed the bottom of the form and a human came out of seemingly nowhere to take it from him, running away just as quickly.

"You'll be processed and harvested once," Mijhael explained, sounding as enthusiastic as someone who had explained this a few hundred times could sound. "Then you'll be kept for the healing process and depending how your peltl sells you'll be harvested again on a schedule. Between those harvests, you have two options. You can be confined to a cell upstairs in cramped quarters with only enough room to stand up and turn around, or you can go back out there and collect more drakiri to bring back for harvest. You will be monitored and leashed with the use of magical means, so don't think you'll escape when you walk out of here. It is your choice, but I can guarantee the cells will not be nearly as nice as you're thinking they are."

Standing there while the Risker examined him was the least favorite thing to do, but he mentally reminded himself that he had willingly walked right in. He might as well keep up the charade for a while. Whenever he caught a glance of the clipboard, he noticed the language on it being different from the written languages he managed to learn. He found writing to be harder to learn than verbal or even sign language.

His ear twitched when the Risker spoke again, confused on what he was talking about. Hearing the kainu speak, Ked understood that the Risker was referring to the clattering of the chains that happened when the kainu trembled. Ked had realized that he pushed out the sounds of the chains out of his mind until the Risker pointed them out. Then again, he was busying himself with various cores he sensed in the area to pass time. With his attention back to the draks around him, he watched and listened to the conversation while keeping his tongue to himself. It ended up being a good thing since the Risker had turned back from the kainu to Ked, having concluded the inspection.

Ked laughed after the Risker told him the details. "I'm well aware of how unremarkable I am," he said with amused irony. "I'm only cooperative because your runners caught me in a good mood." He moved to sit down, tired of standing for quite some time. "I don't care about your cells. It's nothing like the outdoors."

"Your mediocrity is no concern of mine," Mijhael said dryly. "It is my responsibility to tell you what to expect. If you don't want to be in the cells, you will be out collecting other drakiri to bring them back. If it proves that your pelt is worth more than your time, you will be brought back here and harvested on a stricter schedule. You have no scales, your teeth are not terribly impressive, neither are your horns. They may take them once, but no more than that."

He straightened up and snapped his fingers. Two primals--both black as pitch--stepped out of the shadows and approached to stand on either side of Kedryzal, their massive shoulders practically touching from either side of him as humans came maneuvered between their legs to unchain Kedryzal's legs.

"They will escort you to the subfloor where harvesting takes place," Mijhael said. "If you're as cooperative with the folks down there as you were with me, you shouldn't expect them to hurt you."

The Risker turned away from Kedryzal then and went to stand beside Icarus, though he did not touch the kainu just yet. He was certain the smaller drakiri would collapse in fear if he tried, and that would only make his life more difficult.

The primals escorted Kedryzal across the warehouse to one of the double doors that led to a staircase beyond. They had to wait for the doors to be opened, walking together down the stairs with one primal in front of Kedryzal and the other behind, keeping a steady pace without rushing. They didn't say a word, they didn't have to. They were efficient enough without having to speak to one another and fell into step side by side as they reached the landing for the subfloor.

When the doors opened, they were greeted by a wide hallway--nearly an open space unto itself--with enough room for several drakiri to move about freely. On either side, there were concrete rooms with arches over the entrances, no doors or curtains, and in each there were drakiri of every shape and size. A golden kelpie with vivid purple scales was stretched out on a portable table with a team of humans in pale blue gowns hovering over her. Two of them lifted a scale away from her body and set it on a tray while another human began using a small blade to cut away under the scales on her shoulders. The kelpie's eyes were halfway open, but glazed over and unfocused--she didn't so much as flinch.

On the opposite side of the hallway, a black komakha with an impressive, vibrant blue swirled pattern on his scales lashed out with her back legs, upending the table that had been set up in the stall and sending surgical tools clattering to the floor and spilling out into the hallway. The primals led Kedryzal around the mess, heads down as they continued on without so much as

acknowledging the komakha as she was dragged to the ground and pinned by a truly massive mutt.

The primals stopped only once they reached an empty stall to the right, standing in stoic silence as they waited for the drakiri to step forward into the empty concrete space.

Ouch, that assessment hurt. Ked said nothing about the other option since he did not see it a fair trade to see the outdoors just to collect draks. It did not seem anything he did would phase the Risker, so he listened. It seemed he had to get up to move again which annoyed him. Once the chains were off, he got up and walked with the primals. He supposed it was unfortunate that he couldn't watch or chat with the kainu next to him.

Nothing too interesting happened on the walk until he arrived to the wide hallway. Ked tried to observe the area without slowing the primals down too much. He heard the clatter of the tools before seeing who had kicked the table over. Ked was the only one to acknowledge the komakha as he was led around the mess. This place was quite unpleasant.

Once they stopped, he looked to the space and sighed. He quietly walked in the space and did a quick check over the space before lying down. It seemed he would have to wait here with all of this going on in front of him instead of back at the holding and inspection area. To pass time, he quietly observed the scene in front of him and the two primals that seemed to be standing guard.

The primals remained in place at the doorway to the stall Kedryzal was confined to. They would remain there, silent and watchful of their surroundings, almost seeming to blend into their environment despite appearing as enormous black smudges in the middle of the brightly lit hallway.

The komakha was silenced with either spell or drug--it was a toss up between which was used, depending on who was available at the time--and lifted onto the table for the harvest. It would take hours, but they would remove the entire chitinous shell from the drakiri's body and send it on to be cleaned and mounted.

An hour later, a rose-furred dracus with a white, red-ticked mane that draped down her throat to her belly passed through the doors to the harvesting floor. She walked with a sway in her hips, her head and cervine tail held high, all but floating down the hallway with a pleased expression on her face.

When she approached the stall where Kedryzal waited, the primals departed without a word, not so much as glancing up or acknowledging the blue-eyed drakiri. She waited for them to move out of her way and then moved to stand in the archway, looking down at Kedryzal.

"My newest recruit," she all but purred. "You look absolutely scrumptious...and so polite, I've been told. You'll be put under a spell that numbs you from the pain and I've heard it gives a

rather pleasant numbing sensation to the mind as well. Your hide won't take more than half an hour, I would assume, and then you will be put in recovery. Do you have any questions before we begin?"

Kedryzal ended up dozing off, only partially listening and monitoring the cores in the area. He did come back awake upon sensing a core coming closer to him and managed to look up. When his eyes came back to focus, he spotted the rose-furred dracus approaching his stall.

It was odd being called scrumptious. "Er, thank you? You look lovely yourself," he replied. The explanation did clear up how the process would go and what happened with the draks he saw being harvested. "I suppose my question is, I assume food would be after the recovery?"

The longer white fur around Esperanza's neck and down her back stood up proudly when Kedryzal complimented her, and her whiskers trembled at the ends in her vanity. This was one she would like to keep around for a while, especially if he was going to stroke her ego as such.

"Food will come well after," she confirmed. "The process can be unnerving to some, I would hate for you to aspirate into your lungs--that's much more difficult to fix."

She moved farther into the stall, and as she left the hallway the primals returned to escort the kainu from the inspection floor to the stall across from Kedryzal's. Icarus moved to stand in his stall, pacing nervously and looking around with wide eyes.

Esperanza reached out a hand to hold Kedryzal's chin between thumb and forefinger, smiling as she lifted his face so he had no choice but to look at her.

"I like your attitude," she purred. "I like that you behave, yet you aren't afraid to ask questions. I hope you keep that spark while you're here."

As she peered at him, something in her eyes changed--her pupils constricted to slits hardly the width of a claw-scratch, and a vibrant green hue crept into the blue of her irises, hardly noticeable unless one stared directly at them.

Kedryzal chuckled after the dracus commented about aspirating into his lungs. "No, that would be unpleasant." He made sure that the dracus had room in the stall but otherwise remained relaxed. He spared a glance at the kainu that was escorted in before giving the dracus his full attention.

He gave her a small smile upon the compliment. "I am a curious being even in a place like this." He had wanted to say more but her eyes ended up grabbing his attention as he watched how her pupils became slits with a green hue starting to appear in her blue eyes.

The hue in her eyes seemed to grow brighter, staining the blue a sickly seafoam green and almost seeming to strangle their original color with how fiercely it glowed. But just as quickly as

it had begun, it stopped, the color receding and her pupils expanding once more. Esperanza sagged, taking her hand back from where she had held Kedryzal's chin and blinking slowly several times. She rolled her shoulders slowly and gave her head a small shake, her well-groomed, soft mane almost seeming to shimmer under the lights above.

"Let's get started then," she said, and this time when she stepped forward, she stepped to the side, placing her hand over Kedryzal's eyes so her palm rested lightly across his brow and snout. Violet light shone from her palm as she closed her eyes and focused. She knew how this went, she'd seen it enough times and had been told what it felt like, though she'd never felt it herself: Kedryal's limbs would grow heavy, his eyes would seem almost to vibrate and his mind would plunge into blackness, as if jumping into a warm, dark well.

She held Kedryzal's head as his body relaxed and lowered it to the floor. The humans would come for him with their tools and their table, and she would be on to the next crop.

Esperanza turned to leave the stall, seeing the fiery red and yellow kainu in the stall across the way, but she stiffened and looked back at the drakiri she had just put to sleep. She felt the pressure in her eyes again, felt him looking out of her eyes, and shivered in delight. Something about the drakiri had intrigued her love, and she knew he would feast in mere hours.

The dracus strode across the hall to the flighty kainu, watching him with glee as he danced back from her to stand with his side pressed hard against the far wall, as if begging it to give way and let him hide behind its cold, solid stone. She reveled in the fear in his golden eyes, almost as much as she adored the praise the other drakiri had given her. Fear was her favorite form of control, and she would take it, even when it was not willingly given.

"Do you fear me?" she asked, brushing her fingers through her own mane once more--a gesture common to her, especially when preening in self-satisfaction.

"Yes," the kainu admitted, his voice shaking as much as the rest of him.

"But you do not attempt to flee," Esperanza mused, her head cocking slightly to the side. "Why?"

Icarus's whiskers shook even harder than the rest of him, his heart hammering so loudly in his chest he was sure Esperanza would hear it.

"I have children," he said, his voice shuddering with the concern he felt for them. "I would like to see them again before I die. If I run...they'll kill me." He didn't have to say who, they were both well aware.

"And so smart you are," Esperanza cooed. "Lie down. We don't want to scuff up the knees of that pretty skin of yours."

Icarus shivered and shied away from the dracus's touch, even as he laid down, folding his legs under himself and drawing them in close. He was cold, lonely and afraid. Not for himself, but for his children. He had no idea where they were, no idea if they were dead or alive, though he'd been told they would not be harmed. Could he believe these people?

"You have a restless mind," Esperanza said as she placed her hand on his face like he'd seen her do to the drakiri across the way. "Quiet now, and sleep. You'll wake soon enough."

He closed his eyes when the light began, it blinded him until he saw nothing but white, and then black crept in around the edges as he lost hold of his own body, falling into a pit in himself where up and down had no meaning, it was all black.

Kedryzal was certainly suspicious about the eyes and the dracus reaction once it was gone. In any case, he said nothing as he let her put a spell on him. He was aware of how falling asleep was like, how difficult it was. This was nothing like it. It was as easy as diving from the sky to the ground. He wondered what he might find there as he drifted off.

The dream did not start immediately, leaving his mind to wander in darkness. Ked had no problem waiting and was rewarded for his patience. He landed on a favorite planet of his where it was twilight on warm grass. He was slightly disappointed by the lack of wind and smell, but he supposed he couldn't be too picky. It wasn't like he was sleeping outside.

He landed on the surface and frowned at the lack of feeling the grass between his paws. Decided to pretend that the grass was as soft as it looked, he walked. At first, he did not see or sensed creatures around but in time, he noticed the small bugs, the creepy crawlies, and odd creatures. Feeling that he was too big to see them properly, he shape shifted to his anthro form.

He was surprised how easy it was and got a better look at them. The creatures he saw did not bother him, but they were on very odd and disturbing objects. He reached out to them when a few spotted him and hissed. Getting the hint that they do not want to be disturbed, he got up and moved on.

He doesn't remember how it happened only that the sounds of feet on the grass changed to rock then the horrible echo... of the hallway. The echo and sudden bright harsh light grabbed his wandering mind back to where he was: the hallway to the harvesting floor. He paused and glanced around, hearing the echo dying down. There was no one in the hallway with him.

He pressed on, feeling the cores of all the being up ahead, including his own. It was odd feeling his own core within the room up ahead instead of in his chest. He went right up to the doors and placed a hand on them. It passed through the door, showing that he did not need to wait for it to open.

As he stepped in, his eyes scanned the room.

As Kedryzal stepped through the doors that led farther into the subfloor, he would smell the metallic tang of blood on the air--not much, but enough. He would pass stall after stall where drakiri lay on sterile bedding, stretched out or sitting up with their heads low, eyes unfocused but still open. Not a one wore their skins, they were hornless, some missing ears and eyes entirely. They did not stir as Kedryzal passed, they would not have stirred if the warehouse itself had caught fire.

The scent of magic lay heavy in the cold basement floor, an oppressive feeling that would set the fur standing on end and cause rippling shudders the longer one stayed there. It grew stronger as Kedryzal approached the stall where his waking body lay.

Four humans worked efficiently to remove the skin from the drakiri's body where they had rested it on a large table, stage lights beaming down from above like spotlights. The lights gleamed on the startlingly white tendons and thin subcutaneous fat that was revealed by the skin being pulled back.

Not a single one of the humans seemed to notice when a shape shimmered into existence above the drakiri, a black, wispy smoke that thickened and shaped itself into a long-limbed, half-formed creature. The vague, almost fuzzy edged shape of horns emerged from its head as it looked down at Kedryzal. It placed long arms on either side of the drakiri's body and opened its jaws impossibly wide.

Wisps of essence that looked not unlike the shimmering air above hot asphalt lifted from Kedryzal into the creature's outstretched mouth, and after no more than a second, the indistinct shape of enormous wings burst out from the shadow creature's back. The wings shuddered and shook as the creature let out a mewling sound while it fed, jaws stretching wider still in its clear excitement.

As it fed and became stronger, Kedryzal would be thrust into yet more dreams, the lapse in control banished.

It was unnerving walking through the subfloor. While Ked would have liked to observe and examine each room, he was feeling a chill that he couldn't quite place. It was oddly getting stronger as he continued on. He soon realized that the chill was from the room his own body was.

At first, he honestly thought the chill was the fact he's seeing what was happening to his body. He was quite wrong. He stepped back upon seeing the black smoke solidify into a creature with vague edges. He could only stare as he tried to understand what was happening. During his vague horror, he realized that the creature seemed to be feeding off of him. Just as he started to move to the creature to stop it, a weight slammed on him, pushing him through the floor.

He did not see what it was that pushed him through only that he hit a ground hard. Somewhere during the descent, he dropped his anthro and drakiri's form. Struggling to get up in his real

form, he looked around. The area was pretty devoid of anything interesting or worthwhile except for...

"Binary?"

Binary was another starbeast like Kedryzal, but her expression was cold. This terrified Ked since he had no idea what her expression meant. Then, she spoke. Her voice echoed the dark area of her disappointment, anger, and distrust.

Unable to counter her, Ked forced his frozen body to run. Binary was faster, immediately appearing in front of him. He turned heels to avoid crashing into her and ran in a different direction as he tried to ignore her voice. Several more times, she appeared in front of him, forcing him to change direction.

A sudden weight landed on Ked, nearly crushing him to the ground. "Stop running around, Red. You look like a directionless proton," Binary spat out. "Can you feel it? Your energy weakening? You can't even force me off."

Indeed, he felt weak. He had been feeling weaker by the hour... or however long time passed here. Instead of tiredness in response to loosing energy, he simply feel more fear. How long will this go on?

The nightmares would last well after the humans had finished their task and left Kedryzal lying on the ground on a sterile cloth pad. He was entirely without skin, horns and even his whiskers had been taken. His claws were gone, his mane and the fur on his tail had been harvested, and even his teeth had been removed.

Across the hall, the kainu named Icarus had suffered the same fate, though his harvesting took more time as they had to take care with the removal of his scales. He had watched the entire process of removing Kedryzal's skin and horns, flinching at the sound of the buzz saw, nauseated by the smell of blood and flesh. By the time the humans had moved to his own stall, he trembled so hard they had to use magic to still him so they could find a vein to inject the anesthesia.

The most recently harvested drakiri would lay unconscious until their healer could come through and rouse them, holding the pain at bay.

Elessara walked into the harvesting room. She hated this place, it made her sad... but her presence helped the poor Drakiri that suffered here. He walked gently into the room where Ked was, letting out a soft and gentle greeting to rouse him... to take his pain, to help keep him calm... and possibly assist Esperanza in healing. She was fully capable of healing herself, she was surprisingly powerful. But Esperanza seemed to want to be the only healer, though she couldn't fathom why. She did her best to relieve what pain she could

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Kedryzal did not register the pain he was in. He wasn't aware of any reality except his own mind. The nightmare ended dreadfully with him seeing his own star exploding in front of him. All that fear had snapped like tension on a rope. All he saw was pieces of his own star scattered. The vast coldness of space and darkness were all that was left.

His own body was cold to touch and barely breathing in response to his dreadful nightmare. He was not roused by Elessara at all.

She settled beside him, lowering her head a bit and singing softly, her voice clear and beautiful, laced with a peaceful spell she knew. She often used it to calm those who were afraid and panicking. She wanted to yell at those who had harvested... they had clearly put this Drakiri through way too much in the harvest. She hated the harvesting at the best of times, but even more when it did damage

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The song slowly brought Ked back to reality. Instead of being afraid or panicking, he felt sad bordering on emotionless. The nightmare took a lot out of Ked to feel anything else. Despite the lack of emotion, he slowly took stock of his own body. It felt weird. The skin did not feel right and the missing teeth was easy to notice. The one other thing he noticed was a warm body near him within the cold room. Barely cracking an eye open, he blearily gazed around until it fell on the drak next to him. This one was not the dracus he saw right before he got knocked out. He was too weak to seek out the drak's core.

"They took a lot out of you." She said softly. "Here... let me help." She moved closer, though didn't touch him. She drew from her core, which was quite powerful surprisingly, and let some of her own energy flow into him, and took any pain he might have away, so he could rest until he was healed. "I hate what this place dues to Drakiri..."

Whatever the drak said, it sounded muddled to him. Though, he did not refuse the energy being generously given to him. Greedily, he used the energy to feed into his core nearly devoted of energy. He imagined the new energy stitching away the pieces of his star back together. He could have drawn in his own power, but he was exhausted to try, and it took time for his own energy to flow in.

Whatever pain he might have had, he did not notice them disappearing.

She gave as much as she could, without affecting how she worked with others; she knew that there was a fiery colored Kainu in the next stall who would need help as well. It was enough to give a boost, and help jumpstart his recovery.

"Get good, peaceful rest, now. Esperanza should be in to heal you soon." She said.

It was enough for him to start drawing in his own energy. He was in no mood to stay awake much longer and fell back to sleep.

As he fell asleep, Elessara left a little more of her calming energy behind, and moved on to the next stall and the Kainu within. He had been terrified when being prepared for harvesting... So she had a feeling it would take some time to get him calmed down

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Elessara was correct to assume the kainu would be terrified. As soon as he became aware of himself again, he knew something was terribly wrong. His body was cold, colder than he thought he'd ever been before, and he felt something clinging to parts of his body that he was sure should have hurt. His breath came in short, fast pants as he turned his head slightly, feeling a looseness along his throat that should not have been there.

Icarus's heart galloped in his chest and it took every ounce of strength he had to even try to open his eyes--but they would not respond. In fact, he realized that he couldn't feel them moving at all. They...they'd taken his eyes?

A muffled keening sound came from the kainu and his legs twitched as if he was trying to move, but he was too panicked to coordinate his limbs to try to stand.

Elessara moved closer.

"Don't try to move... I will take your pain until Esperanza comes in to heal you." She said gently. "You will get everything back that was taken from you. You will be alright."

She laced her words with her gentle peaceful power, hoping it was enough to calm the poor thing

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Icarus's panic ebbed once the drakiri began to use her magic, but his thoughts still raced. Had the drakiri with the maw in his throat made good on his promise? Would he keep Icarus's children safe? Keep them away from these horrors? Would he ensure that they didn't meet this same fate?

His body stilled as Elessara's magic worked, his head relaxing back into place where it had been placed by the humans. His lips parted and half-clotted blood leaked from his mouth onto the sterile padding beneath him. Icarus's tongue moved and a fresh wave of revulsion and horror filled him as he realized his teeth were gone too.

Tears mixed with the fluid that already glistened on the exposed muscles of his face and he wanted to wail like a drakling, terrified and confused. But when he finally gained the strength to speak, he rasped in an unclear, shaking and muddled voice, "Alina...Mila...my sildren..."

"Everything will be restored." She repeated gently. She wished Esperanza would let her help... She couldn't fathom why the healer didn't want help healing. Perhaps she was a gloryhound... Likes the near worship she got around this terrible place.

"Don't try to speak yet... I will take your pain until you are healed."

She still felt the pain she took from Ked.... But she had built up an impressive tolerance.

His concern was less about whether he would be restored and more his fear that his children would meet the same fate. He couldn't reveal to this drakiri that they were somewhere in this building. The fewer who knew about their presence here, the less likely it was that they would be found out.

The kainu laid there, too fearful of the press of unconsciousness to draw him into sleep again, too horrified by the strain he felt in the muscles of his ribs with each breath he took.

It took two hours for Esperanza to find herself back down on the harvesting floor, a bounce in her step, her mane freshly groomed. She first peeked into the komakha's stall and found them asleep, or so it seemed anyway. It was difficult to tell when they had no eyes...ah well she'd find out soon enough.

The dracus paused when she saw Elessara farther down the hallway, a low growl rumbling in her throat as her short, cervine tail flicked in annoyance. The short fur down her back stood on end and she gave herself a light shake to dispel the irritation she felt every time she saw the other healer. If she had things her way, the drakiri would stay drugged until she could come and heal them herself. But she'd been told something about costs and the effect of the drugs through long term use--yadda yadda yadda, she didn't really care all that much.

"I see you have your hands full," she said in a blustery voice. "Let me take things from here. Which one was harvested first of these two?"

"I believe Kedryzal." She said, motioning. "The harvesters took a lot out of him. They need to be more careful."

The annoyance didn't go past her notice. Her form glitched a little, as if she was going fuzzy and indistinct, though it was subtle. She, smartly, kept her mouth shut.

Esperanza's lips twitched back from her teeth at the admonishment from the other drakiri. She knew Galithrax wanted her in this position, so they could reserve more power from the crystal, but the bitch infuriated Esperanza. She would have liked nothing better than to smack her across the face and take as much skin with it as she could. Or even better, stick her in one of these stalls and harvest that pitiful skin of hers and sell it for next to nothing, just to add insult to injury.

"They only take what they think what the risker says is worth anything," Esperanza said with a shrug as she padded over to the drakiri she assumed was named Kedryzal. They all looked the same to her without their skins, and she never took the time out of her day to learn their names.

She lifted the drakiri's arm to place her hand on the slightly slimy chest, hardly phased as the violet light filled the stall, originating from her palm.

Esperanza frowned and the light faded away with only the crossbreed's skin having been formed, and hardly at that. But she stepped away and gave her hand a light shake.

"His body is too weak to do more right now," she said. "If I try, he will die. The power I utilize draws from within, he is too weak to do more." She shook her head and let out a slight tutting sound of disappointment. "He seemed stronger to me."

"As I said, they took too much at once. Allow me to help heal him." She said. "I use a similar spell, but drawing from my own power. I still don't understand why you do not allow me to help.... It is quite a bit for a single healer to take on alone, even using the other Drakiri's strength. There's only so much I can do just taking their pain and keeping them calm..."
Her tail twitched a bit. She kept her gaze neutral, but the third eye floating between her horns seemed to turn and glare of its own accord.

At the suggestion, the fur raised along Esperanza's spine and the ends of her whiskers curled in her anger. She turned slowly to look over at Elessara, her pupils contracting to claw-scratches.

"I am the healer," she hissed. "He will be healed on my schedule. It means nothing to me if these vermin lie here screaming and writhing in agony. You will do as I say or you will join them."

Her voice shook with intensity as she took a pace toward the other drakiri, her claws scraping the concrete floor with the desire to sink them into something that would bleed.

Across the hall, Icarus saw the form of another drakiri, or what he assumed to be another of his kind. He had never seen one look like that. Bare flesh exposed to the air, smudged and smeared with dried blood, fresh glistening wherever the muscles moved.

"You could use another healing to regrow your horns faster," Esperanza said, moving Icarus's head from hand to hand before letting go, expecting him to catch himself. But the kainu's head fell to the floor with a thump and she blinked in surprise before she asked, "Now why would you do that?"

Shaking her head, Esperanza turned away from the kainu and walked across the hall to the crossbreed. Had she caught his name? She couldn't recall. But seeing him lying there she wondered if she'd been by to heal him yet. She could hardly remember anything of the night before after the late night she'd had after...it was a delight, but when she dreamed with Galithrax she didn't truly rest. The skin beneath her eyes was puffy and tender from lack of sleep, and though her mane was perfectly groomed as always, her blue eyes were just a little less bright.

She placed her hand on the crossbreed's chest and violet light shone from beneath her fingers, drawing from within the other drakiri and tapping into the new wealth of power the crystal held.

Galithrax had fed from it, but the nightmares had been working overtime to refill it. He hadn't told her the details, but this drakiri was terribly important, and she was to keep him here, whatever the cost. She had never disobeyed Galithrax and she did not intend to start now.

Ked had been in a dreamless sleep, slowly getting the energy back. It was quite enough for Esperanza to start healing. The shallow breathing he was doing quickly changed to full deep breaths. Feeling more alert, he opened his eyes to the rose dracus in front of him.

Esperanza felt the power of the crystal throb through her like a shadow to the beat of her own heart, tha-thump thump thump, tha-thump thump thump. It was almost comforting now, after years of utilizing the energy to do her bidding.

She watched as Kedryzal's breathing slowed and his eyes opened finally, looking down to meet the yellow gaze that peered up at her.

"Good morning," she said, keeping her voice low and gentle. "You sleep like a rock, did you know that?"

"Felt like it," he replied, slowly getting himself sitting up. "Sworn there was nightmares, but I don't remember them..." Ked lightly massaged his head as he tried to recall what had happened.

START OF DOWNFALL OF THE POACHERS

Upstairs on the production floor, Kedryzal had been brought to scrubdown, humans trotting over and around the crossbreed as they sprayed him down with the soap that was used to clean his pelt before harvesting. They hadn't restrained him, and had no reason to.

As the humans climbed ladders and scrubbed with their hands and long brushes, Mijhael descended from the risker's podium and stopped short of the scrubdown grate where Kedryzal stood. He waited impatiently for the humans to scatter with startled gasps and exclamations, then return to their stations as they warily looked over shoulders and around limbs to keep an eye on them. He didn't care that he unsettled them, it was neither his responsibility nor his pleasure to keep them comfortable. They worked for him, not the other way around.

"Kedryzal," Mijhael said, speaking the drakiri's name for the first time since they had first met--in fact, had he said the other's name then? He couldn't recall, it was too long ago and he had seen too many faces since then. In fact the only reason he remembered the crossbreed was that he had seen how often the drakiri spoke with Icarus. They weren't friends by any means, but they got along well enough for Mijhael to have noticed.

"I need to speak with you. When you're done here come up to my podium," the larger drakiri said. "It won't take long."

Kedryzal was quite well behaved as the humans scrubbed him down. By this point, he had a decent grasp of their language though, he was not interested in showing off. Unlike the humans, Mijhael did not unsettle him.

"After the scrub down? Sure."

Once the humans were done, Kedryzal started to walk out, doing a little shake to get the excess water off before stepping out. He tried to not shake his body to rid of the excess water as he made his way to the podium. "You wish to speak to me?"

As much as Mijhael would have liked to watch the other crossbreed to make sure he didn't stray from the podium, he kept his eyes moving around the production floor. He was wary of listening ears and prying gazes, aware that this was perhaps the most obvious place to look for anyone in the room, but it was also the most isolated since he was raised up above everyone else. If he brought Kedryzal to another part of the warehouse, someone would immediately notice and come to eavesdrop. Even now he couldn't be certain they wouldn't be overheard, but he could at least be relatively sure they wouldn't be interrupted.

When the smaller drakiri came to stand beside him on the podium, Mijhael turned his head toward him and lowered his voice to a murmur, only loud enough for the other to hear.

"Icarus is down on the harvesting floor now, I need you to pass on a message to him." He hesitated, understanding the gravity of what he was about to ask and that this was an enormous risk not only to himself but to Icarus too. If Esperanza found out that he was conspiring to free Icarus from this place, she could kill him out of spite...

"Tell him to hold on a little while longer," he said, his throat feeling tight as he repeated the words he had spoken to the kainu in his quarters. "Tell him to keep his chin up."

Hearing him whisper to Ked made him realize that the words from the Risker was only for him to hear. He was aware of the time spent between Mijhael and Icarus during his time here, but he had no idea what was going on with them. He gave Mijhael a nod, confirming he heard him. "Understood."

Mijhael was grateful that the other drakiri didn't deign to ask questions or for further clarification. Kedryzal hadn't seemed like the type to make idle conversation and he was glad to have been right.

"Go now," he said, gesturing toward the double doors that would lead him down the stairs to the harvesting floor. "You're scheduled to be harvested soon, and from what I understand the crew is working on dracus right now so that's going to take a while. You should have plenty of time to speak with Icarus before you are harvested."

Kedryzal nodded and moved to the double doors. He waited patiently for the doors to open then stepped through. He thought about what Mijhael said. He sensed the dracus for a long time, but he never saw or met him personally.

He then arrived at the harvest floor and saw the large dracus taking up two stall spaces against the wall opposite of his entrance. Since he was not being ushered into a stall right away, he took his time to see the draks and the humans on the floor. He did take the longest at the dracus before finally settling on a stall in front of the fiery kainu, Icarus.

The dracus was indeed stretched out between two stalls on the far end of the harvesting floor, with no fewer than ten humans working around him. Their chattering was loud and stern as they struggled to lift the heavy skin from his body, having to work together with the aid of another drakiri in order to lift his neck and head to free parts of it.

Icarus had already been harvested once more, but this time had forced himself to stand. He swayed often and there was a bloody smear on the wall from where he'd leaned against it a few times, but given the option of standing or laying on that disgusting pad on the floor, he chose the former.

He lifted his head when he saw another drakiri step into the stall in front of him, his belly lurching when he saw who it was.

"I don't want to see it again," he croaked, only finally able to find his voice after having suffered this experience so many times before. The thought of hearing the drakiri he had come to know over his several months here. How long had it been? He couldn't even remember that.

Ked tilted his head puzzled at what Icarus said. "Don't want to see what again?" he asked.

He closed his eyes and let his head lower down as he leaned against the wall again, his heart racing now as his anxiety doubled.

"You skinned again," he rasped. "I can't take it...I can't see it again."

He blinked as he sat in silence. "O-oh, my first time here." He had been thinking how exactly was he going to convey the Risker's words that he was surprised when Icarus spoke. "The Risker asked me to tell you this:" he waited for Icarus to pay him attention, so he will only need to say it once. "He said to hold on a little longer and to keep your chin up."

Icarus's brows tried to pull together in consternation when he heard the words that Kedryzal spoke. He knew what those words meant, he knew why Mijhael would risk having someone deliver them to him. Mijhael had told him things were going slowly going wrong but he anticipated them worsening fast...

"Gods," he breathed, feeling the stall spin around him as the blood rushed from his head. "He's going to get himself killed."

Kedryzal glanced at the dracus before focusing on Icarus. He was quietly checking in the others to ensure they could continue the conversation without anyone listening in. "You two are planning something," he said in a calm voice.

For the first time since he'd been here, Icarus felt suspicious of Kedryzal. He was terrified of being betrayed, because it wasn't his only his own life at stake if something went wrong.

"I don't know what he's planning," he said truthfully. Mijhael must have realized the same, as the Risker hadn't thought to clue him in on exactly what was happening, only that he would tell him before it happened so he could be prepared.

He heard the humans' voices at the end of the hall raise higher, and beyond that he heard the wet scraping of knife on bone. He turned his face away, gagging as he locked his knees to keep himself standing.

"Who is it this time?" he asked, not expecting the other to have an answer.

Ked decided to accept the response and not needle Icarus out for other information. He perked at the question. "If you're asking about the dracus, it's a blue long one. If I recall correctly, they were here before we were."

Icarus stared across the hallway at the drakiri in the other stall, his heart pounding in his chest now. A blue dracus...he only knew of one dracus here, it had to be Milarose. They were harvesting him now.

"I know him," he said, tasting bile in the back of his throat with how sick he felt.

He flinched as a flash of pink fur streaked between them; from the scent left behind Icarus could tell it was Esperanza, but he hadn't realized she'd even been down there. He was overwhelmed by...everything. All he wanted to do was sleep, but he knew sleep would not come to him even if he tried.

He crawled across the ground, still invisible to the drakiri around him, pulling himself closer to Kedryzal, who was trapped with Mila in his cell by Esperanza in his way. The nightgaunt was fueled only by desperation now, his will to live greater than the burning that raged through his body, opening wounds along his arms and legs that bled glowing white liquid.

Galithrax thrust his arm forward, his hand sinking deeply into Kedryzal's chest and he drew power from the drakiri with feverish need.

In Kedryzal's stall, Mila stood on his hind legs trying to see past the two dracus that crowded the entrance to the stall, his whiskers held high with anxiety as he whimpered in fear. His sister was not easily frightened, and he didn't understand what was going on. Nor did he know the drakiri in the stall beside him. All he knew was that he was in a strange place and he could smell blood, both old and fresh.

Ked had fallen silent when Esperanza came close. He was glad that she did not stop and simply walked by. The 10 minutes she had been gone, he thought about what Icarus had said. He was afraid to ask now that he was keeping a closer eye on Esperanza's movements. He sensed her coming back with 2 more with her. In fact, the cores were quite telling.

The cores felt young and when he finally saw them, they were indeed children. He blinked in surprise when one was led into his stall. He still heard Icarus and realized that he was aware of these children. In fact, as he looked more closely, he can tell by their cores that they were related to Icarus... and the dracus. The dracus part surprised him more.

"You don't want to see what's over there," he said to the child in his stall with sadness. "Nor would your parent want you to see it."

That terrible burning rose and rose and rose... Even trying to feed from Ked's energy did absolutely nothing, it was as if he was being eaten from the inside out. Like he had drank a gallon of pure bleach... starting to burn into him more. The draw of energy woke Aeshma, who lurched and struggled against the chains. It seemed he had done something... in feeding from her, he had broken the energy chains around her core, and her energy surged as she glowed

for a moment, eyes blazing as her wings re-appeared in a flare of white fire. She lurched and struggled against her bonds, huffing and panting with her tail lashing and wings flapping furiously.

Kedryzal was startled by the scream, feeling quite scared. He no longer was focused on the child in his stall and glanced out. It did not take Ked long to spot the distortion crawling closer. "You-!" He was suddenly standing when the nightgaunt was close and gasped upon feeling the hand sinking in him.

He could do nothing as the nightgaunt pulled practically his remaining energy in him.

Galithrax fed deeper and faster than he had in all his life, but the agony became unbearable as he lay there writhing on the ground. His spine bowed with it, contorting his body into unnatural positions, his hand falling out from Kedryzal's body before he had drained the drakiri entirely.

Mila cowered at the volume of the disembodied scream, crying out as it hurt his ears and as he watched the stranger drakiri fall to the ground. Was he dead?

Ked breathing was barely there and with his low energy, he was close to death. He had very little time to think as he fell to the floor. With what little energy he had, he tried to remain aware of his surroundings as worry filled his emotions. Seeing the nightgaunt had told him that something was very wrong, and he had no time to play pretend anymore.

He tried to use the child's core to help draw out his real body, but it was small and unfamiliar to him. It was easily lost among the other cores. That was when he finally felt void. It was like feeling a small black hole, and he grabbed a tight hold of it. The rest came easy and his real body was formed above his drak's body.

It was refreshing to finally let his real body free, feeling all the energy that he carefully put away come rushing out to fill him up. Once he became aware, he realized that he was still in the stall... that was now too small for him. Briefly ensuring that the stall next to him was empty, he broke the wall with ease to get more room. "Ok, that's a slight miscalculation on my part..." he muttered to himself.

In the stall with Kedryzal, Mila had seen his sister's body fall to the ground and then been crushed against the wall of the stall by a creature that grew from nothing. He screamed, and with each shallow breath his small chest could pull past his sheer panic, he screamed again.

Ked heard the child screams and moved out of the way to make room for the poor child. He had no idea what to do with him, but he had bigger things to worry about. Sensing that someone was handling Esperanza, he turned his focus to above: the nightgaunt. Picking a spot in the ceiling that had the least amount of draks, he pressed his hands there and pushed. With his real body, forcing a ceiling to move was easy. As soon as he made a hole big enough, he squeezed himself through and looked to locate the nightgaunt.

Kedryzal was inspecting his surroundings and the cores of the drakiris as he used his floating ability to help pull his own body through the floor. There was a lot of chaos, and he was quietly delighted by it. Now, he simply needed to help make this miserable ring fall.

A familiar core ran past him, and he noticed it was the Risker. The Risker had returned from the upstairs room and was trying to remove the rubble to the double doors. Seeing that the nightmare-dracus cross struggle with them, Kedryzal approached him. "Hey." He got next to the Risker, making sure to get his attention. "I made a hole," he gestured to the said hole. "Go find Icarus, the kids are with him."

After sending the Risker on his way, he refocused on a bigger fish to fry. "Hey you!" he yelled at the nightgaunt once he's close. "Let's take this outside." Just as he said it, he used his magic to make a mini sun to blast open a hole in the wall away from the drakiri. He then lunged at the nightgaunt, grabbing him and forcing him out of the building.

Mijhael, who hadn't said a word to the massive creature that flagged him down, dove for the hole in the floor. He scrabbled to a stop as some sense of his told him to wait and he saw bodies moving below, one massive and black, the other black and white, though she moved too quickly for him to get a good look.

Outside, the nightgaunt had been thrown to the ground, but he rolled with the momentum and landed mostly upright, hissing in pain as his wounds tore even more. Galithrax's jaws parted and he began drawing from the beast that had assaulted him, even as white and black ichor flowed from between his teeth, burning the grass where it landed.

After Kedryzal threw Galithrax out, he was quick to work on removing the nightgaunt's ability to shriek at him. Once he got close enough, he settled on the simple act of crushing the throat with his hands. Unfortunately, the close quarters and the long struggle of getting his hands around the neck meant he was exposed to the shriek for awhile. He realized belatedly that his hearing was shot and echoed the shrieks in ringing sounds.

Despite seeing the damage and the fact the nightgaunt was throwing up whatever that was bothering him, Ked was not going to let him go. Doing so meant another ring like this one would bound to happen. It took a few scuffles for Ked to find the right size to restrain the wild limbs and keep his weight on the nightgaunt to prevent him from moving out from under him. Once the nightgaunt was bound under him, he took the time to think. He had no idea that the entity he was fighting against was a nightgaunt nor how to deal with him.

Galithrax fought like a cornered, wild animal--which in many senses he was. He had been forced into the physical realm, which would have been a terribly vulnerable position for any of his kind to find themselves in. But on top of that, he had been poisoned by the energy he had consumed from that bitch drakiri. He would have Esperanza kill her in due time, as he wanted nothing to do with her. But first he had to get away from here, away from this creature that pinned him to the ground.

The nightgaunt's panic mounted when Kedryzal's hands had squeezed his throat, crushing his windpipe and removing his ability to shriek--that had been his main defense. The one sure way he could buy himself time to escape. But he couldn't run when his arms and legs were damaged like this. His wings hung in tatters from his shoulder blades, and as hard as he tried he could not lift them.

He bared his teeth in an ugly snarl, gums bleeding and raw from where the white energy had burned them. He would have spit at Kedryzal if his lips had been intact enough to do so, but as he lay there struggling to even breathe past the fingers around his thin throat, he realized something terrifying.

He couldn't feel his legs. And his arms felt terribly heavy.

I'm dying. The thought rang in his own head like a bell, and he couldn't unring it. His fear mounted and he thrashed under Kedryzal, teeth snapping together as he twisted his head so he could bite at the arms that held him.

He knew he had a way out...a last-ditch effort to preserve his life. But what kind of life would that be? Suffering in a mortal body until it shriveled and died of old age? The thought alone made Galithrax want to just let the beast kill him. But his self-preservation instinct won out over all else.

The nightgaunt became eerily still for a long moment before he began to rapidly shrink, giving him time enough to draw a gasping breath as his throat shrank. He drew his hind legs up once he finally had feeling in them again and kicked Kedryzal in the stomach as hard as he could, twisting his body and clawing at the grass to try to get away, even as his body's shape changed dramatically.

The sound of Valka's approach came moments later, as he tore past and towards Mijhael.

"Tell me who has those Bezoars, if you know." He said. "So I can remove them. The sooner the better." Very matter of fact, no nonsense. "If the pink bitch wakes up and activates them, I may not be able to remove them all, because when activated, they do have an effect on me."

He hadn't noticed Galithrax yet, or Kedryzal; he was more interested in trying to make sure any who wanted to escape could safely.

The stillness of the nightgaunt did make Ked pause before feeling him shrink. He was a bit stunned to react and got the swift kick in the stomach. Rubbing the area, he got himself up and watched the shape change in front of him. He made sure to get a grasp of his core, so he would be easy to follow.

As soon as Galithrax felt the weight lift off of him, he shot forward on unsteady limbs. His gait was a mess as he ran, as he had to switch from the mindset of walking on two limbs to sprinting on four very rapidly, but he managed it well enough to escape into a thicket of trees.

The last of the transformations left him feeling small and vulnerable in this body, feeling the oppressive cold of the night air against his short, coarse fur. His blood felt icy cold where it was smeared across his body, but at least the incessant burning had stopped.

His heart thundered in his chest and his lungs burned with each desperate gasp for air. These unfamiliar, short legs had hardly carried him any distance at all before he staggered and fell against an old, gnarled tree.

Galithrax gasped, his vision darkening around the edges as he felt his heart pump blood through his body in a way he had never before experienced. It made him nauseas, and he retched as his throat strained to push out a congealed mass of blood and pink slime.

Kedryzal only went as far as necessary to see the newly formed drakiri had rested and ensure that he won't forget the core before heading back to the ring. Once he got back, he surveyed the area. He could see Elessara healing the injured draks, and Mijhael doing control damage. He also blinked at the large black cross that he vaguely recalled that helped started the attack.

Ignoring Mijhael and Valka, he walked to Elessara. Once he waited for her to be done with the drak before getting her attention, he said "When you're done with them, can you help me with my hearing? It got destroyed from fighting that."

In the forest, Galithrax walked on cold, numb feet that still somehow managed to ache. He had to get away as quickly as possible, he knew someone would be after him soon, and if they couldn't track him by scent alone, he was sure the blood that dripped thickly from his legs and his mouth would be more than enough to follow.

He collapsed within a mile of the compound, wheezing as his breath rasped in and out in shallow pants, bloody foam bubbling at his mouth and in his nostrils.

Elesarra nodded to Kedryzal. "It should be a simple repair." She said, closing her eyes and focusing, then pulling from the energy she had within to repair the damage. "There. Can you help Mijhael bring Drakiri here for Valka to remove the stones from?"

Ked was impressed that his hearing was restored. "Yeah, that's no problem." With the task at hand, he turned and looked for Mijael. The former risker was easy to find. "Where do you want me to go to get draks for Elessara?"

Mijhael was busy pushing at a piece of machinery that had been knocked against one of the walls, pinning two of the black primals in place. He needed to get them out, but he wasn't sure if they were alive, dead, or if they would want to try to kill him once they were freed.

"Stay here with me," he said, frowning as he looked up at the other. He didn't recognize him at all, and in fact had no idea where he'd come from. But he was big, so that meant he could help lift things. "These primals may try to attack when we free them. If that happens, we will kill them. Understood?"

"Understood." He then went to assist Mijhael in moving the machinery. It did not take long for him to move it aside, allowing the primals to escape.

The first primal climbed out from beneath the machinery and stumbled away, hacking and coughing as white dust settled around them. The second, however, crawled out and immediately rounded on Mijhael, lashing out at him.

The former Risker had been about to drop the machinery, legs trembling from the effort of holding it up, when he felt the sting of claws rake against his shoulder.

He rounded on the primal and leaped on him, his maw stretching open to reveal the vivid pink flesh inside. The primal recoiled in horror as Mijhael grabbed him by the mane and held him in place, the teeth that lined either side of his maw piercing flesh and clamping down hard until he tore away with the primal's left arm and half of the flesh that covered his ribcage dangling from his teeth. The teeth shifted and shuffled until the meat and bone were all tucked into his maw, and Mijhael realized just how ravenous he was.

"Anyone else with half a mind to fight us will meet the same fate!" he snapped, raising his voice to be heard by all on the production floor. "We are here to help get you out of here."

Valka, at least, didn't seem disturbed.
"Heh, brutal." He said, with a smirk. "Need help moving anything else?"

Ked simply glanced at Mijhael, uncaring that he ended up with the whole machinery. Seeing that the situation was dealt with, he set the machine down easy. "Well, I do need to eventually get my drak's body. Kind of left it in the harvest area in a hurry."

Mijhael watched the primal he'd taken a bite out of stagger and fall to the ground and he let out an angry huff before turning back to look at Valka and the stranger.

"Go down to the harvesting floor, make sure there weren't any other drakiri down there being harvested," he said. "They'll need to be healed right away if that's the case, and they'll likely be scared."

He looked around at the drakiri who remained in the warehouse. He saw a lot of numb expressions and glassy eyes, shock settling in most likely, though he could tell which of them had been there voluntarily. They looked around with suspicion in their eyes, as if challenging anyone to come near enough to question them.

"Watch each other's backs," he added lowly. "Don't trust anyone."

Valka nodded as he headed down to the harvesting floor, to see if there were any down there that needed healing. He could tell Elesarra was getting tired, with all the healing she was doing. He hoped there weren't too many down there.

Kedryzal also noticed Elessara was getting tired as well. He decided to detour to her. "Do you need energy? I have plenty to spare."

"I have expended a lot, yes... Many needed healing. If you can help, I'd greatly appreciate it." She said to him softly.

Ked wasted no time after her consent to share his energy to her. "Let me know when you have enough."

Ked stopped sharing his energy once she confirmed to have enough. He looked over to see that the others had gone ahead. Deciding to take the short cut through the hole he made, he flew down. He did hear Valka as he descended down to the harvest floor. His main concern was the drakiri and his own body, but he would help if the others needed him.

Due to the electricity being out, he brought out his magic to make a small sun to light up the area.

Vyno stiffened at the accusing snarl and turned to look down the lengthy hallway, the fur rising along his spine. He didn't know who this drakiri was, but from the sound of that growl, he assumed one of the ones responsible for the destruction of this warehouse.

"I am Vyno," he agreed, appearing more collected than he felt. "I wouldn't say willing was the right word..."

He narrowed his eyes in the bright light that suddenly flooded the room and he backed away slowly. "I came down here because I heard someone in pain, that's all. I wanted to help."

He still stood on his back legs, lowering his head and narrowing his eyes. "What reason did you have to work here? In this place?" He asked, with a heavy growl. "Let me guess. Coin, right? You were paid I assume, to rip away the lives and freedom of others. Murdering families, ripping Drakiri away from their home."

He still stared him right in the eyes, looking for anything there... Was he just trying to save his own skin? Or was he actually trying to help?

Ked looked about and only saw his own body still where he left it. He went over to check on the body, ensuring that it was alright. He then started to give the body energy that was ripped out of

it. Feeling confident that the body will be fine, he carefully picked it up and flew out. He brought the body to Elessara to ensure that it was fine before inhabiting it.

Vyno opened his mouth to respond, but no sound came out. He hesitated, and then he really thought about his answer. He'd been paid, yes, but he still had most of what had been given to him. Coin had never been his purpose in life. In fact, he couldn't really say he'd ever had much of a purpose--not until this place.

"I thought I'd found a place to belong," he said, feeling an ache in his heart when he realized how wrong he had been. "I was promised that I would work for one of the greatest empires in the world, that I would be helping to build something from the ground up. It started out okay, just a few drakiri who volunteered for it, who knew what they were getting into. I didn't realize what it was becoming until it was too late for me to back out."

He was quiet for a moment, and despite seeing the massive drakiri at the other end of the hall who truly looked like he wanted to kill him, Vyno was no longer afraid. The fear had left him, and he held his head high.

"I did what I could to keep things in order," he said. "I won't say I was good, I won't say I fought to stop what was happening, because I didn't. I felt like I couldn't. I had no real power, I had no voice here. No one listened to me because I am young and inexperienced...but I tried."

Valka listened, before dropping back to all fours. His gaze was still fierce, but at least he didn't look murderous anymore.

"If you want to make a difference, then help." He said. "I will take care of the Drakiri down here." He was still suspicious, but this Drakiri seemed to be telling the truth. "If there are any more living Drakiri down here, take them to Elesarra. If you can not, call her down here so she can heal them. She may need to come down here anyway."

Elesarra checked his body over, finding that it only needed basic healing. She then nodded. "You can inhabit it safely." She said. "It might be a bit stiff from being so exhausted and laying in one spot for so long, though."

Ked nodded, relieved that it was fine. He thought about waiting until his strength was not needed, but decided against it. There was already Valka, and he could bring himself out if it was necessary. Decision made, he then slowly entered his drak's body.

Vyno listened to Valka, knowing that if he were to refuse, it would mean death. He wasn't afraid of that as a possibility anymore, but he hadn't lost the drive to be useful. He wanted that more than anything, and if this was his moment to make that happen, he wasn't going to waste it.

"I've checked the other stalls, it seems if there were any drakiri down here, they've made their way up to the first floor," he said. He gestured with his tail to the rock slab and said, "Someone

is behind here, though, I was trying to find a way to let them out. I heard them wailing and I thought they might have been pinned when the floor caved in."

"I put them there." He said, matter of factly. "Because they were the one behind this entire operation, and they tore the throat out of a child with no remorse. They are staying down here, to think about what they've done."

He paused, looking back at Vyno. "You are still young. You have time to find somewhere to belong. Somebody to care about you for more than just how you can be of use. Remember that. You are not what you were manipulated into being. Ah, do you have one of those stone Bezoers in you? I can remove it, safely."

It was nice to wake up in his drak body with full energy and without someone leaching it out. What wasn't so nice was the soreness and stiff body to stretch out. He suppose he was glad for the warning and took his time to get his body back to shape.

"I think I've gotten everybody here healed, unless we find others." Elesarra said, settling to sit. She was more tired than she realized, though the gifted energy massively helped.

"Yeah. Guess we're waiting on Mijael and Valka." He looked over to check on the injured nightgaunt turned drak progress. He could sense that he was slowly trying to get away. "We do have another to figure out what to do with."

Vyno's eyes widened as he glanced at the rock again, realizing who was behind the wall. Esperanza...she'd been trapped here, and she'd attacked a child? No, she'd ripped the child's throat out, could that be what had left so much blood down here? There were only two children in this warehouse...oh gods.

He felt sick to think of one of the children he'd spent so long trying to look after being hurt, let alone killed.

"I have one, yes," he said, his voice distant as he tried to push away the disgust he felt. "Thank you...for your help. And for the words you've shared with me. I regret what I've done here, I regret what I allowed to happen. There are so many things I would do differently if I could."

His ear twitched back when he heard something that didn't belong--something that came from behind the rock slab wall. It was a sharp cry, but from a voice that sounded terribly young and small as it wailed feebly.

"Did you lock her in there with someone?" he asked, looking up at Valka.

Valka was about to speak, when his antennae flicked up at the question and the cry. He lowered his head and flicked his antennae in that direction. "No... No, I did not.... She was alone, I made sure of that because I did not want her hurting any others." He went over and removed the slab

with shocking ease for the size of it. He grunted from the effort it took, but it seemed more like a body builder lifting a slightly heavy weight than a hulking monster moving a giant slab. He pulled the door open to look inside. He was ready to bite Esperanza's throat out if she tried anything. As an afterthought, he quickly removed the Bezoer. Without warning, a small tendril flicking down Vyno's throat and pulling it free. Simply in case she lashed out and activated them.

"Sorry for the lack of warning, but I didn't want her to activate the thing." He explained, before peering in to try to figure out where that tiny wailing was coming from.

Vyno reared in surprise and gagged as the stone was yanked from his belly, turning away as he was rather suddenly sick. He coughed and spat, taking a shallow breath before he cleared his throat and gave himself a shake.

"I understand," he said, though it made him feel no less violated.

Inside the dark stall, Valka would see deep scratch marks that created furrows in the concrete by the stone, bloody handprints smeared on the walls near the ceiling where Esperanza had clearly tried to claw her way out, even after she had scratched her claws down to bleeding nubs.

Esperanza lay against the back wall, her rose-colored fur slick witih sweat, her once-pristine, white mane matted with blood in various stages of drying. She had one leg lifted and was bent forward to lick the bundle of dark fur that nursed at her belly, its tiny wings still underdeveloped and folded against its back.

Movement not far from Esperanza's back leg showed another bundle of fur--this one white with red streaks of afterbirth still showing on her wet fur. The babe writhed on the ground, blind and deaf as she tried to find her mother's milk, but the second she got close, Esperanza's lips pulled back in a ferocious snarl and she kicked the drakling hard enough to send it flailing away from her, rolling to a stop on its back with its little mouth open in a silent, pitiful wail.

Esperanza picked up the drakling that nursed from her, her teeth gentle against its soft body, and settled herself as far from the other babe as she could. She didn't even seem to have noticed the slab of rock being moved or the drakiri that stood watching her.

Valka let out a savage snarl as she kicked that poor child, leaping in to clamp his jaws on her throat. "You do NOT HURT CHILDREN." He roared through the bite, shaking the room with his ferocity.

"Take the child she kicked to Elesarra." he said to Vyno, still holding her throat, speaking a bit muffled around it. "It's probably injured." He wanted to bite her throat out right there, tear her apart and shit on her disgusting remains, but that was too quick. She deserved to suffer. He reached for the tiny bundle that was nursing to take it away... because she was not going to keep that child. She was not going to turn it into a monster. He'd take it in himself if he had to.

Esperanza became aware of the intruder an instant before his teeth were around her throat. She snarled viciously, bringing her hind legs up to kick at anything she could reach, her back claws digging in wherever they could find purchase. If Valka hadn't moved the child, she would have sent it flying.

The sounds the dracus made didn't sound like anything a drakiri had ever made...she sounded unhinged, completely feral, and it frightened Vyno to hear them. This was nothing like the dignified dracus Vyno had seen stroll through these halls, confident in her place as the owner of this empire.

"I didn't know she was pregnant," he breathed, shaking his head in awe and dismay.

The nightmare darted forward to pick the discarded child up, worried that he would put too much pressure with his teeth and hurt her, but he did his best and hurried to the stairway that he had painstakingly cleared.

"Neither did I." He still spoke through his mouthful of bloody sweaty throat.

Valka snarled and bit down harder, but not enough to cut anything important. He wanted to make sure she wouldn't escape that cell he had thrown her in, and that he could take the child without it being hurt. He only used the front teeth, not the deadly slicing back teeth. He soon had the newborn wrapped gently in a Tendril of Void since his mouth was occupied and walking with it in a forepaw would have been... well... difficult. He didn't seem to care about her claws raking at his side, or one catching between the plates and causing a small cut. Nothing of consequence.

Seeing Vyno with the child, Elesarra moved over quickly. "The poor thing... it's hurt, what happened?" She asked, immediately focusing her energy on the little one. "Bruising... likely would have died of internal bleeding within the hour... who could have done this to a newborn?"

Kedryzal saw Vyno with the newborn as well and followed. He had sensed something about the child and needed closer inspection. He gave a quiet sigh, realizing why upon seeing the child's core. "Esperanza."

Esperanza's voice raised into a warbling screech as she saw her child being moved away from her. She didn't even feel the teeth in her throat, she was so far gone. Her hind legs wheeled against Valka and she scraped at his throat through his mane with her blunt claws, achieving nothing more than scraping the scabs off the stumps and smearing blood onto the drakiri.

She twisted her head to the side, her teeth scraping harmlessly against the plates on his skull as she struggled and fought, her eyes bloodshot from the sheer force of her screaming.

Vyno handed the child over and took a step back, looking over at Kedryzal as he walked toward them, revealing the name of the drakiri who had birthed the child. He didn't know how the

crossbreed could have guessed that, the child looked nothing like her, but he supposed there had been many things that day that he didn't understand...

"Valka and I found her with two babes down in the stalls," he explained further. "She...she kicked this one when it got close, looking for milk. Valka will bring the other one as soon as he's dealt with her."

He kept that bite firm, gently handling the child to move it further away from Esperanza, then out the door and setting it aside. He then reared and throw her down hard enough to stun her, before backing out quickly and slamming the door shut. If she tried to jump out in the process... well. She got a facefull of door. He didn't care. Perhaps he would have normally, but he hated this Drakiri. But that was just how it was. He'd taken eggs from members of his squad, before... though the memories were fuzzy. Of course they had known ahead of time that the eggs belonged to the King, and he was delivering them to what they would be in the future. At least, until he'd learned otherwise.

Taking the child away would hurt, of course... but the life it would have, would be far better than with this psychotic manipulative bitch.

Ked didn't say it though his body conveyed the quiet brokenness. If he had any hope of Esperanza liking him however unlikely he tried to tell himself, it was quietly crushed upon seeing the newborn. He wondered what the other child looked like as he tried to gently caress the newborn.

Esperanza was quiet for all of two seconds before she rolled to her feet and leaped at the door, her eyes wild as she tried to reach for her child. She screamed and scratched viciously at the base of the stone slab, throwing herself against it with all of her weight behind her. She was not small for a dracus, nor was she large.

She beat against the stone, tore at her own mane and dragged her bloody fingers down her face as she wailed in panic and grief.

Upstairs, Vyno was spared hearing Esperanza's meltdown as he looked at the child with warmth in his eyes. That warmth slowly turned to worry, though, as he looked up at Elessara.

"Who will take care of them?" he asked, keeping his voice low. "Surely she can't...she's feral, she's completely lost the plot."

Valka threw the slab back in place roughly, before going up the stairs with the second baby wrapped in his tendril. He made his decision... he was taking it back with him. Possibly even both.

"I can ..." Though she recognized the warmth. "And you can help, if you'd like." She said softly. "I imagine we don't have a wetnurse, or any formula here? Would you know where any is? Or how to get it?"

She inspected the baby. "It's... tiny. Premature, likely by a couple weeks. It seems healthy other than the injuries it got by being rejected." Which she had thankfully healed... but without milk it wouldn't last long.

Click clacking of claws could be heard as Valka came back with the other, holding it out so Elesarra could inspect it. "It doesn't seem hurt. But it's very small. The pink whore downstairs might need some healing. She's completely snapped. Only reason I haven't ripped her apart yet is she deserves to suffer for what she did. But if she's too feral to realize it's punishment, then I'll simply gut her and be done with it.

Vyno didn't know what a wetnurse was, though he could infer by the questions that followed. He glanced back as Vyno brought the other infant forward for the healer to inspect as well, and he frowned softly.

"I don't know anything about caring for children," he said. "But...if you're able to heal a newborn and all these drakiri up here, couldn't you try to heal her mind? Esperanza, I mean. She's...she's psychotic, I'm well aware of that. Leaving the draklings with her would be irresponsible. But if she's just given birth, she'll have a ready supply of milk, won't she? We wouldn't need to find formula for them if we could get her in a stable state of mind so she can at least nurse them."

He'd seen her reject the little white one and knew that she wouldn't want to nurse them both, but he didn't know if that was because of her current state or if that would persist even after she was repaired...

"I can try, but it would be dangerous to leave them around her, especially with that rejection." Elesarra said. "It isn't guaranteed to work, and may take some time. I can induce lactation with a spell, however, in the meantime. That's not too hard."

"I will take the little black one.... Since my body is Drakiri, does this mean I can do this... milk thing? I am hermaphroditic." Likely a surprise, because he smelled quite masculine, and sounded very masculine as well with that growling voice.

"It's an easy spell, just a release of a hormone." She said. "I will perform the spell, make sure the little ones eat, and then go and do that healing."

"Perform it on me, I can feed them while you heal."

She nodded, before pausing, and looking at Vyno. "I'll take care of you." She said, placing her paw on his shoulder. It glitched a little. It was clear by her tone that.. well... he'd been adopted.

Valka lay down and waited for the spell to be performed. It was a strange new experience... and the rush of hormones made him shake his head a few times, but the plating on his lower belly separated out, and the scent of milk would be enough to tell the little ones where food was.

As soon as he stopped poking at the teats with a rather confused look.

"These things do not exist where I come from. It is as if I have turned into some sort of Vespid! But it isn't a substance that is made into honey. And it doesn't come from glands in my tail."

Vyno blinked in surprise when Elessara placed her paw on him, not only because he was alarmed that she would want to take care of him, but because he...really wasn't used to being touched. By anyone, really. He had been so separated from everyone else in this place that he hadn't realized how nice it was even to feel a hand on his shoulder...

"Thank you," he said, looking away in embarassment.

He looked down at the children as they crawled together to find the source of the scent of milk and began to hungrily nurse. They looked about the same size, so at least they couldn't bully each other away from the milk. Kids did that, right?

Vyno tried to listen to what Valka said, but there were many unfamiliar words and he gave his head a little shake.

"There's a lot to get done here still," he said. "This isn't a place for newborns, there's so much dust in the air and on the ground. Once they're fed we should find somewhere for them to go."

"I can take them with me, back to my den." Valka said. "Icarus has experience with young ones, and while I have never raised a nymph of my own, I have enough instinct to do so."

He had to help them get to the right spot due to his massive size, and almost worried their little mouths wouldn't fit ...

The sound he produced when they latched on was hilarious coming out of something so big, almost a squeak. That felt so weird. He shook his head again, and simply made sure they both got enough. All of this was weird... but they did need it.

Vyno couldn't help the small laugh that escaped him at the sound the massive drakiri made, and he moved around to help nudge the small black one aside so the white one could fit better into the space they had available. They smelled warm now, though they could both certainly use a proper bath.

"This is the first time I've ever seen draklings in person," he said. "Even as a babe myself, I had no siblings. Not to my knowledge, anyway."

She let out a breath, with a sigh. Now, it was time to FULLY focus on healing, pouring everything she had into it. She was thankful for Ked's offering of energy. It seemed very much needed..... And she hoped it would work. Esperanza would have to stay here as a prisoner, but... even Elesarra the Merciful felt she deserved it. She hadn't forgotten how she was treated, and how little Esperanza cared about those she hurt.

She felt close to passing out by the time she was done. Wounds of the mind... were so much harder to heal. And took much more careful work. Once done, she simply settled where she was, to rest for a time, her eyes closing. She didn't sleep, but she simply rested for a few; because there was still more to be done. A lot of displaced Drakiri that would need help. And Vyno, who would need guidance.

Kedryzel was quiet throughout the interactions between Vyno, Elessara, and Valka. When Valka brought up the second newborn, he was inspecting the core. He frowned upon finding that there was a different father for that child. Once the two newborns were feeding from Valka, Ked moved a little closer to see them better. He was amused by the squeak the large drakiri made when the newborns started to feed.

He gave a sigh upon seeing the newborns, now having a better understanding of what happened. "I suppose I should mention who the fathers are..." This was not going to be easy.

"You are the father of one." Valka said, matter of factly. "Scent. Energy... they tell me that much. But the other is not. I don't recognize the scent, or the energy. How you could have brought yourself to stick your dick in that disgusting whore, I will never know, but to each their own." he shrugged a large shoulder. "Some have a taste for psycho bitch."

Valka had successfully stunned Ked to silence and he looked away in unease and trying to conceal the blush. "It was a, uh, low moment I admit." He wanted to say more but nothing came to mind. "Well, anyways, the other is from a creature that seemingly materialized in the ground floor. He was connected to Esperanza for a long time."

"The dark force Aeshma mentioned..." He said, thoughtfully. "It does feel dark. I can take this one back with me. I can care for the other one as well... if you want no connection to the bitch, or do not have the experience to care for a tiny nymph."

He was used to calling babies nymphs.

Ked nodded. "The dark force, yes. He been eating off my energy the entire time I was here. It's harder to resist her when one's low in energy and suffering. Well, I had a fight with him and he did something unexpected. He transformed himself into a wolf-ish looking cross drakiri. He's slowly moving away in that direction." He pointed out the rough area he sensed the core.

He let out a breath. "Honestly, I don't know. I need some time to process the events that happened and see how the newborns are doing."

"Judging by the bitch's rejection of one nymph and accepting of the other... It is safe to say that dark thing may have been what was part of the driving force. Strange that it would transform. I will find somewhere to imprison the bitch that isn't here.... and somewhere else entirely to imprison that thing.. Or kill it. Either way. Could just kill both and be done with it. I will care for the nymphs for a time... if you want yours, you can return and take it with you at any time. Once we are done here, I can show you to my den."

Ked was feeling the exhaustion and decided not to add more information. What Valka stated was correct, and Ked accepted what he said about the nymphs. "I'll likely to stick around the den for awhile." He found a nice area to lie down till he needed to get up and move.

Vyno stood quietly as revelations were had and connections were drawn. He didn't know what this dark aura was, but if it had something to do with these children, he was very glad Valka and Kedryzal agreed to keep them separated.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly before giving himself a hard shake.

"I can't imagine the Risk--Mijhael will want to leave before this mess is cleared out and the drakiri here have somewhere to go," Vyno said, looking over his shoulder to see Mijhael offering water from a bucket to a dusty, bloody and bruised sprite. "He looks mean and crude but he cares more than he lets on."

Mijhael's head snapped up and he glowered at Vyno before shouting only loud enough to be heard, "I can hear you, you oaf!"

Valka nodded. "He and Elesarra can continue to help here. You can follow me back to my den, so you know the way back and forth. Those who don't have homes to return to, you can bring to me and I will help them find somewhere. I am sure Aeshma will benefit from the belief of others around her as well... She tries to hide her true nature, but she's terrible at it." He smirked a bit.

He had Elesarra teach him the spell to induce lactation, before motioning to Vyno to follow him. He didn't need to run this time... There was no pressing need to get somewhere fast, Mihjael and Elesarra had the place handled. He could deal with her later.

To Ked, he said "How good are you at tracking? Once you have taken care of the thing that was within Esperanza, and found somewhere to put it where it can't escape, find me. I will take care of the bitch later. I need to do some preparation and get some supplies to keep her contained."

Ked was quiet as he listened to what Vyno said. He was amused by Mijhael shouting at Vyno for it. He lifted up his head when he was spoken to. "I track by your core. When I'm familiar with someone's core, I only need to focus on it and follow until I get there. Or someone else's if it's

more likely to be at your den. I'll need ideas for what to do with the escaped being... but I'll look into the energy Esperanza has." He slowly got up to go down to where Esperanza was trapped in. He was considering Elessara's help with the energy.

Vyno carried the little white newborn, who squirmed at first when he picked her up, but settled after a few moments. He marveled at how small she was, how delicate between his jaws. He held her around her middle because her neck had seemed so fragile, he couldn't imagine carrying anything by something so thin and delicate...

He listened to Valka as they walked, wishing he had more information to offer about Esperanza. She had been terribly reclusive toward him, preferring to let him handle the day-to-day tasks while she handled bigger picture items. Whatever that meant, he wasn't sure, but he certainly hadn't enjoyed their interactions.

"Then finding me should be easy." He said with a nod.

He carried the little black newborn with a tendril, nestled in his mane. He moved with surprising smoothness for something so big.

"They... have two different fathers." He said, settling nearby. "The white one was sired by Kedryzal. That black one... I don't know the name of the sire, but it was a dark entity..." A nervous growl and hiss made him pause and turn to look at the dreameater nymph, who was huddled as far from the babies as they could get. Their head was low and wings lifted and shivering. Something about that energy rubbed the dreameater baby the wrong way... and they did not like. "What's gotten into you?" He wondered. "And I didn't know it existed either... but I have a Drakiri body, and apparently I can make this milk stuff."

Icarus didn't know what entity Valka spoke of, and in all honesty he didn't really care. He felt those children against his belly like his very own, and as he looked at Alina and Mila as they slept peacefully side by side, his eyes filled with a warmth only a parent could know.

"I'm glad the child will know at least one of her parents," he said finally. "It is unfortunate the other comes from such uncertain lineage, but...she will be loved and cared for regardless."

"Well, they're ours now." Valka said. It seemed he'd gained a fondness for the little ones as well. "Kedryzal will likely come to visit from time to time, he says he is able track one's 'core'... whatever that means. Either way... Vyno is going to be working with Elesarra and Mijhael to help those who are displaced get back home, or those that no longer have homes find homes. I don't think that ring is coming back."

He finally went over to try to calm the Dreameater nymph, who was still shivering and staring towards the little black newborn.

Meanwhile, Kedryzal got himself down to where Elessara was. "Hey, how is the, uh,... healing going?"

"I did what I could, but I can't move the slab to check. The giant black Drakiri moved it." She said. "I had to sedate her with a spell."

Ked looked over the slab and checked to see if Esprenza was awake or not. "So, do you need this moved?"

She shook her head. "I don't want to risk her getting out and hurting anybody." She said. "I think the big one had a plan for her, he said he would be back to deal with her, but we can't risk her getting free. For now, let's put something for her to eat with her."

Ked nodded. "Alright. I assume you know where the food may be located?"

She nodded, finally getting up and going to make some food, something that wouldn't go bad right away, and left it there.

"I have done what I can. I will see if any others need healing." She gave him a gentle smile. "Thank you for your help. The... chaos... that happened was entirely unexpected."

"It was. Though I knew something was wrong when the dark being showed up in front of me and starts eating my energy. I guess I have to thank Valka for showing up when he did so I can come out proper."

"I heard all the screeching. Several Drakiri had to have their hearing restored." She said. "Valka told me about an abandoned town to the north of here, in the mountains. Between here and his den... Maybe you can help take displaced Drakiri without homes to return over there? So they don't have to stay in this place."

Ked nodded. "That's a good idea. Speaking of displaced Drakiri, the dark being had transformed into a drakiri and currently moving away from here, slowly. We need to do something about him."

"We can catch him, I can seal him in a stasis for a time... I think I have an idea on where to put him so he won't be a danger anymore." Elesarra said.

"We might as well do that now before he gets too far and figure out how to heal."

"Lead the way." She said, preparing to follow. "Things are stable here, nobody is in critical condition."

Ked started walking out of the building, making sure to at least let Mijhael know that they're going out to take care of a runaway.

Showing Elessara where Nightmare Q'lin cross was easy enough. He eventually pointed him out when they started to get close.

The only thing that had kept Galithrax moving was the knowledge that someone would come for him at any moment. He doubted the creature that attacked him would just let him get away, and though he had tried to veery away from the path he had trod to cause confusion, he had to consistently stop to lean against trees for support.

His chest and throat burned, his mouth was full of something foul that tasted metallic. His vision went in and out of focus before it had finally settled on permanently blurred, and that too caused great strain as he tried to navigate this mortal plain.

The sound of approaching footsteps had Galithrax on his feet in an instant. He bared his teeth in a silent snarl and turned, hobbling away as quickly as his aching, weary legs would allow.

Elesarra tore ran around to block him from getting too far, nodding to Ked. She fired off a spell to slow him down and sedate him. They couldn't let him get too far... and couldn't let him get away. He was too dangerous.

Ked approached from behind. He was ensuring to block the drakiri's progress of escaping and willing to attack if necessary.

Galithrax snarled when Elessara ran into his path, turning halfway when he heard the drakiri behind him. His eyes widened and his nostrils flared in rage as he recognized the filthy pelt of the mongrel that had started this.

"You!" he raged, twisting toward the red crossbreed with murder in his seafoam green eyes. But when Elessara's sedation spell hit, he staggered and then sagged to the ground, his long teeth still bared even in his sedated state.

She trotted up closer. "I think he blames you somehow." She said, inspecting the Nightgaunt turned Drakiri. "Even though it was his own fault for trying to feed on a Goddess of Purity."

"He probably blames me for making him become mortal," he said, walking up as well. "I put up quite a fight back there."

"We should seal his power, to avoid it ever growing strong enough for him to regain what he once was." Elesarra said. "I know basic binding." She moved closer. "But I will need to prepare it beforehand. I have an idea of where to put him in the meantime."

"Do you want me to carry him then?" Ked asked as he inspected the drakiri.

She nodded. "The sedation spell should hold. But if it doesn't, well... he'll get himself hurt and captured again if he tries anything."

Ked chuckled as he started getting the unconscious drakiri on his back. "Alright, lead the way then," he said once the drakiri was secured.

She lead him to a deep cave, that lead to what had once been an underground prison... probably used to seal an entity, though whatever it was was long gone by now. The main thing, however... was how it negated magic in general... meaning he couldn't use any abilities to get out, and it was not wide enough for him to fully spread his wings, walls too smooth to climb up.

"I found this place while exploring." She said. "I almost fell in. There's remnants of some sort of entity, I think it faded away in here. The binding on the place weakened over time, but with your help I can recreate it. Then we can come in and bring him food and water, but he can't get out."

Ked checked the place out, impressed. "Good spot. So, place him here then?" he asked, gesturing the general area of the prison.

Once he got the drakiri in according to Elessara's direction, he then got himself next to her to help recreate the binding.

She worked with him to replace the binding.

"There." She said. "I hope that stops his power from growing... and keeps him from inflicting harm ever again."

"That's something we can check on when we feed him." He then looked around the place, wondering its history but had a feeling that mystery may remain unsolved. "We should head back and start moving draks."

She nodded. "And see about rebuilding that town Valka mentioned... he said that between here and his den is an abandoned town. In decent condition.... I was going to see if I can find where Esperanza stored all the money she got from hurting Drakiri, and divy it up among those hurt so they can start a good life somewhere."

"Sounds like a plan. I'm going to search for that abandoned town, so we will have direction when I get back."