

Characters Involved:

<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1504> Milarose | 16,680
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1528> Icarus | 16,931
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1617> Rubin | 15,529
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1615> Giada | 15,529
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1563> Sammal | 15,837
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1583> Solpor | 15,489.
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1584> Helmi | 15,489
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1505> Azrinal | 15,281
<https://drakiri.com/character/I-1582> Cherie | 4,268

Word Count: 16,931

The sun shone brightly overhead as a proud red, yellow and gold kainu trotted down a forgotten dirt road toward an old barn. His multicolored scales and mane gleamed in the warm afternoon light and it took every ounce of his self control not to toss his head and gallop the rest of the way to the dilapidated building. This was his favorite kind of day, warm sun on his back, light breeze winding through his mane and tail like the cool fingers of a lover, and not a cloud to be seen in the sky. It was simply perfect.

He lifted his knees a little higher with each step, unable to help himself as he pranced toward the wide barn doors, long tail sweeping back and forth behind him as he held it high off the ground. His golden eyes lit up in delight as he approached the side of the barn, examining the faded red paint that had long since begun peeling away from the old wood.

"Ancient, dirty, likely to give me an infection if I step on a rusty nail...how marvelous!" he mused aloud, trotting toward the side of the barn. There was a fence in his way that looked to have been recently repaired--did someone actually live here? Or were they simply repairing it in their spare time? He didn't see a farmhouse nearby...strange. He surely hoped he might see someone here, as he had found himself in a bit of a tight spot.

As if on cue, the breeze kicked up and blew the kainu's main forward, the fence against his chest saving him from being knocked head over heels. It surprised him, but not nearly as much as when he turned around to find a massive creature staring down at him from less than a hundred feet away. It was blue from nose to tail tip with a flowing white mane and long white fur on its tail. Its fur gleamed in the sunlight, and as the kainu lifted his gaze to meet the creature's stunningly bright blue eyes, he realized this wasn't just some serpentine creature, it was another drakiri! The pronged horn growing from the center of its forehead should have been his first clue, but he had been rather distracted by the long claws that grew out of its fingered front hands, the sharp teeth that it bared at him. Even the long, tufted ears couldn't detract from that menacing stare, and the kainu felt his heart beat a little faster.

"Oh *my*," the kainu breathed, his eyes widening. He took a hesitant step forward, tail held carefully without lashing so he wouldn't startle the creature and said, "Hello there! My name is Icarus--"

His voice was drowned out by the furious roar that erupted from the drakiri and he stumbled back a step, whiskers twitching in alarm. This drakiri's breed was unfamiliar to Icarus, did he speak the common tongue?

"I'm sorry if I startled you but--"

Once more he was cut off by a loud snarl that made his whiskers vibrate and the stones under his hooves tremble.

"Turn around and leave," the stranger growled, voice low and as threatening as his posture.

"Oh you *do* speak the common tongue!" Icarus said excitedly, looking up at the aggressive drakiri in wonder.

"Do *you*?" the drakiri countered, taking a step forward as his back arched. "I've told you to leave, yet here you stand!"

"Oh!" Icarus said, letting out a blustery little laugh. "I certainly do speak the common tongue! My apologies, let me start again. My name is Ocarus Sinbad and I am horribly, irrevocably *lost*. I've been walking for a few days now and perhaps a few days before that, I'm not entirely sure. But I've seen neither hide nor hair of another soul, let alone another drakiri!"

The blue drakiri stared at him for a moment in silent incredulity, then shook his head and lashed his thick, strong tail behind him.

"How is that my problem?" he demanded. "Go back the way you came."

"Ah!" Icarus said eagerly, smiling sheepishly. "I thought you might say that. You see, I've no water and my hunting skills leave much to be desired, so I've eaten nothing more than a mouthful of berries that luckily didn't poison me. So I ask you, as one drakiri to another, for a sip of water and directions to the nearest town. That's all!"

"Counter offer," the stranger hissed, blue eyes narrowing as he took another step forward, forcing Icarus back until his ankles touched the rough wood of the fence. "Walk away now and I won't make you fertilizer for my pasture."

Icarus fell quiet for a moment before his ears pressed flat against his skull and he asked, "Pretty please?"

The other drakiri lunged at him and Icarus sprang away, leaning into a gallop as quickly as his legs would carry him. He bolted down the road until it was a speck on the horizon, where he skidded to a halt and coughed in the dust that settled around him.

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Milarose watched the golden kainu gallop away, kicking up clouds of dust and dirt in his wake. Icarus...what a ridiculous drakiri. He didn't seem to have a bone in his body dedicated to self-preservation.

Shaking his head, Milarose turned and kicked off the ground again into the air, wind whipping his mane back from his face as he flew high into the sky. He looked out across the vast grasslands that rolled out around the barn, long blades swaying in the breeze like an undulating ocean of seaweed. In the distance, he spotted the black and white hides of the two cows he had brought, not too far from the tree he had left them by.

When he'd seen the stranger approaching the barn, Milarose had dropped the cows off somewhere he hoped they wouldn't run away from, and now he flew to pick them up again. Of course they protested when he picked each of them up in one arm, braying and writhing, but he had a good grip on them both.

As he touched down in the pasture, Milarose heard a young voice call from in the barn, "You found some!"

He set the cows in the grass and watched them run to the other side of the large enclosure, throwing themselves against the fence he had repaired for this exact purpose. It rattled slightly but stayed firm even under their panicked attempts to escape.

"Mila, what were you yelling at?" came another small voice, deeper and more insistent than the first.

"Nothing you need concern yourselves with," he replied as he walked over to the wide barn doors. But rather than pulling them open, he leaned to the left of them and reached one large arm through a window in the side of the barn, waiting patiently. "How is your leg, Sammal?"

He heard small grunts and the crunching of dry hay under small hooves before he felt a thin rope placed in his hand.

"All better," Sammal chirped, her voice fading as she hurried to meet Milarose at the door.

The dracus pulled the rope and heard the locking mechanism shift before the doors slowly opened. Every time it opened without problem was a relief, the first few times he'd had to pry the doors open with his claws and rebuild the lock he'd created from scavenged pieces of metal and

gears from places he visited. Was he paranoid to lock up when he left the barn? Perhaps...but he had important charges to protect.

Sammal, a young diluted jade sprite with yellow streaks in her mane, intriguing tabby stripes and a remarkably small horn for her age, greeted him with a bounce and a small kick of her back legs. The sickly child he had found limping through the wilderness with a badly broken foreleg and a skin condition that had all but stripped her of her fur was a distant memory as he looked at Sammal now.

"Where are the others?" Milarose asked, expending a minor effort of will to shrink his size so he could fit more comfortably in the barn. Once upon a time it had been an annoyance to have to do, but if it meant he was able to take care of his charges more effectively, he would do so.

"Giada saw a mouse and tried to hunt it but he missed, so he and Rubin are trying to find it," Sammal said, smiling as Milarose reached out to brush hay out of her mane where it had gotten stuck.

"Helmi? Solpor?" Milarose asked, looking in the direction of the hayloft where he knew one of those two liked to spend his time.

"Solpor was down here a second ago, but Azrinal started fussing so he went to take care of him," Sammal said. She let out a sigh and followed Milarose's gaze to the hayloft. "Helmi's up there still, hiding. I think he's mad but I never know why anymore."

Milarose stood on his hind legs so he could look into the hayloft, catching a glimpse of vivid green fur and gold scales before the bantam dracus vanished back into his hiding spot.

"You'll have to come out soon, Helmi," Milarose warned. "Azrinal isn't going anywhere and I'm going to need your help feeding him. You might as well try to get along with him."

When he received no response, Milarose sat on his haunches and looked down at Sammal with warmth in his gaze.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," he chuckled. "This place would fall apart without your watchful attention."

Sammal smiled bashfully and scuffed the hay on the floor with her hoof as she said, "I don't do that much, Mila. Solpor helped a lot today. I didn't know how to make Azrinal stop crying, he's so little."

As if he had been waiting for a signal, Solpor--a young Q'Lin with black satiny fur and frosted white specks, a dark brown mane and curled tail who was all elbows and knees--walked out of one of the four stalls where the children slept at night. He had a burlap sack tied around his waist with a sandbag on one side and an olive-colored, white maned dracus whelp on the other.

Azrinal was the youngest child Milarose had ever found, abandoned at the oasis in the desert far away. The poor thing's eyes weren't even open and he still didn't have his milk teeth. He was the reason Milarose had gone out to find the cows.

"Has he slept all day?" Milarose asked, reaching into the sack to pull Azrinal out, lifting the child into the crook of his arm close to his chest. He set the improvised sling on the ground and gave Solpor a pat on the shoulder in approval.

"Most of the day," Solpor confirmed, deep voice cracking slightly. "When he was awake, all he did was cry."

"I know you prefer peace and quiet, Solpor, I'm sure that must have been difficult to handle," Milarose said. "Thank you for stepping up to help. I can take things from here."

As soon as he said the words, Solpor's demeanor changed, his head lowered and his shoulders slumped, eyelids sliding half shut as he turned and walked toward his stall on the far end of the barn. Solpor certainly wasn't a social butterfly; interacting with others seemed to exhaust him quickly, which made his willingness to help even more valuable.

"Sammal, can you please go out and see how panicked the cows are?" he asked as Azrinal began to stir in his arm, snuffling around looking for food. "The farmer who raised the them told me they can't be milked if they are stressed."

"Sure!" Sammal chirped, scampering off out of the barn doors. She reappeared a moment later and said, "They're eating grass! Is that normal?"

"Yes," Milarose chuckled. "They eat grass. They're used to small herding animals running around them, ask Helmi if he would round them up into the stalls outside?"

"I don't think he's gonna come out Mila," Sammal said, looking uncertainly up at the hayloft.

"He will, unless he wants me to tell Rubin he can wrestle with him after all," Milarose said, raising his voice so he could be heard by both children.

"Do it!" a headstrong voice shouted from some forgotten corner of the barn. A moment later, a young kainu with chestnut fur covered in lighter spots and turquoise blue scales stumbled out from behind a stack of hay, shaking his head to dislodge a clump from his growing horn. "I wanna see Helmi climb the walls again!"

"Shut up, Giada!" Helmi snapped, his voice muffled by the hay but no less indignant.

"Huh?" asked another young kainu named Rubin as he trotted out from the stalls. He had dark reddish brown fur with an equally dark mane and yellow eyes. He was covered horn to hoof in

dust and hay, though it was especially caked on his muzzle and in the corners of his nostrils. Their hunt for the mouse must have gone poorly, though not from lack of trying.

"Alright, everyone calm down," Milarose said as Azrinal began to cry again. "Helmi, come down here and help or I will come up there after you, and then no one gets to go in the hayloft anymore because there will no longer *be* a hayloft."

"HA! Mila called himself fat," Giada snorted as he trotted over to stand beside Rubin. The two were a study in contrasts. They were the same age, but where Giada was slender and sleek, built for speed and agility, Rubin was stocky and muscular, built for power and strength. Despite how different their personalities were, they were attached at the hip and had been since they'd been brought here half a year before. Giada was smart and cunning, unafraid to give his opinion on anything and everything. Rubin, however, seemed not to understand what was happening half the time, but he was always down to wrestle.

"He's not fat! He's an adult dracus," Sammal protested, shouting to be heard over Azrinal's crying. "Be nicer to him, he does so much for us."

"We can have this discussion later," Milarose said hurriedly, relieved to see Helmi sliding down the ramp that he'd built leading from the ground floor to the hayloft. "Helmi, please get the cows into the milking pens and lock them in. Rubin, please move one of the bales of hay into the trough so they have something to eat and distract them."

There was a flurry of motion as the little ones went about their tasks, and Milarose didn't miss that Sammal had taken her weight off her right foreleg, the one that had been broken. She would need to rest tonight and make sure she took it easy.

Milarose moved to the barn doors once more and watched Helmi herd the cows to the milking pens he had constructed out of thin young trees lashed together with rope. Helmi was able to change course rapidly to keep the cows going in the right direction, sharp claws digging hard into the ground to drive himself forward. He might not have wanted to, but this work suited him.

Meanwhile, Rubin emerged from the barn with a heavy bale of hay balanced between his short horns. They were perfectly shaped to carry the bale and drop it into the trough, which helped immensely with this task.

As he watched the children work, Milarose moved Azrinal so the child's front was pressed to the warm scales on his chest. The babe was so thin Milarose could feel ribs under his skin. His little body trembled with the force of his wailing, each cry reaching into Milarose's very core and calling to him to do something to soothe the child.

As soon as Helmi locked the cows into the milking pens, Milarose passed the child to him. Helmi carried Azrinal to the first cow and held the child under the animal, and Milarose watched

intently as Helmi reached forward and pressed on the udder, squeezing a teet so when he lifted Azrinal closer, the milk dribbled between his parted lips to his bright pink tongue.

Azrinal latched on quickly and nursed with gusto, reaching out with small hands to massage the udder. Seeing Azrinal eat finally filled Milarose with such relief he felt light-headed. He sagged and leaned against the barn doors, closing his eyes for a moment and rubbing his face with his hands.

"Does this mean he's gonna be okay?" Sammal asked nervously, looking up at him from just outside the barn doors.

"It means he has a better chance now," Milarose said. "But remember, little one, nothing in this life is guaranteed. He could still fade and leave us, Sammal."

"I know," the young sprite said solemnly. "I hope he gets stronger."

Milarose reached down to hook a finger gently under her foreleg, pulling it up slightly off the ground so he could see the joint more clearly. He tutted softly and said, "This is swollen again. Have you been resting like I told you?"

"Yes," Sammal said quickly, but she didn't look at him when she spoke. She squirmed in discomfort for a moment before he blurted out, "I can't rest! There's so much to do, and the boys are always running around causing a mess. I can't just--"

"You can do a whole lot less with an injured leg," Milarose interrupted gently. "Rest, and if you feel the need to yell at the boys, do so from a comfortable nest on the floor. Go on inside, I'll stay out here a while longer and make sure Helmi and Azrinal get back inside safely."

Sammal sighed and hung her head in defeat, but Milarose knew she understood why he said these things and why he wanted her to be careful. It was a long trip to Eirwyn, the only healer they had access to who Milarose trusted, and they couldn't leave the others alone long enough if Sammal needed to go to her again.

"Are you gonna nap?" she asked hopefully, looking up at Milarose once more.

"I think so," Milarose said with a slight nod. "It's been a long day, and I expect it will only get longer. I intend to hunt tonight, we're low on food and Solpor and Helmi's appetites are growing with them. I'll be in shortly, find a comfortable spot in the main room and you can rest with me."

The sprite nodded back and trotted away into the barn, limping a little more heavily than normal. Once she was safely inside, Milarose turned his attention back to Helmi and the cow, watching the striped and spotted green dracus.

He often wondered what had happened to Helmi before he showed up at this barn. Milarose hadn't gone out looking for him. In fact, Helmi was the first of the children who had stayed here. He'd been a shy but sweet young bantam dracus for the first year. More and more, though, it seemed like Helmi was becoming wary of all the newcomers to their home. Now it was like he was hostile toward the others in the barn and wanted as little to do with them as possible. But as Helmi held Azrinal, he could see a warmth in the child's yellow eyes that told Milarose he was an older sibling. Helmi didn't like talking about his past, and it was difficult to try to guess what had happened with any accuracy, so Milarose had stopped trying.

Helmi's head turned suddenly and locked eyes with Milarose, whiskers and short, cervine tail lashing as he demanded, "What? Why are you staring at me like that?"

The moment was over, and Milarose felt sorry it had passed with such little consideration. But he could not force a child to empathize with him or to accept his help. So he said, "My apologies, I was just watching Azrinal. Make sure you support his head, he's too young to do it himself. Once he's done bring him inside please and lie him on his belly."

"Whatever," Helmi growled.

When he finally laid down, Milarose pulled the soft, shaved wood bedding close into a pile between his front legs. Helmi came in a moment later with Azrinal gently clasped between his jaws, setting him in the mound of bedding.

"I don't suppose you'd like to join us?" Milarose asked. He received no answer, instead watching as Helmi turned and scurried up the ramp to the hayloft in a few bounding steps. "Thought not."

He leaned his head down to press his muzzle against Azrinal's cheek, checking if he was feverish. He felt cold, if anything, so Milarose pulled him close to his chest to hold him.

Sammal came to lay with her back against his hind leg and he wrapped his tail closer around her so she could rest her chin on it. Rubin and Giada came to join them soon after. Giada laid nearby without touching him, whereas Rubin shoved his head under Milarose's arm between his elbow and his chest--an odd way to nap, but to each their own he supposed. And although Helmi and Solpor would not join them, he at least could hear them in their respective, preferred spots.

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It was easier to hunt and travel in the early evening. Most of the time, Milarose didn't even leave home until the day was over. But he needed to ensure Azrinal ate as his first priority that day.

He hunted deer mostly, as they were abundant and worth the effort of chasing them down across the grasslands. They were also easier to butcher and cook, as the children preferred the tougher parts of the deer cooked. Only the older children would eat the tender cuts raw and



even then only if they were fresh. Milarose himself didn't have a preference, if he had the time and inclination, he would cook. If he didn't, he would eat his prey raw.

Milarose had spent all night hunting and into the wee hours of the morning. He looked out across the field he found himself in as he pushed a metal rod through the ankles of the four does and two bucks he had hunted. Had he heard something? No, no one else should have been out here, this area was incredibly secluded.

He kicked off the ground with his catch, intending to return home, but his gaze was drawn to the ground by a splash of red, yellow, gold and bright orange among the tall, dark green grass. It took only a moment for him to puzzle out what he was looking at, and Milarose sighed in annoyance. It was the kainu, Icarus.

The dracus flew down to land on the ground, setting his deer aside where he could quickly grab them again should he need to leave in a hurry. But as much as he wanted to just continue on, he couldn't rationalize leaving Icarus there so close to the barn.

He expected the kainu to stir as he came closer, but the drakiri remained still in the grass. Milarose watched closely and felt his heart sink when he realized he couldn't see the kainu's chest rising and falling with his breath.

"Damn you," he muttered, reaching out to slide his hand under the drakiri's head and watching it slide bonelessly to the ground when he set it back down. "Why didn't you go home? Why were you even out this far?"

The kainu's throat convulsed suddenly and his eyelid slid slowly open, iris rolling down from the back of his head so his pupil could slowly focus. Milarose jumped back with a start, his skin crawling and his tail lashing in alarm.

"S'a funny story actually," the kainu rasped, voice as parched as his throat must have been from the dryness of his nose and lips.

"Do you realize I could crush your head in *one* hand?" Milarose demanded, angry as adrenaline pumped through his veins for no good reason. "Why are you lying here looking like a damn corpse?"

"I've always wondered what it might be like to be one?" he suggested, trying to sound cheeky, but the rattling, dry cough he let out didn't help him any.

"If you startle me again I promise you won't have to wonder," Milarose snapped. He shook his head and lifted Icarus so the kainu still laid on the ground, but he was at least sitting up. Icarus stayed sitting up for approximately ten seconds before he let out a groan and rolled onto his side.

"What's wrong with you?" Milarose asked, quickly losing his patience.

"Dehydration I suspect," Icarus croaked. "I laid down to rest and well...now when I sit up the world goes a little sideways. I must say though, it was lovely to wake up to being caressed by a handsome fellow whose name I still don't know."

Milarose stared at Icarus, clearly unamused, and said, "You know, you talk a lot for someone dying of thirst. There's a river two miles southeast of here, did you not know that?"

"Unlike your magnificent self, I seem to be vertically challenged and without the ability to fly," Icarus replied. "Hard to see things far away."

"You have a nose, smell for water," Mila pointed out, growing increasingly more frustrated with the kainus's excuses.

"Do I? Could have fooled me, the thing hasn't been of much use to me lately," Icarus mused.

"Enough!" Milarose growled, and the grass around them whipped into a frenzy in his anger, stirred by wind that seemed to originate from himself. "The more you speak, the easier it seems for me to leave you here to die, you insufferable cur. Why are you out here? Are you alone?"

"I am alone," Icarus confirmed. He was quiet for a moment before he said, "Would you believe that I was following a fairy?"

Milarose closed his eyes for a moment and rubbed one dirty hand over his equally dirty face, suppressing another sight before he asked in his best trying-not-to-explode tone, "What is a fairy?"

"Well actually I'm not entirely sure it was a fairy," Icarus admitted. "But it was a bright light! I was in a dark forest with giant illuminated mushrooms as big as whole trees!"

Milarose squinted and shook his head in confusion. "Mushrooms? That forest is half a continent away, how long have you been walking?"

"I couldn't tell you," Icarus said as cheerfully as he could manage. "But I *can* tell you my belly feels as hollow as a walnut after a squirrel has found it."

Floundering in frustration and disbelief, Milarose looked back at the deer he had caught and then at the struggling kainu. He could just leave him...he could do it. It would be so easy. But he imagined how Sammal would look at him if she knew he had turned someone in need of help away.

"If you try anything stupid you're going to regret it," he said gruffly as he picked Icarus up out of the grass with one arm and held him tight to his body. Then with his other hand he grabbed the metal pole with the deer hanging from it and prepared to leave.

"You smell just delightful," Icarus said. "Like warm hay and adventure--"

"Stop smelling me," Milarose ordered, already thoroughly regretting his own decision to take this kainu in. He shook his head and leaped off the ground into the air, expending energy and magic to fly. It wasn't much harder for him with Icarus, because he was so much larger than the kainu, but he had to force himself to concentrate on where he flew.

Icarus was blessedly quiet during the flight, but he kept lifting his head, turning it from side to side. It took Milarose a moment to understand what he was doing, and when he figured it out, he felt surprised. The kainu couldn't fly--this was probably the first time he ever had. He was enjoying the feeling of the wind on his face. It seemed so...innocent.

They made it home before long and Milarose touched down in the pasture, hanging the metal rod on the hooks that were buried in the barn wall for just this purpose. The deer swayed slightly but the rod stayed in place. Only then did he walk over to the trough outside the barn doors to hold Icarus over the water so he could drink, waiting patiently.

Icarus drank long and deeply, eyes closed and taking short, gasping breaths only when he absolutely needed to. And after several long moments, Icarus moved his head away from the trough, water dripping from his nostrils and down his whiskers.

"Thank you," the kainu sighed in relief. "I thought you might live here. It's charming, really! I'm in love with the rustic, country living vibe."

Choosing to ignore the backhanded compliment, Milarose walked with the kainu to the barn doors and put his hand through the window calling, "Sammal, open the doors please."

There was a beat of silence in which Milarose could hear the nervous shuffling of multiple sets of hooves. They had heard Icarus, then, and knew he was here. The children had every right to be nervous, this was their home and a stranger had just been brought here. Milarose could only ask for their patience and tolerance.

"It's okay Sammal, he's calm and couldn't try anything if he wanted to," Milarose said, his voice understanding and gentle.

After another moment, he felt the rope press into his palm and he pulled slowly but firmly, hearing the locking mechanism groan and shudder in protest but pull away to open the doors. He released the rope and stepped inside, shrinking himself slightly so he could fit more easily.

"Oh my!" Icarus breathed. "I knew some magic users could change their sizes but I've never experienced it myself, that was incredible!"

"Do you just say whatever comes to mind, or is there a thought process behind what comes out of your mouth?" Milarose asked as he hauled the kainu over to the corner of the barn farthest from the stalls. He scraped up bedding from where he made his own nest and set Icarus down rather unceremoniously.

"A little of both I think," Icarus said thoughtfully. "Probably more the latter if I'm honest."

Milarose shook his head and turned to fetch the deer but paused when he saw children poking their heads out from behind hay bales and wooden walls. The only ones who didn't look hostile were Rubin and Sammal, though Solpor was nowhere to be found.

"Who's that?" Giada demanded.

"Is he going to stay with us?" Sammal asked, confused. "But he looks like an adult..."

"He's hurt," Milarose explained, stepping out for a moment to bring the deer inside, dragging an old bucket close to himself. "He won't be here for long, he just needs to rest and then he'll be on his way."

"Don't you worry!" Icarus said as he watched Milarose cut open one of the deer from navel to groin and pull the guts out. "I'm just a lost traveller is all, I won't bother you and your father for long."

"He's not our father," Helmi snarled from the hayloft. This was a point of contention with him, one that Milarose had been very careful not to cross for fear of making the rift between him and the young dracus worse.

"Oh, my mistake then," Icarus said, sounding sincerely regretful. It didn't last long, though, as he looked up and around at all the children he hadn't seen before. "My goodness! Look at all of you, you're an eclectic bunch aren't you? Let's see, I see a couple of young kainus like myself, a beautiful young sprite and--oh my I'm afraid I can't quite see that one back there. I promise I don't bite!"

Solpor, who must have found the courage to investigate what was going on, shrank back, his glossy black coat blending in well with the shadows of the barn to hide him.

"Is this a roll call?" Milarose asked dubiously.

"It's meant to be an introduction, but I understand your suspicion," Icarus said with a slight nod. "I'm already invading your home, I might as well try to be friendly."

"Helmi," Milarose called, "Would you please feed Azrinal while I prepare dinner?"

After his previous threat of tearing down the hayloft, Helmi seemed to have come to the conclusion that doing as Milarose asked the first time he was asked would be the best way to get Milarose to leave him alone. But he made it clear that he wasn't please with the arrangement by growling ferociously as he passed them on his way to the stalls.

When Helmi returned holding Azrinal in his mouth by the neck, Icarus let out a quiet gasp and breathed excitedly, "Another one! Please, are your breeds? I've traveled far and wide and have yet to encounter drakiri like yourselves!"

Helmi didn't so much as look at Icarus before he headed straight for the door, setting Azrinal down in the bedding nearest to it so he could round up the cows in their pens.

"They're dracus," Giada sneered. "Even babies know that. Are you a baby?"

"Oh I certainly am not," Icarus chuckled, giving his head a little bow. "See my horns? But asking questions is a very grown up thing to do. If you never ask questions, you'll never learn anything new!"

Giada stared at Icarus for a long moment before letting out a defensive snort. He turned and stomped over to Milarose, stating, "This guy's weird! I don't like him. Mila, make him go away!"

Milarose, who was wrist deep in the last of the deer he needed to clean out, took a slow breath and let it out in a quiet sigh. Giada was always a difficult one to handle. He was a smart kid, but he let his aggression get the better of him sometimes and it could make him quite a handful.

"You don't have to like him, but I'm asking you to tolerate him until he's well enough to move on," Milarose said tolerantly.

"I heard the way you told him off this morning when he was sniffing around the barn," Giada accused. "You don't trust him either!"

"I don't have to trust him to want to help him," Milarose retorted. "That's a lesson you ought to learn, Giada."

"I don't think Giada's wrong to worry," Sammal said in a small voice. She didn't look at any of them, clearly uncomfortable with her own concerns, but she was brave enough to voice them regardless.

"If I may," Icarus started, but Milarose growled lowly.

"You may not," the blue dracus said. He turned his gaze back to Giada as he dragged another bucket toward himself, tearing the limbs off the carcasses and dropping them into it. "It's fine

that you are concerned, and you don't have to trust him. But I'd like you to trust me. You've trusted me to get you this far, haven't you?"

He watched as Giada gritted his teeth but considered what he said. The questions forced him to think rather than react, and after a moment he let out a frustrated grunt and pawed at the floor of the barn.

"Fine," he said, turning away. Before he could go far though, Rubin appeared, looking over at the stranger as his nostrils twitched.

"Rules," the large kainu said.

Milarose dropped the last of the deer into the bucket and slid it closer to the barn door, grabbing a rag to wipe his hands on. "Fair point, go ahead Sammal, tell him the rules," he said.

Sammal jumped a little when she was spoken to, standing up. She glanced over her shoulder when Helmi approached to take Azrinal from her, and only once she saw him nearing the cows did she turn to approach Icarus. The kainu looked eager to hear what she had to say, not annoyed that there were rules he had to follow--that was a good sign.

"There are only a few, but they're important so you gotta follow them," Sammal said softly.

"Let me hear them," Icarus encouraged her. "You're doing great, dear."

Sammal smiled, feeling a little more confident in talking to the stranger now. She danced in place a little before she sat down and wrapped her tail around her hooves, though she couldn't stop the tip of it from twitching eagerly.

"If you're here, you're here," she said with a stern nod. "This is a home, not a hotel. You stay until you're ready to leave--"

"And when you're ready to leave, you can't live here again," Giada interrupted. "You can visit but you can't just come back and stay. So that means no adults!"

"That isn't what it means and I think you know that," Milarose corrected. He rubbed his face, tired already despite the nap he'd taken, but he continued to explain, "This is a halfway house of sorts. I find lost or orphaned children and give them a place to grow and learn how to support themselves. When they've learned everything I can teach them, they move on. It isn't a perfect system, but it works."

"That's a very noble pursuit," Icarus said, smiling. "Do you receive any funding or help with the children?"

Milarose gestured around the barn, a bemused expression crossing his face. "Does it look like I receive funding?" he asked. "We do what we can with what we have, anything more is out of the question."

Icarus nodded very slightly and then his golden eyes moved to watch as Helmi stalked back into the barn, Azrinal clasped lightly between his teeth. They'd only been out there for a short time, but already the child's belly was round, lips wet with milk as his small nose snuffled. He still couldn't see, but he was already eager to investigate the world around him.

Helmi passed Azrinal to Rubin, who carried the child to the stall where they kept him. The young dracus turned piercing yellow eyes to look at Icarus, a low growl rumbling deep in his throat.

"The last rule is that if you become a threat, you will be treated like a threat," Helmi said. "We don't like strangers. We trust no one. You'd do well to move on quickly."

Icarus's whiskers trembled as he grinned, saying excitedly, "That was *perfect*! So fearsome for one so young!"

"Helmi's the oldest one here," Sammal corrected, watching the green drakiri stalk away and climb the ramp again to return to his spot in the hayloft.

"He's called a bantam," Milarose explained as he padded toward the firewood pile he had stacked neatly against the wall of the barn. He picked up several large logs and tucked them under one arm. "He's nearly full grown. He simply isn't ready to leave yet, and that's okay."

He walked outside to the fire pit that was set away from anything flammable and built a large fire, using a flint and steel to light it. He used the same metal pole to skewer the chunks of deer and set them to cook over the fire, giving them a slight turn occasionally. Unfortunately he had no seasonings, but that didn't seem to bother the children any.

Milarose stood there at the firepit for a long time, watching the flames dance across the logs and leap up to lick the fat that bubbled and sizzled on the meat. He felt his mind trying to wander to places he would much rather not visit, places he had spent a long time trying to forget but seemed unable to shake from himself.

When he returned from the outskirts of those places in his mind, the meat was nearly burned. He pulled the metal rod away from the fire quickly, dumping it into the bucket he'd carried it out in and turning toward the barn once more.

His ears laid back when he saw Icarus watching Sammal as she trotted around the barn. The kainu's gaze was locked on her, a strange fascination in his expression that urged Milarose to walk up to the stranger, put his louth very close to his ear and growl, "She's a child. Look elsewhere or you will no longer *have* eyes."

Icarus looked up at Milarose without fear in his eyes. "I assure you, you've no reason to entertain such worries about me. I am a scholar, I find intrigue in all things around me, including the faintly glowing marks on her, in that lightning-like pattern. It is a mark I've yet to come across, I was only committing it to memory so I can record it later." He smiled and added, "A father who worries is a diligent protector, I do not blame you for your suspicion."

"You've known me all of an hour," Milarose said dryly, "you can keep your flattery. I've no use for it. Keep to yourself and if the children approach you, be courteous."

Icarus nodded in agreement and understanding, bowing his head a little lower when Milarose took the bucket of deer to begin passing it out among the children who had begun to gather. He was ravenous, but Icarus would wait patiently for what he knew would eventually be offered to him.

As he laid there in the nest that had been hastily made for him, Icarus couldn't help but reflect on what had happened. What a prickly bunch he had found himself hosted by! He would have to keep an eye on that Helmi in the future. Rare or not, he got the feeling the bantam dracus wouldn't hesitate to claw his ears off given half a chance. Giada had been outwardly aggressive toward his presence there too, but that seemed more like youthful indiscretion rather than hostility.

The colorful kainu felt welcome in this place despite his rocky introduction. He had travelled all over and seen so many people and places, but he always found something new to excite him. This place, an orphanage run by a dracus who clearly had some deep-seeded and repressed issues he refused to address? What a find! Oh how he wished he had his notebooks with him.

"What's your name?" a small voice asked.

Icarus blinked, his ears perking up as he realized the question was directed at him. Sammal stood before him with a brush hanging on a thong from one of her whiskers.

"You know my name," she said, "but I don't know yours. All the boys talked over you so I didn't get to hear."

"Boys do that a lot don't they?" Icarus asked.

"Sometimes they do," Sammal said bashfully. "They're bigger than me and push me around sometimes when they're playing."

"When they get rough with you, just stick them on the bum with your horn, they'll learn right quick to keep an eye out for you," Icarus suggested.



That earned him a giggle that warmed Icarus's heart. The laughter of children was one of the most pure sounds he could think of. It drew a warm laugh from him as well before he said, "My name is Icarus Sinbad, it's lovely to meet you."

"Thank you, it's nice to meet you too," Sammal said. She scuffed her hoof on the floor and then asked, "You travel a lot...have you been to the sea?"

"Not in a long time," Icarus said wistfully. "But I'd love to visit again. Maybe you can go see it someday."

Her face fell and her curled ears laid back as she looked away. She said quietly, "I broke my leg real bad. It's healed now, but I can't walk or run too much or it hurts. Mila did the best he could to make it heal right, but it didn't."

Icarus nodded solemnly, understanding the child's concerns.

"Well, the wonderful thing about adventures is that you don't have to go at anyone's pace but your own," he said, hoping to reassure her. "I'm sure that when you're ready, you'll find a way to make it work."

She seemed a little less upset about her circumstance, and she gave herself a little shake before she stepped forward and held the brush up to him.

"If you'd like, I could help you brush down," she offered. "You've got some uh..."

"Dirt?" Icarus chuckled. "Yes, I'd imagine so. Leave the brush here dear, I think that's a task I might ask Milarose to help with after our meal. Why don't you check on young Azrinal, hmm? I'm sure he could use some company."

"Oh, okay," Sammal chirped. "I'll see you later then!"

She set the brush down and trotted away toward the stalls with her tail swishing behind her. AS soon as she turned the corner, Icarus let out a slow sigh and allowed his chin to rest on the scratchy bedding. He enjoyed talking with and learning about the children here, but he was struggling just to keep his eyes open at that point. He just needed to rest his eyes...

"Wake up."

Icarus jerked awake with a start, head snapping up as he clambered to his hooves. He blinked several times as he swayed on unsteady legs and searched for what had woken him. He looked down to see a metal bucket on the floor in front of his bed. It was full of cuts of meat and it didn't smell warm anymore.

"We don't have a way to keep this from spoiling, so you either eat it now or it gets tossed,."

Icarus looked up to see Milarose standing above him with a scowl on his face.

"You've been asleep for a day and a half. If you starve to death in my barn I'm going to be pissed," Milarose growled. "Eat. Drink some water. Pull yourself together, you're old enough to do this yourself."

"I'm sorry," Icarus said, his voice faint. His eyes wouldn't stay focused, and he felt his tail lash in an effort to balance himself before he staggered and fell to the floor again.

Milarose watched the kainu fall, throwing his hands up in frustration. If it wasn't one thing with Icarus, it was another.

"What was that sound?" Sammal asked, running through the barn doors and skidding to a halt.

"Nothing, just go back outside and play with the others," Milarose said. "He was awake briefly. I'm going to make sure he stays awake this time." He picked Icarus up in one arm and used the other hand to pick the bucket up before he turned to look at Sammal. He added, "If anything happens while I'm gone, get everyone inside and close the doors."

He kicked off the ground and flew the short distance to the river he had pointed out to Icarus when first they met. It was the same place he would fill the trough for the children each morning. Milarose touched down on the grassy bank and set the bucket aside. Then he held the half-conscious and mostly limp kainu over the slow-moving water and promptly dropped him.

Water droplets sprayed Milarose as Icarus fell and then splashed violently as he thrashed in the shallow water to get his hooves under him. The kainu's golden eyes were wild, his mane hanging down in tatters around his face as he staggered toward the shore, his back end falling back into the water in his struggle.

"What!" Icarus howled, staring up at the dracus. "What are you--how *\*dare\** you--!"

Milarose couldn't hear the tirade Icarus flew into over the deep belly-laugh he let out. His shoulders shook and he threw his head back, all but howling himself with laughter. Tears blurred his vision as he lowered his head again, drawing short, gasping breaths. He saw Icarus watching him still, and he watched the dirt that had accumulated in his fur turning to mud that ran in thin rivulets down his body.

"You look like a wet rat," Milarose giggled.

"I can only imagine *why*," Icarus said, his teeth clenched in anger.

"Oh come now," Milarose scoffed. "I've had to watch over you all this time, the least I should get in return is a laugh, don't you think?"

"I don't," Icarus said, finding his footing and stepping out of the water. His tail dragged on the ground and he had to lock his knees to keep from falling again as he swayed.

Milarose picked up the bucket and held it under Icarus's snout, saying sternly, "Eat now. If you fall down again I'll not help you up and you'll have to crawl around like a worm from now on."

"You are a thoroughly unpleasant drakiri," Icarus said, but he didn't move his face away from the bucket. His nose twitched and he chose a cut of meat that he all but inhaled after a couple of famished bites. Milarose was glad that he'd taken the time to remove the bones before presenting the bucket.

"My job is not to be pleasant," Milarose said, holding the bucket steady.

"Who decides what your job is?" Icarus asked between bites. "How did you end up with a veritable hoard of orphans to begin with?"

Milarose raised a brow at the question. Icarus had gone from barely conscious to an inquisitive pain in his ass in approximately no seconds flat. Was he acting more fit than he really was? Or was he just that capable of bouncing back from the edge of death?

"They're not all orphans," he said gently. "Some of them just have nowhere else to go. I gave them the chance to come with me, where they would have food in their bellies and a warm place to sleep or they could stay wherel found them. Usually they were cowering in some alley or other forgotten place. Rubin actually rammed into me, but he was half the size he is now. Giada acted like he was interrogating me, such an aggressive child."

If that answered Icarus's question, Milarose couldn't tell. He just watched the kainu eat every morsel in that bucket and even start to lick the bottom before he remembered himself.

"Thank you," Icarus said, pulling away from the bucket and lifting his leg to try to discreetly rub his muzzle against it.

"Get back in the river," Milarose said, tossing the bucket aside into longer grass. "You're a mess and it doesn't stop at your chin."

Icarus stiffened visibly and opened his mouth as if to defend himself, but when Milarose stood up, he scampered away into the water.

"I'll help you wash," Milarose offered. He raised a brow then smirked slightly and said, "It's the least I can do, right?"

"Couldn't you have come to this decision before you dumped me into the river?" Icarus asked, narrowing his eyes as the dracus joined him in the cold water.

"Probably," Milarose admitted as he used his large hand to scoop water up and splash it over the kainu's back. "It wouldn't have been nearly as much fun, though."

They fell into a surprisingly comfortable silence, Milarose running his hands over the kainu's back and sides. He took his time and even ran his claws carefully through the other drakiri's mane to untangle it. He reached out to hold Icarus's chin between his thumb and forefinger, using his other hand to rub the dirt from the kainu's cheeks and nose. He rubbed his thumb just under Icarus's eye and smiled a little when he saw the other struggling to keep his eyes open.

"You're not going to fall asleep on me again, are you?" Milarose asked, though his voice was calmer than before.

"It's your fault this time," Icarus mumbled. "I've never been handled so gingerly."

"Don't get used to it," Milarose said, releasing Icarus's chin and standing up to head toward dry land.

"Can't blame me if I did," Icarus replied as he followed, shaking himself to get rid of as much water as possible. His mane and tail were still sopping wet, but he simply held his tail up off the ground. "You're good with your hands."

Milarose rolled his eyes and flicked his own tail a few times. "You're a flirt, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't say so," Icarus said, though his tone certainly betrayed him. "I just know what I want and how to ask for it. Do you?"

Milarose went still at the question, his heart thudding hard in his breast. He closed his eyes and took a few careful breaths.

"Oh," Icarus said. "Oh I'm sorry...I've struck a nerve."

"It's fine," Milarose said. "It's a fairly new wound, it opens sometimes of its own volition. Sometimes I'm reminded it's there. It's no one's fault, least of all yours."

Icarus came to stand beside him, their sides touching gently but continuously. He said, "I understand. I'll be more careful about what I say."

Milarose felt a pressure behind his eyes that warned of tears and he let out an angry snort at his own foolishness before he said, "Let's get back. I don't like to leave the children alone too long without locking the door."

"Your barn is so far out of the way of most everything," Icarus reasoned, cocking his head to the side as he watched Milarose pick up the bucket and walk toward him. "What are you afraid of?"

"Many things," Milarose said, picking Icarus up once more. "We've already had an incident, and you found us after following a floating light halfway across a continent. I have reason to fear, especially when I have so many others counting on me to protect them."

Icarus was quiet during the short flight back to the barn, closing his eyes to just enjoy the feeling of the wind in his face. When they touched down again, he stepped away from Milarose to give the dracus the space he needed. He watched the large, blue drakiri pad away toward the pasture where Sammal sat with Azrinal curled against her side. Milarose picked the child up and held him close for a long time, and Icarus was content to watch from afar. He was starting to like these folks...

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Soft grey predawn light filtered through the mist that clung to the pasture outside the barn doors. It was early enough that most of the children were still asleep, but not so late that Milarose felt the need to get up and do his chores yet. He lay in the soft, dry bedding of his nest listening to the steady breathing of the children in the stalls and the hayloft, but his attention kept returning to Icarus where the kainu rested in that dark corner.

Icarus had been with them for a week now, and the more he learned about the other drakiri, the more intrigued he was. Milarose didn't think there was anyone else in the whole world that had travelled as much as this kainu, or seen as many wonderful things. Icarus had a way of describing things he had come across that let Milarose see them in his mind's eye, like Icarus had painted them a portrait.

When the children were about ready to settle in for bed, they had taken to asking Icarus for a story, and the kainu was happy to oblige. It was almost as much a treat to watch Icarus tell his stories as it was to hear them. More than once, Icarus had become so animated that he stood up and reared, kicking his forelegs for emphasis during stories of fights he had seen between great beasts out in the wild.

His favorite times, though, were when Icarus thought no one was watching him. The kainu's expression would change entirely, sobering and appearing almost grief-stricken. It proved to Milarose that the kainu was more than what he presented, that there was something more to learn about that secret side of Icarus Sinbad.

Milarose turned onto his back to look up at the barn ceiling, rubbing his fingers lightly over the scales on his own chest. He remembered being touched there, feeling the warmth of another lying beside him, murmuring promises in his ear, soothing his fears and anxieties. But that memory had been poisoned. Instead of warm brown eyes watching him lovingly and hands helping to guide him on the path they walked together, Milarose only saw the hateful expression on his lover's face, condemning him for things he had not done. He had tried so hard to work

through their problems, but what he gave, his lover would take and then some. It was never enough, and Milarose never received anything in return.

Thinking about these things made Milarose sick to his stomach. He knew he'd done nothing wrong, he knew he had allowed himself to be manipulated and abused for too long out of fear of being alone, but still the anxiety and surety that he had been the cause of their break up because he couldn't be good enough plagued him.

He rolled over once more, facing the wall this time, knowing he wouldn't be able to fall back asleep but finding some small comfort in feeling closed in. A few moments later, he heard footsteps on the bedding beside him and he assumed it was one of the children coming to lie with him after a bad dream. But when the other drakiri laid down, the scent that lingered belonged to Icarus.

"Why?" Milarose asked, his voice hardly above a disgruntled whisper.

"I wanted some company," Icarus murmured as he made himself comfortable. "You looked like you could use some. Was I wrong?"

Milarose held his tongue. Icarus was as bold as he was eclectic, but he meant well.

"I don't know if I trust you," Milarose said quietly.

"You could break me in half if you had half a mind to," Icarus murmured. "And you don't have to trust me to enjoy my company."

Silence stretched between them for long enough that Milarose thought Icarus must have fallen asleep, but the other asked once more in a voice that suggested he was actually doubting himself, "Was I wrong?"

Milarose considered again and he closed his eyes before he finally said, "No."

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"Have you travelled much in your life?" Icarus asked as he walked beside milarose. They had Azrinal with them in a modified sling that rested over Icarus's back, holding the child securely in place while allowing Milarose to keep his hands free.

"Not as much as you have," Milarose said with a light chuckle. "I doubt anyone has."

"In that we agree," Icarus laughed.

Milarose glanced aside at the kainu, studying him for a long moment. He had a good laugh, nothing that suggested he had anything but joy and mirth in his heart. But Mila was still leery, unsure if he could trust what Icarus seemed to offer him.

"Of all the places you've visited, seldom have you traveled to cold climates," Milarose pointed out. "Afraid to get your hooves frozen off?"

"Ah, you're observant," Icarus said, his ears flicking in the direction of a bird they'd disturbed. "Cold and I are fairweather friend. We are only ever together for as long as it takes me to travel to somewhere warmer."

"I don't mind the cold," Milarose said, looking out over the river to their right. "I miss seeing the sun glittering on the snow in the mornings."

They stopped together when Azrinal began to fuss, Milarose using a gentle hand to untuck the child's whiskers from where they had been pinched.

"Do you have children of your own?" Icarus asked cautiously. "You're so good with them, it seems like you would make a good father."

Milarose glanced away and swallowed thickly before he said, "No...none of my own. It was never something I was terribly interested in. In fact, the idea of even committing to a relationship long enough for children to be an option was terrifying to me."

"Well something must have changed," Icarus said. "You have more children than most would ever want."

He couldn't disagree, but Milarose had to consider for a moment. Children would have been a challenge for him and the only partner he would have entertained the idea with, but he would have been willing to try. He had been that invested in their relationship...

"I met someone who changed my mind about whether it was worth the potential heartbreak of starting a family," he finally said.

Icarus nodded in understanding, his eyes shadowed. He said, "I was always too busy travelling, learning, adventuring. When I finally found love, I wasn't prepared for it. He wasn't either, but we were both young and mystified by this new thing neither of us had felt before, and we got swept up in it. We didn't see that there were others who disapproved...There were extenuating circumstances around how I had come to be near him, and I had to return home for a time. When I came back, I learned that he had been killed. He had birth defects and his people harshly judged those who were imperfect. They killed him for his imperfections as soon as I was not there to defend him."

The kainu stopped for a moment, his ears laying back as he swallowed hard. "I lost my mind...I attacked them. I'm deeply ashamed of the actions that I took and I live with that burden every day. I can only hope to one day do something that atones for my sins."

Milarose absorbed this information quietly, letting Icarus speak and get the words off his chest. It would appear that they both had traumatic pasts with partners, one stolen one fled.

"That must have been very difficult to come to terms with," Milarose said, choosing his words carefully. "You've done so alone, haven't you?"

Icarus nodded and gave his head a little shake so his mane settled a bit more comfortably. He looked aside at Milarose and said, "We both have, am I wrong?"

"You're not wrong," Milarose agreed. "I've done so many things in my life alone, it's just easier at times."

"It's been getting harder though recently, hasn't it?" Icarus asked.

They both fell quiet, looking at one another uneasily as they considered what neither of them wanted to say.

Icarus took a step toward Milarose, hesitant but not shying away. His whiskers reached out to touch the dracus, who flinched slightly but didn't move away. Their whiskers found each other and felt along their shoulders and necks, eyes closing for a moment as they just enjoyed that small contact.

A burbling sound came from the sling across Icarus's back and the adults pulled away from one another before looking to see Azrinal blowing spit bubbles and making small sounds that seemed very much like a laugh when they popped against his lips and nose.

"We should get back," Milarose suggested. "He'll need his nap soon and I don't want the others to worry if we're gone too long."

"Damn," Icarus said with a smile. "Foiled by youths once more."

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The trickling over the river along its shore and crickets chirping in the long grass invited the drakiri to a clearing by the water. The sky was still fairly bright, giving them light enough to find their way without exposing them to any possible prying eyes.

Milarose was the first to lie on his side, reaching out to draw the kainu in with a hand under his chin. They touched noses, nuzzling each other while their whiskers intertwined. Icarus's soft



tongue drew across Milarose's lips and the dracus pulled back slightly, heart already racing, eyes closing as he tried to push away the memories that invaded his mind.

"Look at me," Icarus murmured, whiskers pulling gently until Milarose raised his head up and finally opened his eyes. "Keep your eyes open, look at me--no one else is here with us. You're safe."

It took a moment for Milarose to nod, and his breathing slowed, heart still quick but with excitement more than nerves after the kainu's reassurance.

His hands moved down, caressing Icarus's chest, his thumb tracing along the warm edges of his scales. The other hand pulled the kainu closer, stroking over the short, soft fur that covered his side, smoothing over his rump and around to his tail, which he moved to the side and out of his way.

Icarus's nostrils flared and he pressed his muzzle more firmly against Milarose's, tongue crossing with the dracus's as they licked each other, soft, wet and welcoming.

Milarose's hand moved between Icarus's legs from behind, rubbing the warm scales there until he felt them begin to swell and finally part. The pad of his middle and third fingers rubbed light circles around the head of the kainu's cock as it emerged, encouraging it.

Icarus shuffled his back feet in place as he became fully unsheathed, throbbing and eager already, silvery strands catching the moonlight as they dripped from him.

"It's been a while," he said, more amused for himself than bashful or embarrassed.

"For us both," Milarose replied as he moved down a bit and guided Icarus to stand over him. Their height difference was easier to compensate for here and he closed his eyes briefly as he parted his jaws and swiped his tongue along Icarus's dripping length. His ears perked up at the sound this drew from the kainu, a low groan accompanied by a slow roll forward of the hips.

Milarose moved Icarus a little more and leaned his head up to use his long tongue to wrap slightly around the other's cock. He guided it into his mouth, taking great care not to nick sensitive skin with sharp teeth. He'd hardly begun to move his tongue when he felt Icarus begin to shake, his hips thrusting shallowly as if he was trying to keep them still and failing.

The dracus moved his hands to Icarus's hips, encouraging him to do what came naturally. He felt the kainu swell at the base as he thrust with little to no coordination, shallow breaths and quiet moans showing his enjoyment. It didn't take long before Milarose's mouth filled with warm seed. He neither swallowed nor spat it out, holding his mouth carefully shut when he pulled back. He could see sweat glisten on Icarus's coat and he felt a profound sense of pride, one he hadn't felt in a long time. Milarose enjoyed pleasuring others, most of his own pleasure derived from guiding his partners to their own climaxes.

As he stood, he made a minor effort of will to shrink himself just enough so he wouldn't cause irreparable harm to Icarus. He guided the kainu to kneel on the ground and pushed his tail aside again. He positioned himself over Icarus's rump and allowed the seed to dribble slowly from between his teeth, watching as it landed on Icarus's ass just beside where he wanted it to be. He used the pad of his thumb to push it into place and then pressed the digit carefully into Icarus's body. The puckered hole was tight around his thumb, squeezing and resisting--it was enough to make him shiver.

Icarus's tail lashed as he groaned again, breath coming a little faster as Milarose stretched him, but he didn't tell the dracus to stop.

After several moments and once all of what Icarus had provided was used, Milarose stood and helped Icarus to his hooves as well. He pulled the kainu in by the hips, using one slick hand to tease himself out of his own sheathe the rest of the way before guiding the head to Icarus's entrance.

"Gods!" Icarus gasped as Milarose began pushing into him. He dug his hooves into the soft ground beneath him as he pressed back against the constant pressure.

Milarose let out a slow breath that ended in a groan as he felt Icarus's body envelop him, shuddering from the tightness and heat. He felt resistance as his slowly-forming knot pressed tight against Icarus's body, pushing slightly harder until the kainu squirmed. He picked up a slow pace at first, but quickly settled into short strokes that had his head spinning. He grunted, baring his teeth as he leaned over Icarus and held him tight, setting his teeth against the back of the kainu's neck without applying pressure. He growled ferociously as he bucked his hips and maintained that pressure until finally his swollen knot pushed through.

Icarus's leg kicked out of reflex and he danced in place as he suddenly had to accommodate such girth. The kainu threw his head back, feeling fuller than he ever had in all his life, and he realized with a deep throbbing in his body that he could feel Milarose's cock twitching and pulsing inside of him as the heat of the dracus's seed filled him the rest of the way.

They stood there together, breathing hard until Icarus's legs began to shake again from the effort of holding them both up. Milarose lowered them both back to the ground, careful not to put too much weight on the kainu that he might crush him.

As they waited for his knot to soften, Milarose licked the side of Icarus's neck where his teeth had touched, letting out a rumbling sound deep in his chest that sounded almost like a purr.

He smoothed his hand over Icarus's sweat-slicked side and found his fingers brushing over the other's length.

"Are you unsatisfied?" Milarose asked, his voice deep and gravelly as he rubbed his cheek against the kainu's neck.

"F-Far from," Icarus said, his voice hitching when he felt Milarose move back, maintaining pressure to encourage his knot to pull free. "But I th-think that's plenty for now...I could spend all night here, but that seems hardly wise."

The kainu's legs jerked hard as Milarose finally pulled himself free, and the dracus let out a deep rumbling sound as he rubbed himself against Icarus's puckered, dripping entrance. He asked, "You're certain?"

"Quite," Icarus breathed, and though he didn't sound convinced, Milarose didn't press. Instead, he moved to lay among the tall grass, turning his head to the side so he could look up at the other drakiri.

They lay together in silence, watching the stars and the moons high above.

"How are you?" Icarus asked, his voice sounded too loud in the absence of even crickets.

Milarose considered his answer, grateful that the excitable kainu didn't seem to demand answers from him as soon as the question had been asked.

"Better now," he finally said. "Not just because of what we did...though I did enjoy you, don't misunderstand. My mind feels clearer my anxieties feel farther away, it's easier to look at things from a new perspective."

"Good," Icarus said, leaning forward to nuzzle his nose against the dracus's cheek, just behind his fang. "You certainly seemed focused."

"I had a partner willing to indulge me," Milarose chuckled. "Next time I'll have to be more studious so you enjoy yourself more."

"I enjoyed myself plenty," Icarus protested.

"Most who enjoy me don't talk after," Milarose said as he rolled onto his side and pushed himself to his feet. "Not for a while, at least."

He expected a quip from Icarus, some joke at least, but there was nothing and he thought for a moment he had overstepped and insulted the kainu. But when Milarose turned to look back at the kainu, he found curiosity and expectation in his golden eyes.

"I'm under no delusions about being welcome in your home...most of the children don't care for me, and I would never want to overstay my welcome," Icarus said. "That being said...I would not mind there being a next time."

"As far as I'm concerned, you are a functional adult, even if you seem to have the attention span and sense of direction of a toddler and the survival instinct of a scrap of moss in a desert," Milarose said. "My rules are for the children. I want them to grow up and go to live their own lives, make their own decisions and mistakes, or they will never learn. You are welcome to stay as long as you like--or until you start to annoy me more than you amuse me."

"You certainly are a flatterer," Icarus said, rolling his eyes before he tried to stand. He wobbled and his hind legs shook visibly for a moment before he took a couple of steps forward, head held high despite himself.

"Only with those I think deserve it," Milarose said with a chuckle.

"Then consider me flattered," Icarus said. "Now let's get cleaned up before we go back. I cannot imagine the questions Sammal might have if we don't."

The kainu walked toward the river and waded into the cold water with a shudder, but Milarose leaped from where he stood in the nearby clearing, wind whipping the white fur of his mane and tail as he soared over the treetops and splashed loudly into the river. A wave crashed over Icarus and he cried out in surprise, mouth and nostrils filling with water so when he threw his head back he coughed and sputtered.

Icarus reared up and drove both of his legs back down into the dark water in the hopes of splashing the dracus back, but he only succeeded in splashing *himself* in the face once more.

"Smooth," Milarose laughed, using both hands to scoop water over the kainu's head. He flattened himself into the river, even dunking his head. When he lifted his head again he shook it vigorously to dislodge the water that clung to his ears. The water only just covered his shoulders, but part of his spine was still above the surface.

"You look like an enormous beached seal," Icarus chortled, tossing his head in challenge. "Come on then!"

They played together in the river for a while, splashing and leaping in and out of the water, chasing one another in a game neither of them could put a name to but they enjoyed nonetheless. Neither of them were young, but this was one stolen night, just a moment where they could forget who they were to the rest of the world and enjoy themselves and each other.

When finally Icarus collapsed into the grass once more and Milarose followed to flop down beside him, sides heaving, he knew that this would be a night he remembered for a long time to come.

"You never said if you wanted this to be a regular thing," Icarus mused. "Do you?"

Milarose hesitated and then clenched his teeth together. He didn't owe Icarus an answer, but he didn't want to just *not* say anything. So he said, "Every time I've said yes to a question like that, I've gotten close and gotten burned. I've only just met you, but I'm not ready to lose you. Please don't ask me to answer that question...not yet."

Icarus listened quietly, understanding in his expression. He said, "I see. If that is what you wish, I will respect it."

They decided to walk back to the barn to give their scraggly manes and tails a chance to dry more before they arrived. And it gave them a few more precious moments together without the interruption of a gaggle of children asking questions and begging for stories to be shared. The silence that stretched between them was comfortable, barriers having been broken down that night so they walked side by side in leisure rather than uncertainty.

The wind sighed around them, chilling Milarose, though it wasn't from the chilled air against his damp fur. He had heard something, long pointed ears pricking forward with trained concentration. Icarus had passed ahead by a few steps before turning back to ask, "What is it?"

"Something's wrong," Milarose answered, and he felt a shudder ripple across his skin. He didn't give Icarus a chance to ask before he bounded forward and grabbed the kainu, an arm against his chest and one under his tail against the backs of his thighs. He heard Icarus let out a surprised sound, but it was quickly drowned out over the wind that roared in his ears. Was it just the wind? Or was it something else that screamed and wailed in terror.

The barn sat dark and still as ever when they approached, but Milarose felt something was still deeply wrong. He didn't understand what it was until he flew near enough to see the door hung partially off its hinges. The smell reached him next as he touched down and all but dropped Icarus before leaping toward the barn.

The door burst open and a dark figure ran at him, wild black eyes gleaming in the moonlight, hooves striking the earth with the surety of a drakiri with a purpose. Milarose had time only to leap aside, but still felt the sting of its horn graze his shoulder.

He touched the wound and felt warm blood seep between his fingers. Rage filled him, hot as fire as he turned to face the intruder. From its figure he would guess it was a kainu, but there was something off about it. He didn't realize what it was until it staggered to a halt then turned to face him. Ropes of meat hung from its distended belly, silvery intestines turned nearly white in the moonlight as they dragged across the ground. The drakiri stepped on the ends, and though it stumbled it still did not fall.

"Gods," Icarus murmured, and he saw the crazed drakiri's head swing toward him. It did not bellow, shout or make a single noise before it ran toward him, head down in a charge.

Milarose crossed the distance between himself and Icarus in a single bound, snatched the attacker by the horn and grabbed its left hind leg. It screamed in defiance, legs churning as Milarose dug his feet into the soft ground and pulled it to a stop. His jaws parted and he snapped them shut around the drakiri's neck. The muscles in his jaw bulged as he bore down, the deep wet sound of bones and cartilage cracking between his teeth.

Icarus stared at the scene, lips parted in a silent gasp, eyes wide with some unidentifiable mix of horror and gratitude. He saw now that the creature was a nightmare, rare in its own right and seldom seen in these parts. What was it doing here?

When the nightmare fell limp in Milarose's jaws he opened his mouth. Blood and pink saliva dripped from his lips and chin to the grass beneath them as he stepped back. His breath came slowly and evenly, though his heart galloped in his chest like a drum. He had never killed a drakiri before...he would never like to again.

He met Icarus's golden eyes as they stood there together with the corpse between them, until Icarus broke the tenuous silence and breathed, "The children!"

Milarose turned on his heel, barely remembering in time to shrink himself as he yanked the door the rest of the way open and forced himself into the barn. He heard weeping from the rafters and looked up to the hayloft. He took a few short breaths before he shrank himself further, as small as he could. He was still large enough that the old wood of the loft would struggle to support him, but he couldn't stand there and do *nothing*.

He clambered up the ramp, hearing the wood creak in protest under each step until he lighted on the loft. He tore haybales away, sending them careening down to the floor.

A young voice screamed, another snarled and as he pulled one last bale of hay, Milarose had a second of warning before two short, but strong dark horns rammed toward him. He grabbed one with each hand and dug his claws into the floor so he wouldn't be shoved back.

"It's me!" he grunted, struggling to control Rubin as he bucked and lashed his head. "It's Milarose!"

"Mila!" Sammal wailed, limping out of the deepest shadows of the hayloft. "Azrinal is hurt, bad!"

Cold terror gripped Milarose like a vice and he pushed Rubin aside with an impatient growl. He shoved through the rest of the bales of hay, but he had hardly moved before a blur of dark green struck out at him and he jerked back with a pained yelp. Sharp, hot pain and the overwhelming scent of blood filled his nose.

"What--" he started to ask before the same blur of motion drove him back a couple of steps. He realized what it was when he saw the dull gleam of golden scales in the moonlight cast from a space between two of the roof panels. "Helmi what are you--"

"Shut up!" the young dracus snarled. "SHUT. UP. Get away!"

Milarose was stunned, at a loss for words as Helmi rounded on him again, taking purposeful steps toward him with bright teeth bared in anger.

"You were *gone*. You said you'd protect us and you were gone! Rubin almost died! Giada's sitting back there catatonic because he gutted the thing and it still got up and attacked again! He won't let anyone near him. You were *GONE!*"

Milarose's throat tightened as he heard the accusations, the rage in Helmi's voice. He *had* been gone. He hadn't been here, where he should have been. None of this should have happened, if he had been here he could have locked the door, he could have killed the nightmare before it ever had the chance to get in the barn. This was his fault.

"Please let me see Azrinal," he started, but Helmi cut him off by growling fiercely.

"No! You lost the right to him, if you can't protect him, / will!" Helmi snarled. "Why don't you just leave! We can clearly defend ourselves better than you ever could!"

"Helmi, *stop it!*" Sammal wailed. "Stop fighting! Azrinal needs help, Helmi *please!* Milarose can take him to Eirwyn like he did for my leg, he needs help or he'll die!"

"Then he dies!" Helmi shouted back, turning to face Sammal. She recoiled from him as he advanced on her, cowering in a corner between haybale and wall. "Drakiri die all the time, *everywhere!* You're not a baby anymore so stop acting like you are!"

"Helmi that's enough!" Milarose snapped. "Leave her alone. Now!" When his command was not followed he stepped forward, but he didn't have to so much as lift a finger.

A shadow moved deep in the hayloft and Solpor emerged with a limp form hanging from his mouth. Helmi realized what was happening and turned to stop the young q'lin, but Solpor turned sharply and lashed out with his hind leg. The piercing claws would have parted flesh easily if the kick had connected, but Helmi leaped away with an outraged hiss.

"I can't believe you said we should let him die," Sammal breathed, her voice shaking. "He's just a baby!"

"Then his parents should have loved him more and not left him to die in the first place!" Helmi howled, his voice cutting the dark loft like blades. His chest heaved with labored breaths, the only sound left in the barn, and when he realized everyone stared at him in disbelief, he walked to the ramp and descended to the first floor, stalking not for the door but for the stalls.

Without a word, Milarose stepped forward to receive Azrinal, taking him gently from Solpor. The vice around his stomach tightened when he saw the extent of what had been done to the babe. In the shaft of moonlight he saw the child's body covered in deep gashes that exposed dark red flesh beneath, the white of his mane and the white socks on each leg were stained with blood that had crusted over, though it was still wet closest to the wounds. The child's chest rose and fell slightly with labored breaths, and one half of his face was incredibly swollen.

"What happened?" he choked out past the tightness in his throat.

"The nightmare broke into the barn," Solpor said. Azrinal was crying, it must have heard him. We were all downstairs together in the main room and we couldn't get up the ramp fast enough. He was trampled by the nightmare."

The tears that had pressed at the back of Milarose's eyes blurred his vision and fell as he held Azrinal to his breast. He heard the bubble of blood in the child's nostrils with each shallow breath. What if he died? Milarose would never forgive himself...never.

"Take him to the healer," Solpor said.

"I can't leave you again, what if there's another?" Milarose rasped.

"I'll stay with them," Icarus said from the first floor. "I'm no soldier but I can fight well enough. Go, take the child. We'll be okay here."

That was how Icarus came to stand at the barn doors watching the sapphire hide of the dracus fade out of view on the horizon. He closed his eyes and let out a trembling sigh before he turned to look at the nightmare on the ground. He narrowed his eyes as he approached it, avoiding the puddle of dark blood that had spread from the gored wound on its belly. Around its shoulders on the darker chestnut saddle, he saw the sprouts of glowing mushrooms. Its eyes were shot through with black, its mouth open, expression twisted in rage even in death. This nightmare was from the mushroom forest...where Icarus had come from.

A pit sank into his stomach and he took a sharp step back, tail lashing in defiance of the very idea. This nightmare did *not* follow him, he did *not* get that child nearly killed, this was *not* his fault it was a freak accident! It had to be.

"Gods be kind to him," he breathed, head hanging low, ears flat against his skull. "He's only a babe... he hadn't even opened his eyes yet. Please let him live."

Icarus watched over the children for four days, and though he couldn't chase down a deer and kill it he was quite proficient at hunting mice. With all the ones that lived in the barn and those in the fields nearby, it wasn't difficult to keep everyone fed. Their spirits and moral however was a very different story.



Giada hadn't come down from the hayloft since the incident. He had slept up there and had not come down for food, though Icarus had made sure Rubin brought him water in a bucket at least. Rubin had assured him that Giada drank, but Icarus still worried. He knew what trauma could do to a drakiri, and he also knew what being alone after trauma could do. Icarus would have encouraged Sammal to climb up and spend time with him but she too had been injured that night. The knee joint on her leg was swollen and she had been put on strict bed rest so it would heal.

Solpor had been more present than usual, making himself known by lying right by the door when he wasn't hunting mice with Icarus or letting Sammal rest against him. He didn't say much, but Icarus knew it was to keep Helmi at bay. The dracus didn't say a word to them, and in fact he would sneak out of the barn early in the morning and sneak back in late at night. No one knew where he went, but they were relieved when he was gone.

The morning after the incident, Icarus had cleaned up the blood and icor that stained the floor of the barn, spreading fresh hay over the floor and replacing the bedding otherwise. He had also dug a shallow grave for the nightmare, just so its corpse wouldn't attract too many pests and wouldn't be there to scare the children. He had considered saying a few words over the unmarked grave, but had thought better of it.

On the morning of the fifth day, Icarus woke to the sound of wind overhead. It didn't sound like the normal wind that rattled the shutters, so it had woken him easily.

He stood carefully from the bed where Rubin and Sammal lay with him, placing his hooves slowly to avoid stepping on tails. Only then did he move to the door. They couldn't repair the lock themselves, so Icarus had improvised with hay bales. Now he moved them out of the way just in time to see Milarose touch down on the grass outside the barn. His blue eyes were dull, expression weary, and as he landed his legs crumpled beneath him and he collapsed to the ground in a heap.

"Where is he?" Icarus fretted as he trotted out of the barn to Milarose's side. "Is he alive? Is he well? What did Eirwyn say?"

Milarose was quiet for a long moment, long enough in fact that Icarus thought he must have fallen asleep. But the dracus took a deep breath and finally said, "He is alive, but Eirwyn has no confidence he will remain that way. She is doing what she can for him, but there was massive internal bleeding, head trauma, lacerations from the hooves, and blood in his lungs. She told me to come home and she would send word in two weeks."

"Two weeks!" Icarus balked. "Two weeks? Could she work any slower?"

"I'm certain she is doing what she can as fast as she can," Milarose said, grimacing as he pushed himself to his feet. He walked toward the barn, but when he tried to shrink himself the

magic would not come. He hung his head in defeat and nosed open the doors, moving to lay so his neck curled around the barn and rested on the bedding where Solpor and Sammal slept. Is back half and tail were outside the barn, but he didn't care. He was too tired, and the flight there and back had utterly drained him.

"Can we talk?" Icarus asked as Milarose settled, but the dracus's breathing had already slowed into the pattern of sleep, each exhale gently stirring the hay beneath his chin.

Icarus tried to remind himself that Eirwyn lived a very long way away from here. He hadn't seen the other kainu in a long time, so long in fact that he had been a young adult when last they met. She had been the healer to help pull him out of the spiral he had fallen into after Ezra'el's murder. She had healed the wounds of his body and helped teach him how to heal the wounds of his soul. She was very skilled, and he was sure there was no healer more skilled to help that poor child.

Still, Milarose returning and immediately and with such little explanation stung a bit. Perhaps it was unreasonable for him to expect them to talk immediately after what must have been an exhausting trek. They could talk more later when they both had clear heads.

He picked his way back into the barn and laid in the crook of Milarose's neck beside his shoulder. He saw the familiar reed mat wrapping that Eirwyn used to cover poultices that she made for wounds on the cut Milarose had received from the nightmare. Hopefully it didn't pain him too much.

Icarus woke later that day when he felt Milarose stir. The children had gone, probably returning to their stalls or going about their chores to keep the barn clean and try to coax Giada into eating. None of them had been successful thus far.

He stood and moved aside so the dracus could stand as well, backing out of the barn. Milarose remained still for a moment, his face stern with concentration, eyes narrowed. Frustration game over him after a moment and he turned away from the barn entirely after a long moment. Was he struggling to use magic still?

"Milarose, I'd like to talk to you about Giada," Icarus started, taking a few steps toward the dracus.

"What about him?" Milarose asked in a voice so devoid of emotion and consideration that it stopped Icarus in his tracks. He hadn't even turned to look at him...

"He...He's been in the loft since you left," he said. "He won't come down and the ramp isn't stable enough anymore for me to go up."

Tension built in the dracus's body, evident in the irritable flick of his tail and how his shoulders tightened, but when he spoke it was again with that disinterested tone that cut Icarus deeply.

"I'll handle it when I get back."

Icarus's breath caught in his throat and he looked away from Milarose. He didn't know what to say, or if he *should* say anything. So he just turned back toward the barn with his head held high. The children didn't need to know of his worries.

It was two days later when finally Giada came down the ramp from the loft. Milarose had managed to use his magic again to shrink himself and spent long hours talking to the young kainu. Their voices had been low enough that the others hadn't heard what was said, but they were at least sure that Giada hadn't become hysterical again like the first night when they tried to convince him to come down.

The kainu's face looked gaunt and his scales and fur were dull. Hay had tangled in his mane and tail and dried clots of blood and viscera clung to the rounded prongs of his horn. From the fur on his face Icarus could see that the children who had visited him, namely Rubin, had tried to clean his face for him, though they'd had limited success. It had been very brave for someone so young to put themselves at risk like that to save their peers.

"There are mice and water, Giada," Icarus said gently. "I can help clean your horn as well if you would like."

Giada raised tired eyes to look at him. There was a quality about them that Icarus had only seen as of yet in the eyes of soldiers and those who had witnessed unbelievable tragedy. And he was so young...

"Why are you still here?" Giada asked, his voice raspy and hoarse from disuse. "You took Mila away when we needed him, haven't you done enough?"

The question stole the breath from Icarus's lungs. It echoed the question he had been asking himself all this time. Why was he still here? Each attempt he had made to try to speak with Milarose had been met with a cold shoulder and an excuse that he was busy. Should he just leave? Would he be welcomed back? Would he be missed? These anxieties of his were new and unwelcome, and it must have been clear from his lack of response that he was hurt.

"It isn't his fault," Milarose said, giving Giada's rump a nudge with his snout. "Go on, get cleaned up and eat. We can talk more later."

The kainu's eyes lingered on Icarus for a moment longer before he walked away, his head low, tail trailing on the floor.

Only once the child had passed him did Icarus take a breath, all but gasping as he felt tears flood his golden eyes.

"I did not *ask* that nightmare to follow me here," he said in a low but heated voice. "I did not *ask* to find myself here, I did not *ask* for that child to be hurt. Why does he treat me like I did! I have done everything I could to keep things together around here, I have done all that and more! Am I so unwelcome here?"

Milarose stared at him with that same disinterested expression and turned away as if to leave. Frustration and anger welled up in the kainu and he darted forward to stand between Milarose and the door, planting his hooves wide as his tail lashed behind him.

"Tell me!" he said, voice trembling from the effort it took not to shout the words. "Am I still welcome here?"

He saw Milarose's throat work as he swallowed, saw the twitching of his whiskers and the mist of tears that filled his eyes before he rasped, "No. Im sorry."

The breath escaped Icarus once more in a blustery laugh as he straightened and looked away from the dracus. He smiled, but there was nothing happy or pleasant in the expression.

"Okay Milarose," he said finally. "I understand. I'll make my farewells, then. Solpor and Helmi have both made their wishes clear to me that they'd like to leave. They were going to tell you when you got back, but you've been so busy neither of them had a chance to talk to you about anything. That seems to be a struggle we share."

Milarose's jaw clenched in what looked to be anger. He clearly had something he wanted to say, but he kept it to himself. Instead he said, "If they feel they are ready to go, they may go. I won't stop them."

Icarus stared at him in disbelief and asked, "Don't you want to know where they are going? These are children you raised, do you not want to know where they will be?"

"I wish them the best, but there is little I can concern myself with other than the children here," Milarose rasped. He looked defeated, shoulders slumped and his tail resting on the floor of the barn. "Perhaps they will be better off with you. Helmi is not happy here and I suspect Solpor has been ready to leave for a while, but he stayed because he cared about the others. But this is no longer a safe place for them." His voice shook at the end and Icarus heard the tears before he saw them.

"It is still a safe place," Icarus said, his voice gentle and calm once more despite his earlier anger. He understood that Milarose was struggling, he just wished he could help. "You have done everything you could--"

"It wasn't enough!" Milarose snapped, ears laying back and fingers curling into the bedding beneath his hands. "Azrinal stopped breathing twice on my way to Eirwyn. I had to breathe into

him and risk hurting him further by pressing his chest to keep his heart beating. He nearly died, and for what? My own selfish needs? I laid with you while these children who rely on me solely were attacked and one of them was nearly killed, another is so traumatized that he hardly wants to speak. I spent half a day convincing him to come down from the loft, and for what! So I could feel normal and happy again for an evening. It wasn't enough, not by half. I wasn't enough."

Icarus listened to what Milarose said, understanding now why he had been treated this way for the last few days. Milarose didn't want to send him away, but he felt like he had to. He was a distraction, a temptation for Milarose to become complacent that would put these children in harm's way. He wasn't being pushed away, he was being held at arm's length.

"You are enough," Icarus said quietly, approaching Milarose with careful and measured steps. "You raised these children, they had no one until you brought them here. Now look at them. You've done so well." He leaned his head forward to touch his nose to Milarose's cheek, and though he felt the dracus pull away slightly at first, he let out a sob and covered his face with his hand as he leaned closer to Icarus.

"I have friends all over the world, Milarose. Let me help you," Icarus said. "I know a Q'Lin in the northern mountains who could take Solpor on and teach him a great deal. I could even bring Helmi to a friend I think might be able to teach him some humility."

Milarose laughed derisively at that as he wiped away his own tears. He turned his head to press their muzzles together side by side. He breathed in the kainu's scent, warm earth and windswept grass plains. It comforted him in some small way so he could pull himself together.

"Take them, find them a place to call home," he said.

"I will," Icarus said. "I can do that for all the children here, when they are ready."

"How will you know when to come for them?" Milarose asked.

"Send them to Eirwyn," Icarus said. Using his whisker to brush away one of the tears that rolled down the dracus's cheek. "She will send word to me and I will come."

He stepped back and looked up at Milarose, smiling now with his usual brilliance. "We'll see each other again, soon I imagine. Rubin seems about ready to eat you out of house and home, he might need a little push to venture out. Until then?"

"Until then," Milarose said with a nod. "And Icarus...thank you."

"You're welcome."