

Characters Involved:

<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1528> Icarus | 14,781 | <https://imgur.com/mtB1XkL> | 155
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1504> Milarose | 7455 | <https://imgur.com/ZvkSHei> | 82
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1750> Mijhael | 14,930 | <https://imgur.com/c5Ta7bJ> | 156
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1841> Alina | 14,930 | <https://imgur.com/c5Ta7bJ> | 156
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1829> Mila | 14,930 | <https://imgur.com/c5Ta7bJ> | 156
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1668> Vyno | 14,930 | <https://imgur.com/c5Ta7bJ> | 156
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1699> Desmonae | 12,476 | <https://imgur.com/fH0T9c7> | 132
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1696> Esperanza | 12,476 | <https://imgur.com/fH0T9c7> | 132
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-738> Miska | 12395 | <https://imgur.com/FU03S1X> | 131
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1274> Bugzy | 12395 | <https://imgur.com/FU03S1X> | 131
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-973> Lamastu | 7,169 | <https://imgur.com/KRpjwGv> | 79
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1563> Sammal | 9,348 | <https://imgur.com/Us6c0nE> | 100
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1686> Caledonia | 9,348 | <https://imgur.com/Us6c0nE> | 100
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1040> Eirwyn | 8,080 | <https://imgur.com/MBDmR8L> | 88
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1834> Galithrax | 451 | <https://imgur.com/Q3VIZLC> | 12

Total Words: 14,930

“Asking me why I care about the wellbeing of these children makes me question whether or not you are worth trusting,” Mijhael said as he walked beside Vyno down a long corridor.

The dark-furred nightmare fell silent for a moment, as if considering his next words carefully.

“I suppose I could have worded my question better,” Vyno said. “Children have passed through this industry, even through this very warehouse before you arrived, I’m curious why *these* children in particular have caught your eye.”

Together they turned the corner in the grey, featureless hallway of the dorm. The rooms were all empty for the moment, reserved for future endeavors, Mijhael suspected. The door they wanted was the last one on the left, difficult to find and inconvenient to reach. This was the intended design, to thwart escape attempts and limit the number of drakiri who interacted with the room’s occupants.

“Their father made an impression on me,” Mijhael admitted as they reached the room. He rapped his knuckles against the wood and turned to look at Vyno briefly. “Some of your recruits still call you a child, yet they fear you. One might think they’d need less convincing to treat children with the respect they deserve.”

“Most adults don’t think children deserve respect at all,” Vyno replied, flicking his ears derisively. “But most children don’t have a grandfather like mine. I command respect by proxy, it is not earned.”

"I'm inclined to agree with you," Mijhael said. "They do not respect you, they respect what your father and grandfather would rain down on them."

"May I be candid with you?" Vyno asked.

"I see no reason why you can't," Mijhael said, shifting his weight as they waited.

"I doubt either my father or my grandfather would do anything if something happened to me. Solpor was never going to be father of the year, and Ruin...I don't actually know much about him. I doubt he even knows I exist, if I'm honest."

"You might consider that a blessing, if half the things I have heard in muttered conversations about Ruin are true," Mijhael chuckled, though there was little in the way of true amusement to be found in his voice.

"I don't doubt that," Vyno said, smiling in return, though the expression did not reach his eyes.

Finally, the doorknob turned and opened, revealing the anxious young face of a red-colored dracus. She had strikingly bright blue eyes that seemed all the more beautiful in contrast to the darker reds of her fur. Her pelt and scales would fetch a pretty penny, but anyone who tried to harvest from her would face Mijhael's wrath.

"Good morning Alina," Mijhael said with a respectful nod of his head. "May we come in?"

He watched the young dracus puzzle over what the proper and polite response would be. Eventually, she returned the nod and looked between Mijhael and Vyno.

"Do you have news about our dad?" she asked. "Is he back yet?"

"Not yet," Vyno said. "Galabastarin is vast and much of it is yet to be explored. I imagine he will send word soon."

Alina's face fell and it was impossible to miss the disappointment in her eyes.

"How is Mila?" Vyno pressed, wanting to keep her focused so she would let them in. If she declined access, they would not force the issue.

"He's still mad," Alina sighed. "He doesn't understand why Dad wouldn't take us with him. I kind of wonder the same. He took us everywhere with him before, but now he has this important mission so we have to stay with you? It doesn't seem fair."

"Where your father has gone and what he is doing of the utmost importance, it's no place for children," Mijhael said. The indignant flash in her eyes prompted him to continue, "Your father trusted us with your care and wellbeing, and we intend to honor his trust. You are young, but

you are smart. Surely you understand he has only the best in his heart for you and your brother. He'll be back soon."

"You said that last time," Alina sighed, turning away to walk farther into the room and leaving the door open.

Vyno and Mijhael stepped into the room and closed the door behind them. It was no ordinary room, it held the square footage of four of the normal sized rooms, having had the walls knocked down so the children would have plenty of room to move around and run if they liked. Alina even had room to fly if she so chose. On one end of the room there were two beds set into the floor so the top of the beds were flush with the concrete; they were comfortable, with full sets of sheets and multiple pillows. On the other side of the room, a television—something sourced from a human settlement—had been installed on one wall, large enough to see the pictures well and play the electronic games provided. Mijhael had never once seen the screen turn on in the video feed from the cameras installed on the ceiling. None of the newer technologies seemed to appeal to the children, but books—those were another story.

Half of one of the longest walls were covered by floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, rows and rows of books had been provided. The children read them almost as fast as Mijhael could bring them, and he was both annoyed and amazed by their voracious appetites for learning.

"I want you two to be comfortable, this may not be your home, but I can at least try to offer you things that will make your stay more comfortable," Mijhael said, moving to stand closer to the bed where Alina had retired. Mila—a young, pale sapphire kainu without any impressive markings and a short mane—also lay in his bed, mostly covered by his blanket, his nose tucked under one of his knees. He wasn't asleep though, which was evident by the twitching of his ears as he listened to what they said.

"We don't have a home," Alina said as she settled on her bed and reached out to run her fingers down one of her whiskers, smoothing the short fur there with her thumb and forefinger. "Dad always said home was where you made it, not any one place."

Mila's head snapped up and his yellow eyes opened, glaring up at Mijhael and Vyno where they stood as he spat, "Home is where Dad is!"

"Mila, don't be so rude," Alina admonished her brother.

"Shut up," Mila said nastily as he looked away.

"I imagine it's difficult being away from your father," Vyno said, stepping over to stand to the side of Mila's bed. The child was small for his age, his horn hadn't even erupted yet, but he had golden yellow eyes that missed nothing.

“Your father must be very wise, to tell you such things,” Vyno continued, leaning forward to brush his muzzle against Mila’s brow. Their father had told them how important physical touch was to the children, but they had been—rightly—skittish about being touched by strangers. “Would you like to go outside? It should be warm enough for the pool in a few hours. I know how much you like swimming.”

“No,” Mila said, turning and moving to the other side of the bed so Vyno couldn’t reach him. “I don’t want to swim.”

“Then you don’t have to,” Vyno said, demonstrating patience beyond what Mijhael would have expected from someone his age.

“Alina, may I speak with you?” Mijhael asked, tilting his head toward the circular table in the corner of the room, not too far from the television and untouched game systems.

“Sure,” the dracus said, following him away from the bed. They sat across from one another, without chairs but with their arms resting on the table. It was a formality mostly, but also gave Mijhael a place to put his clipboard.

“The drakiri who brings your meals told me one of the plates has hardly been touched,” he said, keeping his voice low so he wouldn’t interrupt the one-sided conversation Vyno was having with Mila across the room. “Is Mila eating?”

Alina shifted uncomfortably and looked away from him as she fidgeted with her whiskers.

“Yeah he’s eating,” she said after a long moment.

Mijhael waited patiently to see if she would elaborate, but when she didn’t, he thought he understood why.

“You’re not, though, are you?” he said gently.

She looked down at the table, studiously avoiding looking at him as she shook her head. At least she had been taught not to lie. Children at this age made terrible liars, they were too fidgety and unaware of themselves.

“Is something the matter? Do you feel unwell?” he asked, readying himself to have to pry for the information. He uncapped his pen and poised it over the paper attached to his clipboard to take notes as he studied her demeanor. He found children tiresome after a while, but he treated them well regardless. His own impatience was not their fault.

“I just—I don’t like the meat anymore,” she said, her voice uncharacteristically small. Usually she was outspoken and boisterous, so he was surprised and concerned by this change in her personality.

“Would you prefer a different kind?” Mijhael asked. “We can get you anything you would like.”

“N-No,” Alina stammered. “Venison is fine, I just—I don’t want it all...bloody.”

“Oh, you would prefer it cooked?” Mijhael asked. It wasn’t unusual that drakiri preferred their meat cooked, but these two had made it quite clear they didn’t appreciate it within their first couple of meals here. It wasn’t an unreasonable request, so Mijhael would make it happen.

Alina nodded and before Mijhael could even ask, she said, “I had a bad dream a few nights ago and...I don’t like it anymore.”

Mijhael jotted that note down, but after a moment his pen stilled and his brow furrowed. He asked, “What was the dream about?”

Alina glanced up at him and then back down at the table. A visible shudder passed through her.

“I was in front of a mirror, looking at myself and for just a second, I didn’t have any skin. My horn and my ears were gone, my scales, my teeth...it was horrible.”

Mijhael’s fingers tightened around his pen so suddenly it snapped in half, plastic bits breaking off and landing on the table. He lifted the clip on the clipboard, tucked the broken pen under the edge so he wouldn’t forget it and folded his hands in front of him for a moment as he focused on his breathing. In and out, slowly. The teeth that lined his maw clicked together as he opened and closed them, struggling to keep from growling from within.

After that moment it took him to calm down, Mijhael reached out with his left hand to place it against Alina’s right cheek. Her brows lifted slightly before she leaned into his palm, relaxing and letting out a relieved sigh.

“It was only a dream, dear,” he said gently. “I know you like to research, so if it would calm your mind, I could try to find some anatomy textbooks. Perhaps seeing such imagery in an academic context might put your mind at ease. You could turn it into a learning experience rather than a frightening one.”

“Maybe,” she said, smiling up at him. “Thank you Mijha. I’ll try to get Mila back in better spirits.”

“He has a right to be upset, let him be upset, just be open to doing things he might want to do,” Mijhael said as he took his hand back, picked up his clipboard and moved away from the table. “Come along Vyno, I think we’ve pestered poor Mila enough for one day.”

They bid the children farewell and walked out of the room, closing the door behind them. They did not lock it—there was no need. The children believed they were safe here, and both the room and hallway were constantly monitored for movement.

"I'm usually the one dragging you away," Vyno said as he followed Mijhael down the hallway away from the door.

"Someone has been influencing Alina's dreams," Mijhael said, his voice steady with anger as the teeth of his maw opened and closed, hot air rasping from between them in low, deliberate breaths.

Vyno stiffened in alarm and trotted to keep up, asking, "Galithrax?"

"Who else could it be?" Mijhael demanded, disgust making him snappish. "I am going to have words with that rose-colored harlot."

"Hey, hey wait a second, you're not going to burn the warehouse down, are you? Because you said you would, and I work and live here Mijhael!"

Mijhael stopped in his tracks and rounded to face the nightmare, staring him down until Vyno looked away. He said in a purposefully calm and concise voice, "If I decided to burn down the *world*, I guarantee you could not stop me."

The metal grate felt cold against the pads of Icarus's feet as he stood for his bath. The temperature of the water was less startling each time they bathed him, and though he hadn't been able to fully come to terms with the idea of another person washing *every inch* of him, he understood why they did it. He understood a lot more than they probably intended for him to. During his time here he hadn't exactly sat idle. Those they used as guards would talk amongst each other, and Icarus would listen closely to what they had to say.

He flinched when the water sprayed over the raw, exposed skin where his scales had been, and he heard a voice shout in the language the humans spoke to one another. It was a language Icarus could not understand, but the human who shouted the words was familiar to him—young by the standards of the humans from what he could tell, with dark brown skin and tightly curled black hair on top of his head. The human spoke to him in a gentle voice most times they interacted, even went so far as to pat his neck once his skin had regrown enough to tolerate the touch.

The human's hand pressed against Icarus's throat, beside where one of his scales had been removed, and though it was uncomfortable, Icarus assumed the human was checking for damage. It was one of the many things Icarus did not understand about this place. So many humans worked here, scrubbing down drakiri as they came through the line to be washed and taken to Esperanza for examination, but this was the only one who seemed to actually care about the drakiri who walked through this place.

“Finish washing him and send him to Esperanza,” Desmonae said, looking down at them from where she stood on the catwalk above. She wasn’t as physically intimidating as some of the other guards, but she frightened Icarus regardless. The way she hovered around him, yellow, glowing eyes staring him down like a piece of meat she was considering eating. Under different circumstances he would have wanted to befriend her and study her black, leathery wings, but he was petrified of her.

“Why are you here instead of Mijhael or Vyno?” a petulant voice asked.

Icarus looked over to watch a drakiri he’d seen before leading a sprite with a brilliant white coat, dark brown antlers and a curled mane and tail by a rope attached to a metal muzzle. The sprite fought with every fiber of its being against the muzzle and the shackles that held its long, slender limbs together by chains at its ankles and wrists. The drakiri leading the sprite had the size and presence of a kainu, with the more elegant features of a mystic, fawn colored fur with markings that Icarus had begun to recognize from the terms he heard around the warehouse. The darker parts around his hooves were called socks, the spots and stripes on his pelt named according to their appearance, but the darker fur that blended into the lighter along the top of his body was sable, perhaps named after the animal that shared the name.

“I could ask why you’re even *here*, Miska,” Desmonae snapped in response, leaping off the catwalk. Her wings stirred the air into a frenzy as they unfurled and gave a few hard strokes to slow her descent so she could touch down heavily on the concrete floor not too far from the crossbreed and the sprite. “Are you still trying to convince Mijhael your dusty looking pelt is worth anything? Trying to get off door duty by leading tantrum-throwing sprites around to look busy? That one hasn’t even been through evaluation, why is it out of its cell?”

“Esperanza wants to see them,” Miska said defensively, his ears laying flat against his skull. He tried to lead the sprite around the nightmare who stood between him and the nearest inspection platform, but the rebellious sprite reared up and struck out with deceptively sharp hooves toward the nightmare.

Desmonae’s jaws parted and she roared, her voice shrieking through the warehouse like a hell beast. The sprite fell back, legs crumpling and sending them falling to the ground. Their eyes were stretched wide, and the smell of urine lingered in the air under the strong scent of conditioning soaps.

“He pissed himself in fear,” Desmonae chortled. “Get him out of here. And Miska, I don’t want to see you on this production floor again or I’ll skin you myself.”

Icarus watched this happen while the humans’ rough, blunt fingers rubbed soap into his fur, stroked through his mane so roughly he feared they might pull the hair out themselves. They manhandled his tail, passing it between one another like a rope they were trying to coil up together. It took every ounce of self-control he had to not smack them in the face with the

sodden fur that hung from his tail. But with his control focused there, he was incapable of holding his tongue.

“Why must you terrorize them?” Icarus demanded, taking an aggressive step toward the nightmare. “You already have them under your hoof, must you crush them completely?”

Desmonae rounded on him, putting her face uncomfortably close to his so he could feel the warm breath that she huffed out through her nose. Her gaze bored into his own, but despite his racing heart he did not falter.

“If you didn’t have Vyno’s cock so far down your throat, I would crush *you*,” Desmonae hissed. “He’ll come to his senses eventually. Pelts never sell for much after they’ve been shipped to a few buyers. The value of yours will fall and then Vyno won’t have any interest in keeping you around. Then you’ll be discarded. You and those shit-eating whelps of yours.”

She leaned in closer, eyes glowing brighter with malice as she said lowly, “I can’t wait to hear your children scream.”

Icarus’s ears snapped back and lunged at Desmonae, rearing up to strike at her with his hooves since his antlers had been removed just the other day. She danced away, wings unfurling as she backed up, but not before Icarus’s clawed hoof struck the side of her muzzle, digging deep furrows into the sensitive skin there.

Desmonae howled in rage and leaped at him, hooves flailing and clawed wings beating at him, only for a dark blur to crash into her, thrusting her aside. She lunged toward the drakiri that had intervened, only to balk and back away, yellow eyes staring hard down at the ground even as her nostrils flared. Blood dripped from her muzzle onto the concrete floor as Vyno glared at her, his tail lashing behind him in anger.

“You were to stay on the catwalk,” he said, his voice deceptively calm. “Get back on the catwalk.”

Desmonae fell silent for a moment, the muscles in her jaw working under her dark, satin pelt before she growled, “Dismiss me. I’ll kill him if you don’t.”

“Touch him and you will enter the rotation again,” Vyno retorted, his words clipped but voice still calm. “You have clearly learned nothing from the last time, say one more word and I will do it.”

A tense moment passed, Icarus watched the indecision cross her expression, until her lips pulled back in a snarl, and she spat in the younger nightmare’s face.

Vyno flinched, his eyes closed, and he took a slow, calculated breath. The warehouse had gone utterly silent, even the humans stood as still as statues, watching the two strong-willed nightmares.

“Take her.” The order was given and two primals stepped out from the shadows of the warehouse. Their pelts were black as night, Icarus couldn’t have told that they were there if his life depended on it—and he realized with a disconcerting jolt that it very well could have. They led Desmonae away, and Icarus felt weak with relief.

“Did she hurt you?” Vyno asked, looking down at the wet floor.

Icarus turned, surprised, and looked at the glob of spit that slowly slid down the nightmare’s cheek. He said, “Only my pride.”

“Then why did you goad her into a response?” Vyno asked, his voice pitched higher and raspy with what sounded disconcertingly like despair. It was one of the few things that reminded Icarus how young Vyno really was.

“She threatened my children,” Icarus said quietly, his voice even despite how much he shook from the cold water that clung to his fur and the unspent adrenaline that coursed through his veins. “I will not tolerate that.”

Vyno’s eyes squeezed shut and the nightmare sighed, giving his head a deft shake and lifting his leg to rub his knee against the spit, though that only served to smear it across more of his cheek. His expression twisted in disgust, and he lifted his head to glower at the drakiri who stared at him.

“Do we suddenly no longer have deadlines?” he demanded, raising his voice. “Get back to work!”

As the hoses turned back on to rinse soap away from the pelts of the harvest, Icarus watched Vyno turn back to look at Miska and the sprite who still lay on the ground.

“Why is this one out here?” he demanded. “Get them off the floor and back into a cell. Miska, get back to your post. Who the hell is supposed to be running the floor right now? They’re not doing their goddamn job!”

“You are, are you not?”

The voice was accented from lands to the northeast, across the sea that divided the continents, sweet as honey, smooth as silk, and it sent a chill down Icarus’s spine. He looked up to see Esperanza lounging on the platform where Mijhael usually stood looking down at them. Her rose-colored scales glittered under the harsh lights overhead, her pale pink fur and white mane gleamed with the kind of grooming one did when they were perfectly comfortable. For being a prisoner herself, unwilling to cooperate but forced by circumstance, this dracus certainly didn’t seem under duress.

Vyno turned to look at the raised platform and the drakiri lounging on it. His nostrils flared and he gave his head a derisive shake as he averted his gaze. It was a small, but meaningful interaction that Icarus found odd.

“Get off Mijhael’s platform,” Vyno said, the commanding bite returning to his voice. “Don’t make me have to put you back in your cell.”

“But you were just so tough with poor, young, foolish Desmonae,” Esperanza pouted, lowering her head to rest her cheek against her hand where it lay on the floor. “I don’t think I could possibly settle now that I’ve seen something so upsetting!”

“Your comfort is neither my concern nor my responsibility,” Vyno snapped. “Get off the platform and do your job! The humans are nearly done scrubbing Icarus down, examine him and make your assessment before I start something I won’t want to finish.”

Esperanza slid forward across the platform, her fingers and long claws gripping the platform’s edge as she looked down at Vyno with blue eyes that gleamed with intrigue.

“Pray tell, young nightmare,” she said, her voice practically shaking with what Icarus thought might be excitement, “what *exactly* you would do that you simply could not bring yourself to finish.”

Icarus watched as Vyno rolled his eyes and shook his head again before walking away toward the double doors that led to the cells. He took a breath and let it out slowly as the humans rinsed the soap from his mane and tail, using a long piece of metal with a rubber edge to squeegee the rest of the water from his fur and leave him damp and uncomfortable as he stepped off the metal grate toward the inspection platform.

He hated this process, he truly did, but he’d been here long enough to know that fighting them would make things so much worse. It would lead to someone like Desmonae making good on their promise to hurt those he loved...Icarus would do anything to keep his children safe. Even if that meant giving these people what they wanted, when they wanted it. Already he had given them his skin, his antlers, his teeth and scales, there was even talk that they would take his eyes...he was horrified and scared, always riddled with anxiety, but he stayed and behaved because he had assurances that his children were safe and well kept.

Oh, his children...he missed them dearly. This was the longest he had been away from them, but he had insisted they know nothing of what he was doing here. Mijhael had offered to help him with that, had created a story to tell them about an important exploration mission he had to go on without them because it was very dangerous. Alina would accept it but Mila was smart enough to see through it, given time. He hoped they were well. Mijhael assured him they were whenever they spoke, but assurances were different from actually seeing them well and happy.

"Penny for your thoughts?" The voice cut through Icarus's concerned ruminations and he lifted his head to see Esperanza sitting in front of him, her blue eyes scanning him as if he were a cut of meat she hadn't decided yet how to cook.

"You don't have a penny," Icarus said dryly.

"And you have no thoughts I would spend a penny for," Esperanza mused, but there was no malice in her voice. She would sometimes say things to him that seemed entirely inappropriate to the situation at hand and Icarus had to wonder if she knew where she was. Other times she was sharper than the blades the skinners used to take his hide, to an almost frightening degree. He couldn't get a read on her, and it was likely what unsettled him so much when she was around.

"Then why did you ask?" Icarus countered, shifting uncomfortably on the dais.

"Because it is polite," Esperanza said, as if it was the simplest thing in the world that he should understand. "And because I wonder what you think about sometimes...I heard someone shouting your name this morning, from the cells. Someone you know?"

Icarus's pelt prickled with unease as he remembered the voice that had shouted his name. It was a voice he hadn't heard in years, one that he had avoided and felt great shame for doing so. He wasn't ready for this reunion, especially not in a place like this that was filled with so much suffering and fear.

"Ah, you do know him," Esperanza said with a knowing smile, her tone almost smug. "Is he a friend? Family? A lover perhaps?"

"No," Icarus said sternly, glaring at the dracus. Who was this drakiri to ask such questions? She was none of those things to him, these questions were entirely inappropriate.

"Let me guess, let me guess," Esperanza said, her long, elegant whiskers twitching frantically with her eagerness as she settled on her haunches and lifted her left hand to stroke at the long white mane that draped down her throat. "I would bet all the money in the world that this dracus fellow, Milarose, is a long-lost lover of yours. Maybe you parted on good terms, but I think not. I think you resent each other, and he is furious to find you here because you cannot seem to stay away from one another."

Icarus clenched his teeth and breathed slowly, knowing that if he reacted poorly to Esperanza too, he could potentially put his children at risk. This was a careful dance he had to navigate, and he'd already missed a step today in his reaction to Desmonae.

"He's just a friend," he said finally, his voice tight but still polite. "He helped me when I needed it, and I returned the favor. That is the extent of our relationship. It would hurt me if you continued guessing and making conjectures, Esperanza, and I know your intent is to heal, never to harm."

Esperanza was quiet for a long moment, her eyes glazing over in the strange way they tended to when they interacted. Her claws dug a little deeper into the fur along her throat until he heard them scrape against the skin beneath. When she came back to herself, she did so with a jolt and she stood, breathing a little harder.

“You are quite right,” she said with a small bow of her head in acknowledgement. “I would hate to cause you harm with my own entertainment, forgive me. Let us see how your pelt has regrown. I want to ensure the treatments have worked as intended after your first harvesting.”

This was the part Icarus hated the most, he could suffer the indignance of being bathed, he handled the initial examination Mijhael did despite the drakiri’s startling appearance, but Esperanza was much more hands-on.

He closed his eyes and turned his face away when the healer stepped forward to stand at the edge of the dais, reaching over his back to run her hands down his flanks, feeling for breaks in the fur or patches that might not have grown in entirely. He hated the feeling of her soft fingers against his body, the occasional scratch of her claws against his skin when she ran them down his haunches toward his ankles. He shuffled uncomfortably in place when her hands touched the raw skin where his scales had been and shied away from her touch.

“It still hurts?” she asked, and when he glanced at her he saw her expression had tightened with concentration.

“It does,” he confirmed, keeping his answers short and curt so there was little to interpret other than obedience.

“It should not hurt,” she said. “Hold still.”

Icarus let out a short, sharp breath through his nose and tensed, knowing what was to come. Esperanza placed her hand fully on his chest, pressing firmly enough to bring stinging tears to his eyes. The pain was far preferable to what came after, though.

From Esperanza’s palm, he felt a warm, prickling sensation tingle along his skin. It felt like a thousand pins and needles poking and prodding, until his flesh felt like someone had set it aflame. His breath came in short, pained gasps and he leaned his head back, squeezing his eyes shut tight against the painfully bright violet light that emanated from his chest.

It lasted entirely too long, his legs felt weak, his heart beat rapidly and his vision darkened around the edges. But the pain in his chest lessened where Esperanza’s hand touched, and he felt the relief spread up his throat and down his belly. He fell to his knees as the exhaustion returned to him and would have collapsed to his side if Esperanza hadn’t kept him upright with her other hand.

"This magic draws from your core," the dracus said as she moved her hand away from his chest, moving him so he lay on his side without falling. "The energy that sustains you, fuels your own magic. I have done what I can, but if I do too much at once it will kill you. Your scales are mostly formed, it will take a few days more before they harden and return to their normal state, but the skin should no longer pain you."

Icarus stared ahead, finding it difficult to do much more than that, struggling to focus his eyes on much more than the lazily spinning violet auras that seemed to surround what little he could see.

"I want to see Mijhael," Icarus said, voice weak and reedy, but firm in the words he chose. They hadn't denied him the right to see the risker yet, not since Mijhael had taken a special interest in him.

"I will send him to your cell once you've been harvested again," Esperanza said. "Your skin has regenerated completely; we can harvest as soon as tonight."

"No!" Icarus said forcefully. "I want to see him before you harvest again. I've done this once already, Mijhael has said he will speak with me whenever I want, I want to speak with him before you take anything more from me."

He felt her gaze on him, knew that he had displeased her, and in the moment was too exhausted to try to backpedal. His eyes closed and he slipped away into unconsciousness.

The gentle patter of rain on the roof tiles would normally have soothed Sammal's nerves. She had always loved the rain, especially when she was young and could hear it gathering in puddles outside that she could later splash through. Milarose hated when she splashed in puddles because he would have to wash her all over again and make sure she didn't catch a chill, but he never stopped her. He had been the closest thing to a father she'd had, and now he was gone.

Sammal hadn't slept since they'd arrived at Eirwyn's house. She and Caledonia had set her as gently as they could on a blanket on the floor with a soft pillow under her head and a damp cloth over her lidless eyes to cover them and attempt to keep them from drying out. They hadn't known what more to do—what more *could* they do? Eirwyn was the one Sammal would have asked for help from, she was the healer, not them...

The sprite gave her head a small shake, trying to dispel the frustration that her own helplessness caused her. She looked instead across the room to where Caledonia lay beside Eirwyn with his side pressed against her back. They had draped a light sheet over her body when the flies had come, attracted by the smell of blood and flesh no doubt. That had been simple enough to fix, but when she had started breathing shallowly it had taken them an

exceptionally long time to realize that she was cold. Sammal was too small to do more than get in the way, so Caledonia had taken up the spot beside her to share his warmth as much as he could.

Sammal could tell that this had all affected Caledonia terribly. She saw it in how his head would jerk up at every small sound outside, yet his eyes would droop shut immediately after, his nose resting on his ankle in an attempt to keep his head up. She wished that she could take that stress from him, and help him feel more secure. He was so young, he didn't deserve this stress, but they were both stuck in this mess until they could figure a way out of it.

The rain fell heavier, and Sammal shivered lightly, standing from where she lay by the door to watch through one of the low windows for anyone that might approach the door. Finding Eirwyn this way had made them realize that the poachers were even this far north, and they would not be safe here. But until they could get information from Eirwyn, none of them could leave.

Once they did leave, where could they go? With the healer in this state, Sammal would not leave her. She would die alone. But if they didn't leave, they could meet the same fate. It was an impossible decision, one that no one should have to make. For now, thankfully, it was one they didn't have to make just yet.

"How are you?" Sammal asked, stepping carefully around Eirwyn to nudge her muzzle against Caledonia's brow. She could feel the nub of one of his horns pushing the skin taut, it would likely push through in the next month or so. She wondered what they would look like. Would she get to see?

Caledonia lifted his head and looked up at her through tired eyes. He let out a low chuffing sound and returned the touch of his nose against her cheek. They'd known each other only a short time, but they had needed to rely on one another a lot since the incident at the barn. Sammal trusted Caledonia more than she probably should.

"I'll see if I can find anything for us to eat," she said gently, glancing down at the sleeping kainu with a sinking feeling in her belly. What if Eirwyn didn't wake up? They truly would be lost without her.

There was plenty to be found in the kitchen, almost none of which Sammal knew how to cook. She found a gas stove—a piece of equipment she knew existed but had next to no knowledge of how to operate—and many pots and pans, though she couldn't identify most of the items in the kitchen itself. Innumerable jars labeled with haphazardly scribbled names that she couldn't read lined every horizontal surface that wasn't already occupied by another item, some full of strange brown and grey powders, others with dusty looking liquids and still more wide-mouthed, wide-bellied jars full of dried mushrooms of every variety she could imagine.

Sammal despaired at her lack of knowledge and backed away from the kitchen when she heard a clucking sound from outside the window. She trotted around to the back door and stood on her

hind legs to see through the window there, ears pricked up with interest. She saw the brown and black speckled plumage of chickens, and where there were chickens, there were eggs.

Ten minutes later she sat down in front of Caledonia and the fire they had built in the hearth, taking a pan she had found in the kitchen to set it in the embers at the edge of the fire. She fried the eggs, burnt the edges of them, but before long they had mostly edible eggs that they both ate in quick, famished bites.

"I'm sorry this happened to you," Sammal said, keeping her voice down despite her desperation for Eirwyn to wake up. It felt disrespectful to speak at a normal volume around someone who slept.

Caledonia's head cocked to the side, his small ears laying back to show he clearly didn't understand what she meant.

"All of this," she said, gesturing with her horn to where they had ended up. "You shouldn't have been taken by the poachers, and you shouldn't have to be exposed to this horror. I'm sorry...I know it's not my fault, but I still feel badly about it. Especially since there's nothing I can do to fix any of this."

Silence stretched between them, punctuated by the crackling of the fire and the sizzle of the egg shells that Sammal had tossed into the flames.

After a moment, Caledonia unfolded his leg from beneath himself and reached out with his foot to touch Sammal's leg, letting his cloven hoof rest gently against her wrist. It was a simple gesture, but it meant the world to her.

She closed her eyes and sighed gently before looking down once more to the young primal's ankle. "We'll have to figure out how to get those shackles off of you too, they look terribly uncomfortable. They've worn down the fur already."

Caledonia grunted in acknowledgment but seemed unperturbed by the metal cuffs around his ankles and wrists. Perhaps he had gotten used to them—that was a chilling thought. No one should be used to being shackled and chained. Sammal would work to find a way to get them off of him as soon as she could.

They rested together beside the fire, their sides pressed together and their muzzles resting close. It was warmer here, and Sammal found comfort in Caledonia's presence when everything else had been torn away from her. She hardly slept, but she tried. Every particularly large droplet of rain on the roof was a nightmare landing from the air, ready to stomp through the roof to steal them away into the night. Every creak of an old tree trunk in the wind was the crack of bone between massive teeth. It took hours for her to finally fall into an uneasy, dreamless sleep.

A high-pitched keening sound cut through the haze of exhaustion that had settled over Sammal's mind. She opened crusty eyes to peer around blearily. By the pale morning light that filtered through the shutters, she could see a form standing over them, a ghostly form that swayed in place and made that awful keening wail.

Sammal's heart leaped into her throat and she scrambled to her hooves, backing away and nearly falling into a wicker basket full of dried mushrooms. She cried out in surprise, and that was when Caledonia woke up. He stood swiftly, lips peeling back to expose broken and chipped teeth, but he relaxed a moment later. His tail was still held high with alarm as he started forward. It took a moment for Sammal to see why past her deliriousness.

The ghostly figure was Eirwyn, standing under the sheet that had once been white but now was stained with various shades of red and brown where it clung to her body. She was awake!

"Oh my gods!" Sammal gasped, starting forward and dancing aside in alarm when Eirwyn's head swung toward her. She stared and the kainu's bulging eyes where the cloth had fallen away from them, clinging to her face by a scab on her cheek.

"Metal box...mantel," the healer gasped, her voice tense with the agony she felt.

Sammal had no idea what could be so important in that box, but she leaped for it, pulling at one of the handles on the side until it swung down and slapped her chest. The top flew open as she turned toward the others, a black bundle flinging to the floor and rolling to a halt.

"Be careful!" Eirwyn snapped as she wobbled forward on unsteady legs that shook so hard they might collapse under her at any moment.

Sammal hurried forward to the black cloth, pulling at it until she finally revealed a shard of crystal. It was dark against the cloth, but she could still see its violet facets, raw except for one side where it seemed to have broken off another piece. It was beautiful, and Sammal found herself unable to look away.

"Give it to me!" Eirwyn wailed, locking her knees as she bowed her head to try to take the crystal.

Sammal grabbed it off the floor between her teeth and passed it to Eirwyn. The healer took it and drew it far back into her mouth, holding it with her tongue. She stared at nothing for a horrifying moment before violet light poured from her mouth, so bright it bathed the living room in violet. Sammal shrank away from it, closing her eyes.

Eirwyn screamed in pain and rage, and when Sammal opened her eyes again she saw skin flow over the kainu's muzzle, fangs growing back into their sockets. The changes rolled over her body like a wave, skin and fur growing in over the exposed muscle. The sheet fell away from her

body as the skin reached her flanks, her tail growing in behind her. Her horn was the last to grow in, slicing through the crown of her head and gleaming in the light from the crystal.

The healer collapsed to the floor in a heap as her mane grew in, blue fur dark to Sammal's eyes as the light from the crystal died away. It fell from the kainu's lips and Sammal used the cloth to pick it up and wrap it quickly, putting it back into the metal box. She stared in disbelief at the kainu, who looked like her fur had never so much as borne a mark in her life, let alone the entirety of her skin having been removed.

"Gods," Sammal breathed. "What the hell was that?"

The rattle of the bars roused Milarose enough that he opened his eyes, but he did not stir. He hadn't been asleep—he hadn't slept in what felt like weeks, but could only have been days. His exhaustion had left him weak, but his thoughts would not allow his mind to rest. He hadn't seen Icarus since the kainu was led down the hallway, and wasn't entirely sure he had seen him at all. But every time he pictured the scene, he remembered the anxious disbelief that he'd seen in Icarus's eyes and was convinced anew that he had, in fact, seen him here.

At first, Milarose had been convinced Icarus was here to save him, but that had been a desperate hope—a child's wish, useless to him here in the real world. No one was coming to save him, if he was to leave this place he would have to do it by his own merit. But then a thought occurred to him, a terrible thought that he had dismissed out of hand, but he could not forget having had it. Did Icarus work for these people?

He hated to even consider it, because he had put so much trust in the kainu by letting him get as close as he did. But Icarus spent his life travelling from place to place, keeping record of all the drakiri he came into contact with. Wasn't that what Icarus had told him? That he kept journals? What if those journals hadn't been for his own personal use, but rather ledgers for a place like this? He'd seen the crossbreed with the horrifying teeth in his throat and belly with a ledger, was it so much of a stretch?

"Get up," growled a disgustingly familiar voice.

"I will not," Milarose said, his voice low and unaffected by emotion. They weren't worth what little he had left.

"Then I will drag you by your throat," Lamashtu growled.

"By all means," Milarose said with a lazy twitch of his hand. "You'll not get me out of this cell otherwise."

The door slid open and Milarose expected to feel the sharp pain of teeth in his hide once more. Instead he heard the gentle scrape of claws against concrete, smelled the scent of dracus and warm fur. He looked up once more to see Esperanza in the cell with him, standing closer to the door where she had to place her feet carefully. There wasn't much room with the two of them in there, as the cell was hardly big enough to fit one dracus.

"Then I shall come to you," the dracus said. She settled on her haunches and placed her hand on his flank, running her fingers through his fur and sliding them up over the ball of his shoulder where the white fur was clumped and matted with dry blood and scabs. "You will stain your pretty white fur this way."

"Is that how yours got the red ticks?" Milarose said, studying the dracus warily. He didn't trust her as far as he could throw her, but she was the only one who had shown any interest in keeping him healthy. Even if it was simply expected of her.

"Ah you noticed," she said with a smile, her accented voice sweet and uplifting. "I was born with it, it is a marking they call *mane tips*, not very imaginative in my opinion but it is descriptive at the least."

"They've named markings?" Milarose asked, grimacing as she passed her fingers over the wound on his shoulder.

"They've done more than you could imagine," Esperanza said in a voice that sounded almost reverent. It unnerves Milarose and he wanted to pull away from her, but laid out on the floor with the other dracus hovering over him, there was nowhere for him to go. "I can take the pain away. Would you like me to?"

Milarose was quiet for a long moment, blue eyes meeting those of the healer. "There'll just be more," he said.

"There will always be more pain," Esperanza said, reaching out to guide his whisker away from where it was kinked under his neck. He hadn't even noticed that half of it was entirely numb until the blood rushed back into it, causing a pins and needles sensation. "But I can relieve what there is now. If you stop fighting it will be easier."

"If I stop fighting, I will be dead," Milarose countered.

She smoothed her hand up his neck and then back down to his shoulder as she considered what to say. "Is that not what you have wanted?" she asked. "A dracus does not so easily invite death when he faces adversity. Thrice now you have asked for death. Would it not be easier for you to give in and die in this way? Or do you only accept death on your terms?"

Milarose let his head rest back against the cold concrete, the will to argue seeping away into it as fast as it stole the warmth from his body. He said, "Do what you will. I can't stop you."

Esperanza closed her eyes and sighed slowly, but she reached forward to place her hand over Milarose's chest. Her touch stung him, as her fingers rested against the ruined skin where his scale had been. He closed his own eyes and lifted his nose so his face was turned away as far as it could go.

Even through his closed eyelids, he saw the violet light. It was bright enough to hurt his eyes and he felt a rippling, agonizing prickling sensation under his skin that made him tense. His heartbeat quickened, his legs strained as he tried to back away, though he only found Esperanza's body to rest his feet against to try to push himself across the floor. It didn't work, and he took a gasping breath before he grit his teeth and leaned his head back.

The exhaustion was worse than the pain that lingered after the light died away. His mind felt numb, his body leaden. He couldn't have stood now if he'd wanted to. His arms and legs fell away from Esperanza as she leaned over him, put her mouth close to his cheek until he felt her warm, sweet breath tickle the fur inside his ear.

"We must talk in private. I will request an examination with you in one of the private rooms, do not refuse," she breathed, her voice hardly audible even that close to him.

It was all he could do to keep his eyes open and breathe properly, let alone react to the idea of a covert meeting.

Esperanza pulled away from him and ran her fingers over his chest. It didn't hurt this time, and in fact felt as Milarose had expected it would.

"Your scales are healed," she said. "I told you before they would not grow back right. Not without my intervention. This magic has saved lives...do not take it for granted. Do not discard what it has done for you. It has saved your life, do not throw it away so easily."

She was gone as quickly as she had come, and Milarose watched out of the corner of his eye as Lasmastu locked the door behind the dracus and followed her down the hallway.

His head spun as he finally sagged against the floor. The pain was gone, and when finally he found the strength to lift his hand, he touched his chest and found the scales that had been damaged and gone had grown back as if nothing had ever happened to them. He was surprised, and he felt along his shoulder expecting to find the ruined flesh there, only to find smooth scales and skin. Even his hind leg responded when he moved it. Like nothing had happened...

He could hardly believe that magic like this still existed. He knew so little about the magic his people could do, hell he knew precious little about his people in general. Milarose had spent his life running from his family, from his past, but it always seemed to come around and bite him when he least expected it.

Milarose finally slept after that encounter, but it was an uneasy sleep full of disturbing flashes of ivory teeth and the gleam of eyes watching him from the darkness behind his eyelids. His dreams were short-lived, as if they began but were plucked away like feathers from a bird.

His exhaustion felt like something palpable. Never in his life had Icarus felt this poorly, even after childbirth he hadn't been this exhausted. It felt like every fiber of his being had the energy sapped from it. He'd felt the bone-weariness of a long day of travel, the emotional drain that affected the body in grief, but this...this was from magic. He did not use magic, no matter how intriguing it was. He had never been gifted in it, no matter how much he tried, so he was unaware of the effects it could have.

Icarus wanted to lay down. He wanted to see his children. He wanted to tell Milarose that he hadn't ignored him out of malicious intent. He wanted so many things, instead he was given an escort from the warehouse floor down the winding, twisting hallways of the building. He followed behind the drakiri, seeing nothing more than dark limbs and a tail, his head hung so low.

They stopped walking eventually, it could have taken them five minutes or five hours to arrive, he couldn't be sure. But Icarus heard a door open, saw the harsh, unnatural electric light filter into the dimly lit hallway. It was yellow light, different from the harsh white of the—what had they called them? Fluorescent? Icarus preferred the yellow bulbs, they reminded him of the sun—something he had not seen for what seemed like a very long time.

He lifted his head as far as he could, looking up at the drakiri that stood in the doorway. He was large, with a pale mane and many rows of bone-white teeth that lined either side of his throat, relaxed now and showing glimpses of the startlingly red maw beneath. Mijhael looked down at him with surprise in his expression, and then aside to the drakiri escorting him.

"What has been done to him?" the risker demanded. That was what they called him, the others on the warehouse floor. Icarus had heard the word before, whispered among the humans. They must not have had a word for it that translated into their language.

"Something Esperanza did," the drakiri leading him said. "I don't know anything about it, don't bite my fuckin head off. I'm just the delivery drak."

A rattling hiss came from that impressive maw, and Icarus watched in silent amazement as the teeth opened, slow, deliberate breaths flowing in and out in a way that the kainu simply could not comprehend. Perhaps that was the thing he disliked about magic the most—it was something he could not understand. Try as he might, there would always be something that escaped his notice or that he simply didn't have the background to understand. People, places, things, he could understand those. Magic seemed so nebulous. Perhaps that was what drew him to Mijhael in the first place, why he felt so comforted by the drakiri's presence. He always

felt the need to understand what was going on around him, to learn everything about anything. He didn't feel that with Mijhael, and it comforted rather than irked him because he knew it wasn't something he was ever *going* to understand. And that was okay.

"Just fuckin' take him," the third drakiri said, sounding disgusted as he stepped back. "I'll be back in half an hour. He's scheduled for harvesting in forty-five minutes."

Only once the sound of the other drakiri's hooves had faded away did Mijhael surge forward out of the doorway, reaching out to put a hand on either side of Icarus's face. He turned the kainu's face side to side, looking for damage to his head or dysfunction in his pupils.

"Icarus, can you hear me?" he asked, his voice neutral in tone, but the concern was there—one simply had to look for it in his expression.

"I can," Icarus mumbled. His eyelids felt heavy as Mijhael held him, and he wanted nothing more than to lay down in Mijhael's nest—for it looked much more like a nest than a bed—and sleep beside the drakiri who had shown him such great kindness.

"Do you remember what they did? Did they give you something to eat or drink?" Mijhael asked as he led Icarus inside. He backed up and his brow furrowed when Icarus tripped over his own hooves, but the kainu remained standing.

"The healer, she touched me," Icarus said, shaking his head slightly as he recalled. "Violet light. Regrew my scales. I'm nearly whole again...isn't that nice?"

He turned to look up at Mijhael, and he felt the drakiri's sorrow, knew that Mijhael hated him being here as much as he did, but they were both currently powerless to change anything about it.

"You asked for this meeting didn't you," Mijhael asked. "Icarus, you must be careful. They know nothing of us, I would prefer to keep it that way, for your safety more than mine. If they decide to come for me, I can handle myself. But you have so much to lose."

"As I am reminded constantly," Icarus said. He made the mistake of closing his eyes and swayed on his hooves. Mijhael scooped him up and brought him to the nest where he made his bed. It was built of many blankets and pillows, soft to the touch and comfortable, yet firm enough to support. Icarus liked this nest...

"I asked because I fear for my Alina, my Mila," he murmured as he was laid in the nest, a pillow tucked under his head. "They told me twice, twice and then I would only have to twice a year. I want to see my children, Mijhael. I have not seen their faces in months. I have not heard their voices in longer. Please, I know how dangerous it is, but if I cannot see them, I fear I will lose my mind in this place."

Mijhael listened to him, and as he listened his hand moved slowly over Icarus's cheek, brushing the backs of his fingers over the fur there, watching the kainu's whisker coil loosely around his wrist in a gesture of comfort. "I want to," Mijhael said quietly. He opened his mouth as if to speak again, but his words stilled in his throat. He clenched his jaw and looked across the room to his desk, where the human technology—a laptop—sat open, screen black.

"Wait here," he said, as if the kainu would be able to move away. He moved from the nest across the room, stopping to throw the deadbolt on his door. He tapped a button on the keyboard—something he still struggled to use, if only because the size of it was not adapted for the hands of a drakiri—and used the touchpad to navigate on the screen. It took a long moment, and when he turned back around, he saw that Icarus had fallen asleep. He knew that he should let the poor kainu rest, but he also knew that they would have a moment such as this for a long time. He needed to make this happen for his friend...

"Icarus," he said, gently touching the other's side. Icarus roused, his eyelids opening before his eyes had rolled back down. He blinked slowly and squinted as Mijhael moved the laptop in front of his face, close enough to see the figures in the room. It was in black and white, but the young drakiri in the video were unmistakable.

"The feed is live, but I do not have access to it," Mijhael said solemnly. "This is footage from last week. Alina is studying the biology of mammals, Mila has taken to writing. I'm not sure what he writes about, we try to give them as much privacy as we can and I take no pleasure in reading the private thoughts of a child."

He watched Icarus's expression soften, his golden eyes full of all the love of a father and more. This drakiri loved his children fiercely, it was impossible not to tell.

"Mila is getting so big," he breathed, his voice choked with emotion. "I'm missing so much of their lives...six months is so long for youths, they are only children once."

"But you are their father forever," Mijhael reminded him. "Hold on just a little while longer. Everything will be alright."

Without knowing what to expect, Caledonia and Sammal had brought Eirwyn to the bedroom they found once they explored the house a little more. It was a simple bed set into the ground with steps leading into the depression in the foundation. There were piles of comfortable pillows and neatly folded blankets beside the steps that stretched all around. They brought Eirwyn there and laid her down with pillows to support her head and a blanket to cover her body.

They had hardly reached the bedroom door before they heard her stir and she grunted aggressively, "No! I will not sleep."

Sammal turned to look over her shoulder, her ears and tail perking in surprise to see the healer standing. It was a relief to see Eirwyn with her skin and ears again, to look at the kainu's eyes and see lids covering them. The creature they had stumbled upon in the woods seemed farther away now than ever, like some distant memory that she hoped stayed wherever it retreated to.

"You just healed yourself, you should rest," Sammal said, trotting back toward the edge of the recess. "Whatever you did with that crystal—that has to have taken a lot out of you."

Eirwyn cast the blanket aside, grabbing it by the corner with her mouth and pulling it away with a snap. She walked up the steps, stumbling over her own hooves, but she didn't stop as she shouldered past Caledonia and slammed the bedroom door out of her way.

Caledonia met her gaze as she scurried past him, she had no idea what had upset the healer so much, but she was just as worried about it. If Eirwyn was stressed, they all should be.

By the time Sammal found her way back into the main room of the house, she found Eirwyn standing in the center of the room, her horn glowing faintly with the use of magic. Jars and satchels floated to her, and Sammal had to lower her head quickly to avoid the copper ring that flew across the room toward the healer. The ring was large enough to have fit around Eirwyn's waist, but it settled on the floor in front of her instead, over a map of the continent that had just finished unrolling.

Eirwyn's legs trembled, the magic that caused her horn to glow began to fade, and she let out a vicious curse under her breath. The items fell to the floor, a satchel that sounded full of rocks hit with a loud *thud* followed by a spool of thread that rolled across the room to stop at Sammal's hooves. The sprite knelt to pick it up and walked over to set it on the floor beside the copper ring.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Magic," Eirwyn grumbled as she reached for the spool of thread and dragged the satchel closer. It was as big as Sammal's head, and when the healer opened it she saw that it was filled nearly to the brim with raw shards of violet crystals, none bigger than one of Sammal's own clawed toes.

"Are those more of that crystal you used?" Sammal asked, her eyes wide as she looked over the items that Eirwyn had spread out in front of her.

"Yes," Eirwyn snapped, glancing at her angrily. "Are you going to talk the entire time? I need to focus."

Her instinct to respond was squashed by her fear that she might upset Eirwyn further, so Sammal closed her mouth and shrank back, jumping when she felt something solid against her leg. She turned to see Caledonia standing behind her, letting out a soft, reassuring rumble.

Together they watched as Eirwyn fished out a chunk of crystal, her eyes focused as she tucked another shard of crystal between her teeth. It glowed faintly violet and she tied a string around the crystal, the other end dangling from the end of her horn. She lifted her leg, hesitated as she looked down at her ankle and gave her head a hard shake. She bit her ankle and held it over a silver bowl on the floor, spitting a wad of hair and skin into it.

Blood trickled down her leg and dripped from the claws on her hoof. As she leaned her head down, she dipped the crystal into the blood, swirling it so blue hairs clung to it. She spoke in a language that sounded like the slithering of a snake's belly across the forest floor. It chittered and clicked like the prey animals that hid in burrows from the snakes.

The healer moved her leg so blood dripped onto the copper circle, and the air above it shimmered with power as the circle was completed. Eirwyn leaned over the map with the bloody crystal on its string, and the crystal glowed from within, casting her face in violet light. The crystal circled the map once, twice, three times before it jerked down hard enough that Eirwyn grunted as her horn was yanked. The crystal began dragging along the paper, following a river that Sammal could see and smearing blood along its northern bank. When it stopped moving, Eirwyn leaned back and looked further up the river.

"They're travelling toward Dorn'Drugar," she growled. She spat something in a language Sammal could not understand and the sprite jumped, her nerves on edge from what she had just witnessed. Magic was unnerving at the best of times, seeing it performed in front of her, using such items, it frightened and fascinated her.

"What's in Dorn'Drugar?" she asked in a small voice.

"Cocksuckers and vermin," the healer snapped. "Rats, the lot of them. They consort with humans and their ilk, selling whatever they can get their grubby hooves on. It's been rumored that something was brewing in the bowels of that country, but the governing body doesn't care enough to regulate what happens there, as long as they get their cut."

Maybe it was the blank expressions on their faces, maybe the silence that followed her words, something drew Eirwyn's gaze to the two children and she explained in a dramatically slow voice, "Cri-mi-nals, they're all criminals! You're as dense as you are young."

She reached up to pull the crystal string from her horn, letting it fall to the floor as she struggled to her feet.

"Where are you going?" Sammal asked anxiously. "Shouldn't you rest?"

"I'm going to get my skin back," Eirwyn growled, her expression drawn as if she had to focus hard to put one hoof in front of the other. "Not going to let that...that *bitch*--"

Caledonia moved faster than Sammal could recognize something was wrong. He left her side and pressed his shoulder against Eirwyn's flank, propping her up so she wouldn't fall.

"Get off of me!" the kainu snarled, recoiling from Caledonia until she fell back against a bookshelf, knocking the lowest shelves loose and spilling the jars and bowls onto the floor. She took several deep breaths, pupils wide and ears flat back against her skull. The fur along her spine was raised up, and she held herself as if she were in pain.

"Eirwyn, we don't mean any harm," Sammal said, her own voice shaking. She didn't understand what was happening and she wanted to help, but as she drew closer, Caledonia flicked his short tail and looked over his shoulder at her shaking his head. She stopped, feeling helpless in her worry, but trusting Caledonia that he knew what needed to happen.

The room fell into an uncomfortable silence, where only Eirwyn's labored breathing could be heard. They waited, still as death itself, until the kainu turned her head away, let out a slow breath and moved away from the bookshelf.

"You're young and foolish but not dumb," Eirwyn said begrudgingly. Her voice was still tense, but calmer now. "I am sorry I snapped at you. This changes nothing about what I said, I have to go after them."

Sammal feared being yelled at again if she spoke, but Caledonia couldn't ask the questions she wanted answered. So in a small voice, with her head low, the sprite asked, "Why is it important that you get your skin back?"

Eirwyn paused, breathed deeply, and let it out slowly. She didn't look at Sammal as she said, "There are more disciplines of magic in this world than stars in the sky, each is minutely different than the next, there is no way to know what someone could do with something like a skin. They took my horn, my scales, everything that makes *me* who I am. Blood magic is a terrible thing, and it can be used in terrible ways. All they need is a hair to wreak havoc on its owner. I have made enemies over my lifetime, powerful enemies who would cut off their own limb to see me suffer. I would rather not risk my life hoping my skin winds up in the hands of some magically-stunted elf."

She started off toward the kitchen, but she paused and looked back at Sammal finally. She asked, "You...I've seen you before. What is your name?"

"Sammal," the sprite said. She lifted her foreleg, giving it a little shake as she said, "You helped me with my knee years ago. Milarose brought me to you."

Her eyes widened for a moment and she asked, "Milarose—is he with you?"

"No," Sammal replied solemnly. She looked to Caledonia as the younger drakiri moved to stand at her side again. "He saved Caledonia from the poachers and they caught up with him. He let

himself be taken so he could save us. I-I don't know if he's okay, but he was hurt really bad when they took him."

Eirwyn's jaws clenched and she shook her head. "That idiot. I told him to be careful when last we spoke. Even more reason to go. You two can stay here, you'll only slow me down."

Indignation swelled in Sammal's chest and she stepped forward, brow furrowed as she said, "No! If you're going to find Milarose, we're coming with you. He sacrificed himself for us, we can't just sit here and twiddle our hooves."

"I am not babysitting and listening to you two babble about how tired you are three days into it," Eirwyn said as she walked into the kitchen.

"Caledonia can't even talk!" Sammal argued resentfully. "You're too weak, I'm too small and he doesn't have a tongue anymore, we'll be lucky if we can even catch up to the poachers, let alone stop them when we find them!"

"I'm not doing this out of some righteous need to stop the bad guys," Eirwyn retorted, appearing in the doorway to the main room again. "I'm doing this to save my own skin—or to get it back...you know what I mean. I don't care who else is wrapped up in all this poaching business, I'm getting my skin and I'm leaving this place for good."

Sammal's ears flicked back and she asked, "What? Why would you leave?"

"I'm not going to stay in the home where I was attacked and abducted," Eirwyn said. "You're young, you might not understand why I cannot. This house means nothing to me, I will find another and I will rebuild. Those who need me will find me. That's all there is to it."

Eirwyn was right, Sammal didn't understand, but she thought she could eventually. She felt the same way about the barn. If they ever went back, it would never feel like home again. Not after she watched the primal crash through the wall and attack Milarose.

She shuddered and stamped her hoof on the floor in a childish but validating gesture as she said, "We're coming with you. We don't need you to help us, we know they're travelling along that river, so we'll follow it too. We'll find Dorn'Drugar and we'll find Milarose."

The healer stalked back into the room and came to stand right in front of Sammal, towering over her as she hissed, "We, we, we, this is an awful lot of *we* for a half-grown sprite with a bum knee who can hardly do more than stand on her own four legs. What will you do? You and this tongueless child, will you talk the poachers to death? Whine at them about how much you miss your papa before they drop dead from annoyance? You have no skills, you have no weapons, you have and are *nothing* to these people. You said Milarose got Caledonia away from the poachers, you would disrespect his memory by bringing him back to them?"

Grief struck her as suddenly as lightning and she took a step back, looking down and away from Eirwyn. She had spent so long trying to convince herself that she was useful, but Eirwyn had all but torn that confidence down with a handful of words.

“Heh ot eh,” Caledonia rumbled in his surprisingly deep voice.

Eirwyn’s gaze snapped to the primal crossbreed, looking him over critically now. “You sound ridiculous, stop trying to speak,” she said.

“The poachers took his tongue,” Sammal said, but she couldn’t bring herself to raise her gaze again.

Eirwyn passed by them, her long tail twitching in annoyance as she stooped to pick up another of the crystals—a larger shard than the one she had tied to her horn. She passed it to Caledonia, who took it between his teeth and then tilted his head back slightly so it moved further into his mouth. “Keep this in your mouth and focus.”

Caledonia did as he was told, and in a few moments the crystal began to glow, the light showing through the broken and chipped parts of his teeth. The hair on Caledonia’s shoulders and neck stood on end, his tail trembled and he tossed his head once. But when the crystal fell from his mouth, a healthy pink tongue darted out to lick his nose.

“I never thought I’d be so glad to taste a rock in my life,” Caledonia said.

Sammal felt a relief she didn’t entirely understand when her friend spoke. Yes, she was glad he could communicate now, but she also felt relieved that he was no longer suffering. It must have been painful and she had seen how he struggled to eat without his tongue. She hoped he would be better now.

“A mineral, but I’m sure it’s all the same to you,” Eirwyn said. “You were saying?”

Caledonia frowned and worked his jaw a couple of times, as if getting used to the feeling of his tongue in his own mouth once more. After a moment he said, “Milarose isn’t dead. The poachers wouldn’t kill a dracus, their scales are big, their teeth and claws are too. We can try to get him out. You’re wrong about us not having anything. We can always do something. We only fail if we don’t try.”

“That is young-people horse shit,” Eirwyn said flatly. “But if you want to risk your necks in the woods, fine. I will not be risking mine. If you get left behind, you better hope you know how to forage or hunt.”

“You said it yourself, we’re young and foolish, not stupid,” Caledonia said with a curt nod.

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When Icarus's eyelids were too heavy to stay open any longer, Mijhael closed the laptop and set it aside. He stayed in the nest with the exhausted kainu, his hand stroking softly over the beautiful coat that covered lean muscle. When first Mijhael had seen the kainu, he'd thought him half-starved. But as he came to know Icarus, he realized what an active lifestyle the other drakiri led. Travelling the continent on a whim required a certain degree of preparedness, and being fit enough to do so was important.

He felt guilt burn low in his body, somewhere among his belly he thought, though guilt was an unfamiliar emotion still. All his life he had been sure of himself and his place in the world, confident that he was exactly where he ought to be. But events had led him to this place, to this nest, to sit beside this drakiri and look down at his pelt and feel an emotion he was never meant to feel. He had undervalued Icarus's coat significantly, knowing that the harvesting would be more rigorous if he had valued it truly to his initial assessment. It had been one of the two conditions that allowed him to green light the removal of children from their father and what amounted to the torture of such a pure heart.

His hand stilled on Icarus's flank, feeling the steady rise and fall of his chest with each sleeping breath he took. Beyond that, Mijhael felt the drumming, slow beat of the kainu's heart, watched his nostrils twitch in his sleep. Were his dreams wonderful? Filled with life and light and the things Icarus had seen and done in his waking world? Or were they fraught with fear and darkness, feeding the creature who lurked in the shadows?

"I will not let them harm you," he said, finally realizing that he meant the words this time. He'd said it before, years ago, in a different lifetime, in a different world it seemed sometimes. He had said those words, and he had held them true. But in the end, death always comes, and he cannot keep promises that laugh in the face of death.

Mijhael glanced at the clock that hung on his wall before he stroked the backs of his fingers against Icarus's cheek to rouse him. The kainu's eyes opened and he jerked back with a start before his pupils contracted and focused.

"What's wrong?" he mumbled, clearly still half asleep.

"Your escort will return any minute," Mijhael said quietly. "I wanted to give you time to fully wake before they take you."

The kainu's expression tightened, but that was as far as it went. It was clear to Mijhael that Icarus was scared, but neither of them could have stopped what had to come next. Icarus had one more harvest, one more and then he could go. Mijhael would ensure it.

He helped Icarus to his hooves and held the kainu's face for a short while longer, stroking his ears and letting him lean against him for support. There was only so much Mijhael could do for

now. Helplessness was not a feeling that sat well with him, and he was going to do something about it.

When the drakiri returned to escort Icarus away, Mijhael waited and watched as they walked together down the long hallway toward the main warehouse. He gritted his teeth, closed his eyes and took a slow, deep breath. Then he closed his office door and followed the same hall. Instead of turning left to reach the warehouse, he turned right and descended a flight of steps swiftly, his paws hardly touching the cold, unforgiving concrete before he lighted on the floor far beneath.

This level of the factory looked much the same as the one above, except there were no lights whatsoever. He could peer through the darkness as if his eyes themselves were his lights. He had taken perhaps three steps forward before he saw a lithe form slink from one room to another father ahead, a lithe form with a flowing mane, slender limbs, and fur as pink as the petals of a spring rose.

"Have you finally come to your senses?" Esperanza asked, a honeyed purr in her voice as she reappeared in the doorway of the room. "You haven't come down into my quarters since I nearly caught you on my snare all those years ago. You must have changed your mind..."

"I didn't hear you prattling on upstairs with the dracus, so I assumed I would find you here," Mijhael said, his voice short but not impolite. "I have come to speak with you, nothing more."

As she prowled closer, her steps soft and almost dainty against the floor as she moved with dramatized ease. She was trying to show off the sleekness of her body, her impressive mane, even going so far as to flick her short, fluffy tail as what must have seemed like an invitation for further exploration to any other drakiri who wandered into her quarters. Mijhael had seen it all before, and though he had been briefly intrigued, her ambition had quickly extinguished that.

"Talking is so boring," she sighed, her shoulders sagging as she realized she wasn't getting anywhere with him. She frowned and narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously. "You're certain I can't even tempt you?"

"Quite," Mijhael said curtly. "I'm here to talk about Icarus."

"Of course you are," Esperanza said with a dramatic roll of her eyes. She turned away from him, her gait snappier now as she strode away and turned into a room. It remained dark as Mijhael followed her in, but he didn't mind. He couldn't imagine how unnerving this must have been for any drakiri who lacked the ability to see in the dark.

"You've seen him recently enough, did he not answer your questions?" the dracus asked, turning sharply to face him. The room was entirely empty except for a mass of blankets that must have served as a nest. It was not to Mijhael's tastes.

“He requested an audience with me, considering my role as the guardian of his children,” Mijhael replied coolly. “That is entirely acceptable.”

“I did not start this business to cater to what is *entirely acceptable,*” Esperanza sneered. “I did it for money and power. The more time you spend with lost little kainu who can’t stand being away from their children for a few months, the less time you spend appraising pelts and assessing risks.”

His frustration with Esperanza edged closer to outright disgust—how could she say such things about Icarus? About anyone, for that matter? How many mothers and fathers had she already stolen away from their families? She had killed drakiri in the past who did not submit and could not be controlled, she’d told him as much. How many had been children, just growing out of their baby fat and downy fur?

“I agreed to work for you for ten years, I did not agree to rip families apart and watch them suffer,” Mijhael said, watching as Esperanza moved to stand in the center of the mound of blankets and pawed at them, her claws tearing the fabric each time she lifted her hand.

“You agreed to work for me, that means you do what I say, when I say it and how I instruct you to do it,” she retorted. “If I tell you to isolate that kainu from every other living creature, you will do it. If I tell you to gut him from nose to balls with a butter knife, you’ll do it because I tell you to and you don’t get to complain about it—”

“No.”

Esperanza froze and looked up at him. Her blue eyes stared as she met his gaze, and Mijhael did not look away.

“I will no longer turn the other cheek,” he said. “You have your fun with the sapphire dracus, his pelt is worth only the color it bears, the same with his scales, you can tear into him and get whatever it is out that you need to so you have a clear head. But I will no longer bend to you. Icarus and his children will be released as soon as he is healed after this harvest.”

Esperanza remained still for a moment longer, then she padded toward him, each step deliberately placed. She didn’t stop until her nose was practically touching his, and Mijhael saw something peculiar in her eyes—burning mint green shot through the blue like a cobalt vein through ocean waters.

“Or what?” she asked, baring her teeth as she spoke. “What are you going to do if I take his squealing daughter and rip her throat out in front of him? Will you stop me if I tear that puny kainu’s skin off myself and wear it as a hat?”

The thought alone chilled Mijhael, and he clenched his teeth to still his tongue. He'd had enough. There was no reason for him to stay. His contract still had three years, but a contract was worthless if the one who held it was dead.

"As I thought," Esperanza hissed, her honey-sweet breath saturating the air around him so it was the only thing he smelled. "Go. Do as I bid. Or I will find someone else who will."

He left that floor and returned to his room, pacing and thinking until he could do neither any longer. But he still found no respite when he laid in his nest for the night. Icarus's scent lingered there, like the bright citrus of northern pines and the earthy musk of a freshly churned field, ready for planting. Thoughts of Icarus filled his mind, and he clutched the pillow to his chest, bending his neck to press his nose into it. Anything to escape that thick, saccharine sweetness that lingered in his nostrils.

He must have fallen asleep at some point, though he couldn't have said when. Perhaps it was between the thoughts of burning the warehouse to the ground to end the suffering he had helped cause and letting himself burn with it, but eventually he became aware of the dream around him. He was no longer in his bed, he found himself in a place he did not recognize. A dark, dank cave where he heard water dripping in the distance. Cold gravel rolled under his feet as he padded forward, looking around in confusion. Had he seen this place before? He must have, for he could see even insects roaming across the ground beneath his feet. This amount of detail, he surely must have at least read about a place such as this.

Mijhael stepped forward toward a pond that shimmered with the barest amount of light. It had a color, though he could not have said what it was, as it seemed to cascade through the entire visible spectrum as he peered into it from the shore. His eyes narrowed as he saw the light grow brighter farther into the murky water—if he could only look closer, he might be able to make out its source.

Motion caught his eye on the surface of the water and Mijhael's head jerked up. His maw opened and he hissed, teeth clicking together as he leaped away from the water's edge. Across the pond, hovering twenty feet off the ground, was a pair of vibrant, mint-green eyes. Their slitted pupils watched him as a low, rumbling growl echoed in the cave, vibrating along the water until the surface jumped in spikes and ripples.

"You will submit." The voice came from the rocks themselves, from the very darkness that surrounded him.

"And if I don't?" he challenged, meeting the eyes with his own stubborn gaze.

The eyes moved, and as they approached the weak, colorful light from the pond, Mijhael realized with a start that they were set in the skull of the largest drakiri he had ever seen in his life. The fur was pitch black except for a band of pale color around its throat and mane, but even that was lost in the darkness that surrounded it.

"I will take what you hold dear," the voice rumbled.

Mijhael's claws curled into the ground at the threat and his lip curled in disgust. Even in his dreams he could not escape these threats.

"I hold nothing dear," he all but spat.

The eyes blinked slowly, and an impossibly low laugh shook the gravel beneath him. Then the voice said as the light from the cave faded, throwing him into darkness, "Very well."