



BRIDES  
OF  
THODOS

ALIEN  
DEVIL'S

BLUFF

BLACK STAR MATES BOOK 2

AVA YORK

# ALIEN DEVIL'S BLUFF

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# BLACK STAR MATES: BOOK TWO

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## LAUX

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“Mr. Banek, I trust everything is to your liking.”

I approached Banek and his men the moment the large party arrived on the casino floor.

The Mondian who managed the Pulsar dance club here on the Thodos III space station had enough credits to his name to be treated like a VIP guest whenever he came to the Black Star Casino to get up to some less respectable activities.

Even if he didn't, he was also an old ally who fought beside the Vinduthi in the Battle of Bauxwell. That would have made him a VIP in my eyes, regardless of his reckless spending habits at the casino.

“As impeccable as always, Laux,” Banek mused, already chomping on a cigar. I always found it amusing how many species had taken to the human invention. The leader of our syndicate, Alkard, favored cigars as well, though I never understood the appeal. Now tequila, that I could appreciate. The smell, the burn, the slow intoxication. But cigars? Just never saw the draw.

“Your usual booth is waiting for you in the back. Can I get anything sent over to you while you get settled?” I offered. As pit boss at the casino, this wasn't technically my job, but keeping the big spenders happy wasn't a bad idea for anyone. A happy high roller meant happy bosses which meant happy me.

“How about a round of thump shots for the lot of us?” As his entourage shouted in agreement, he made his way to his

booth and I headed to the bar.

My attention was already on the next task as I reached it. Even as I shouted the order over the counter, I scanned the room for the next high roller that might need my help. I knew them all by name, what games they liked, which waitresses they found attractive. In my line of work, those details were more precious than latinum.

“Nine shots of thump for booth 27. Top row stuff only for this guest. And don’t get smart. He can tell the difference. Send Queegan to deliver them, he really likes—”

I turned my head to make sure the bartender was listening to me and briefly lost my train of thought. Standing on the other side of the bar was a human, but not just any human. This was the most strikingly beautiful woman I’d ever seen.

Typically, their women didn’t do much for me. Even though a few had made my friends turn their lives upside down, I didn’t see the appeal.

But this one was different. She immediately gave me pause. Her shoulder-length blonde hair seemed to glow in the low lights of the casino. Her pale blue eyes shone through the smoky haze of the room like a beacon warning starships of asteroids.

Her curvy build was on full display under her bartender’s uniform. We dressed the bartenders much more simply so customers would keep their eyes on the sexy cocktail waitresses and not notice how much they were being charged at the bar. But this human’s body didn’t get the memo, and she looked incredible. What were we doing hiding her behind the bar? She should’ve been one of the cocktail waitresses. Though perhaps that was for the best—I didn’t need the distraction of other men staring at her all night.

“You’re new...” I finally said after collecting my thoughts. My voice came out lower than I expected.

“Yes, sir, started a few days ago.” She grabbed a top-quality bottle of thump and started pouring shots. Her hands moved swiftly and precisely. “Queegan, table 27.” So, she

listened. She was already leagues ahead of her direct supervisor, Gwak. That idiot couldn't pour a shot to save his life.

"Why haven't I seen you before?" I asked. Queegan, one of our waitresses with long legs and huge...assets, took the tray of shots away. Her skimpy outfit barely contained her figure. Once, I would have gladly watched her walk across the casino floor. Now my eyes couldn't leave the bartender in front of me.

"They've trained me during the quiet hours. This is my first time on the busy shift." She barely looked at me as she typed the order in an electronic bill pad behind the counter. With a ding, I heard her send it to the device Queegan carried. Then Banek would swipe his percomm to instantly transfer the credits to pay the tab from the comfort of his booth. Efficiency like that was rare in new hires.

"I assume you know who I am?"

"Of course, I've heard... stories about you." She continued to barely look at me as she made drinks for waiting customers, her fingers nimbly slicing fruits and pouring mixes. Each movement was precise and efficient. Who was this woman?

"All terrible things, I imagine." Vinduthi were referred to by the rest of the station as both grimfangs and space vampires. Neither term was used with affection. Luckily, the Vinduthi didn't care for affection as a general rule, so it was of no concern to us. I'd rather be feared than liked, so I had no objection.

At least, until faced with this pretty human before me. Now her, perhaps, I didn't want to inspire fear in. I hadn't made up my mind yet.

"Only the worst." She flashed me a polite smile as she said it before returning her attention back to her work. That brief glimpse of a smile made my chest tighten.

"Well, don't worry. You keep working here, you'll have terrible stories about me of your own to share..." I leaned in to read her name tag. "Lila." Her name felt sweet on my tongue.



“Oh, I bet I will.” She laughed. The sound sent a tingle down my spine. *Focus Laux, you have work to do.*

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted another high roller entering the casino floor. “This is the jerk that owns the Glimmering Moon,” I told her quietly. “Everything there is overpriced. You can give him the bottom shelf shit and charge full price for it. He wouldn’t know quality if it bit him in the ass.”

With that, I had to pull myself away from the bar and her.

Lila. Something deep inside me wanted nothing more than to stay next to her at the bar. To listen to the musical tone of her voice and watch her hands as she worked.

It was strange. Most employees would cower and get nervous when I started to talk to them. For good reason—I didn’t take any bullshit. Not during work hours, not ever. I liked it that way, but with Lila, I could already tell I toned it down. I wanted something different from her, though I couldn’t put my finger on just what.

She just nodded in my direction and kept doing her job, barely giving me the minimum of attention, while still executing every task perfectly. No one ever acted that way towards me. Certainly not my workers, especially not the human ones. Even more so, never the new ones.

She was so intriguing. A mystery I wanted to uncover.

But as much as I’d like to keep talking to her, I still had a job to do. Without me, this place would crumble to the ground.

“Mallip, we’re so pleased that you’ve chosen the Black Star Casino this evening,” I declared while approaching our latest guest. “We have booth seven waiting for you. First drink is on the house, I’ll have our best girls bring it over to you.” Only fair to give the first round free, since he’s going to be paying three times what it’s worth every other round. But if you’re too stupid to know the difference...

I turned back to the bar, pretending that I needed to micromanage this drink order any further than I already had. Normally, this would be far below my pay scale, but I needed

to learn more about Lila. I pulled the same move I did the last time, reaching the bar and turning my back to it and nonchalantly scanning the room as I gave my order.

“He’s in booth seven. Send Kyler and...” I turned my head and noticed that the bar manager, Gwak, a guy we only hired because of his extremely powerful father, was the one I was addressing. “Gwak? Where the fuck is Lila?”

“I sent her into the back, sir, we need more tomit fruit slices for –”

“Shut up, Gwak.”

“Yes, sir.” He paused. “Should I go get her?”

“No, you fucking idiot, get the drinks for booth seven. Bottom shelf, and this one is on the house.” I stormed away from the bar. Of course, Gwak, of all people, got in my way. Fucking Gwak didn’t know his horns from his ass, as far as I could tell. Probably sent her away on purpose just to piss me off.

But that wasn’t the end of it. It was madness, but everything I did that night was just an excuse to get back to Lila.

The draw I felt towards her was too strong. I couldn’t ignore it. I was also the pit boss around there, and I could do whatever the fuck I wanted. The only person who could tell me differently was Draven, and that was because I let him. Vinduthi had an unshakeable loyalty to each other, if no one else.

I moved around the booths and weaved between the tables on the game floor, just looking for a reason to head back to the bar. It really wasn’t difficult to do. When in doubt, I claimed it was for guest satisfaction, though I’m sure more than one employee noticed I had never been quite so concerned with everyone’s satisfaction before. This shit was normally Thelev’s job. He was good at it. I didn’t have the patience on most days.

A famous comet ball player needed a refill at the rolt-jack table? I was on it. That tech entrepreneur wanted something to

toast with? I knew just the thing. Banek needed some more cigars? I'd go to the bar and yell at Gwak to get them from the storage room.

Each trip back to the bar gifted me another small interaction with Lila before I'd be dragged away by my responsibilities to the casino. For the first time ever, I wished we had a slow night. The small but frequent talks didn't reveal much other than confirming her resistance towards my usual intimidation. She met each of my quips with her own quick wit. I couldn't seem to catch her off guard.

"Get someone to bring a lump ale for the gentleman at the thomball table. Immediately." I barked the order, glancing at her reaction.

"Yes, sir," Lila responded, continuing to work at the exact same pace she was when I arrived. Something about the way she said sir stirred something within me. I pictured her on her knees, calling me sir.

I swallowed hard, willing the image from my mind. Focus, Laux.

"Sir!" Another employee raced up to me. "Mr. Kraig is getting too... rambunctious on the game floor again."

"Again? Fine, I'll handle it." Throwing assholes out of the casino was my specialty. Maybe roughing him up a little and sending him on his way would be a good use for my increasing frustration.

Later in the night, I finally did something that seemed to catch her attention.

"A mug of whatever is on tap, human," some young Zequinid slurred out, slamming into the bar. "Quickly, hurry up!" His antennae twitched drunkenly. What an entitled little prick.

I watched the interaction from the side, waiting for a new problem to arise for me to solve, and it looked like one just arrived. Lila rolled her eyes and poured the drink. The Zequinid waved his percomm around drunkenly and impatiently.

“Here you go.” Lila slid the mug to him. “That’ll be –”

“Here,” he said with a belch, shoving the device rudely at her. His lack of manners infuriated me. I would teach him a lesson.

“Everything good here?” I approached, standing to my full height.

“No problems,” Lila said, her face stiff. I could tell his behavior annoyed her as much as me.

“I’m having a lovely time.” The drunken slob slurred.

“Oh, that’s wonderful...” I leaned in close to the Zequinid, grabbing tightly onto one of his insectoid limbs. I whispered with a hint of anger, “Don’t forget the tip.”

Fear sunk into his eyes as I squeezed his arm tighter, letting him get a taste of pain. He seemed to sober up instantly, straightening up to politely close out his tab. Then he rushed away so fast he almost forgot his drink. Good. Now he knew not to disrespect my staff.

Before I returned to making my rounds around the casino, Lila flashed me a wary smile but nothing more. I lived for those brief smiles. Someday, I would get more from her.

It was fascinating. The more I tried to talk to her, the more she pulled away. At first, I thought I’d have to give her a little time to get used to me, but I was beginning to think she was actively resisting the opportunity. What employee would pass up a chance to be on their boss’s good side?

Somehow, every aloof reaction only drew me towards her more. I’d figure her out. I was no longer just interested in her, now I wanted her. And I was going to get her.

The night wound down, and the casino cleared out. It should’ve meant more time talking to Lila. But as my obligations to the casino faded, my obligations to my friends and business partners began.

At the end of busy nights like those, we had a tradition of all hanging out in the casino at the end of the shift, celebrating another successful day and analyzing what could be improved.

Usually, I'd enjoy knocking back a few drinks with my crew. But tonight my mind wouldn't leave Lila.

"Laux!" I heard the call cut through the game floor as I made my way to the bar and Lila yet again. It was Draven. "I already got the drinks, get over here!"

I paused, not wanting to walk away from the bar. But I had no choice. I'd been through war with that crew. I'd do anything for them, and they'd do anything for me. We were Vinduthi. Loyalty above all else. I couldn't disrespect them by ignoring this tradition.

With a last lingering look at Lila, I turned and headed to the booth.

"To another successful night at the Black Star Casino," Draven said as I took a shot glass from him. We all drank the shots in one smooth motion. The alcohol burned down my throat. "Okay, everyone, give me a rundown of what went on tonight." Draven, as the head of our group and the casino, liked to know everything. Information was power.

Sakkar, our security specialist, leaped into some rant about the upgrades to the security system, while I zoned out. Sakkar was a good guy, but his tech shit bored me to tears.

Instead, my eyes fell on Lila across the room as she wiped down the bar. Her golden hair fell in her eyes as she worked. Her lithe body stretched to reach every part of the surface. I couldn't peel my eyes away.

From that angle, I had a good look at her curves. She was incredible. I still couldn't believe we had her as just a bartender.

No. I was glad. I didn't want other people ogling her all night. The fire inside me burned hotter at the thought of someone else touching her. She was mine, even if she didn't know it yet.

A deep urge started to grow. I wanted to walk over to her. To stop wasting time and just take her in my arms. Consequences be damned.

“Laux?” I was brought back to reality and noticed the whole crew staring at me with smirks on their faces.

“What?” I growled.

“What... or who were you staring at?” asked Thelev, the VIP host of the casino, trying to hold in a laugh. His job was to handle the ridiculous requests of the high rollers, and he was used to accommodating anything they desired. Yet at that moment, he couldn't keep a straight face.

“No one... Nothing... Fuck off.” After all the times that I teased those guys for similar actions, I could never let them know about my thing for the new bartender. They'd never let me hear the end of it.

As I walked away, I still heard them holding back laughter. But even with their eyes watching me, I was drawn right back to Lila, and I decided I didn't even care if they knew it. She was a drug and I was addicted after only one day.

## LILA

---

My first week at the Black Star Casino had been... *interesting*, to say the least. Especially after my training ended and they put me on the “night” shift, not that day and night really meant much on a space station.

I met more interesting characters than I ever could’ve imagined.

Most significantly, my boss, Laux.

I heard story after story about him in training. By all accounts, he was an intimidating Vinduthi who was used to getting exactly what he wanted when he wanted it. A boss who would snap and yell at you at a moment’s notice, regardless of whether or not you did anything wrong.

Luckily, Laux was hardly the first asshole I’d ever encountered. I knew to stand firm and not give them the reaction, the fear, they were looking for. But he was certainly the most interesting asshole I’d met in a while.

“Good evening, Lila.” Laux approached me almost immediately after my shift started on my third night. His voice was smooth and deep, sending an involuntary shiver down my spine.

“Good evening, sir. What can I get for you?” I asked politely, ignoring my body’s reaction.

“Oh, nothing yet. I just came to talk with you because I like to get to know all of our new employees when they start.”

Somewhere down the bar, I heard another bartender scoff. Laux shot them a deadly glare, and the scoff went silent. Judging by the fact that they weren't immediately fired, it was probably Gwak. Even I could tell that guy was useless, but I heard his dad was powerful on the station or something.

"I'm afraid I don't have anything interesting about me to know." I kept my tone light despite the uneasy feeling in my stomach. Something about the intensity of his gaze unnerved me.

"I'm sure that's not true." He stared deeply into me, as if he was trying to intimidate me into spilling my guts, but it wouldn't work.

Because it was mostly true. There really wasn't much to share. At least nothing that would be interesting to some rich and powerful Vinduthi.

Even if that wasn't the case, why would I tell him anything? I'd only known the guy for three days. It'd take a lot longer than that to get me to say anything more.

At first, I found it odd how often he'd come to me to put in orders rather than the other bartenders. Then he asked all these questions and clearly flirted with me. His motives became pretty clear.

I tried to keep from reacting to his antics as much as possible. But as much as it annoyed me, he was handsome. His piercing red eyes stood out from his luminous gray skin and drew me in. I ended up flashing him a smile here and there despite my better judgment.

But I needed to stop myself from doing that. Laux was a Vinduthi after all, and my boss. That was not something I dared to start.

Why would I ever trust a Vinduthi? When had their species ever been anything but disinterested in humans like me? We were on the ground floor of the hierarchy around there while they got to live high above us in their towers.

If being a Vinduthi wasn't enough, Laux was also my boss. That was even more of a reason not to respond to his



advances. I wasn't exactly working here of my own free will.

But, fuck, he was handsome. His always finely tailored attire clung to his body perfectly. He may have been fully clothed, but every inch of his muscular and toned body was not hard to find. I couldn't help but check him out when he wasn't looking, biting my lip.

Then his charm came into play. Watching him switch tones so competently between scolding Gwak, flirting with me, and schmoozing with guests presented a compelling side of him that all the stories seemed to miss.

When he would pace around the casino out of sight, I had no doubt ignoring his flirtation was the best course of action. He was my boss, he was a Vinduthi, and by all accounts, he could ruin my life if things went wrong. By some accounts, he would gladly end it, depending on who you asked.

But then he'd appear at the bar again, and my sense would all fade away. It was like I was at war with myself and my better judgment. There was just something about him that pulled at me.

"I imagine you've lived quite a fascinating life before ending up here. A beautiful girl like you must have some stories." His voice was like velvet, caressing my skin. I suppressed a shiver.

As much as I hated it, a warmth grew in my chest when he called me beautiful. I wished I could ignore it or be disgusted by it. But the best I could do was hide the fact that I was blushing.

"You'd be wrong," I said, ducking below the bar to pretend to look for more glasses. "I lived a pretty boring life, just barely scraping by. That's why I decided to sign the indentured contract. 'See exciting new places. Meet exciting new people.' That's what the advertisements used to say, I think."

I couldn't believe I just accidentally told him some stuff about my past. It wasn't much but still more than I wanted. He just got me so flustered!

I took a few deep breaths to calm myself. When I was confident my face had returned to normal, I stood back up. Laux was still there waiting for me, a hint of a smile on his lips.

“Well, you’ll definitely get both of those here...with me.” He gave me a big smile, showcasing his disturbingly sharp teeth.

I pretended to ignore him, but I felt my face getting red. Before he could comment on it, some Fanaith with a huge entourage entered the casino floor and Laux was back to work. I exhaled in relief.

As I watched him walk off, I noticed that I wasn’t the only one who was wrapped in his spell. A group of young Vinduthi women watched Laux move from across the casino and giggled. When he passed by them, they tried to pose their bodies in a sensual manner to get his attention, but he paid them no mind.

“There were worse places you could have ended up,” I reminded myself as I turned away and wiped down a glass. It was true, but this was hardly a paradise for a human. All night, every night, these other races flashed their wealth and carefree lives to us workers, while I just prayed to someday get a little bit of freedom.

Euge, an older human man working in the stock room of the bar, had been there twenty years. He was only supposed to be there for five, originally, but he’d gotten sick, couldn’t afford medicine, ended up with his contract resold to the casino, plus a new debt for his medbay time. It made me nauseous every time I thought of it.

“You can’t take any chances,” I reminded myself for the millionth time. I couldn’t risk learning what the outcome of an affair with someone like Laux would be, no matter how attractive I found him.

I had to walk a fine line. If anything went wrong, who knew what my punishment would be? I needed to play nice to all the creepy customers hitting on me. I needed to not openly

reject Laux's advances, but I also couldn't give in like I wanted. I just had to smile.

The next few days were more of the same. Laux flirted with me at every spare moment. Meanwhile, I tried to act like I didn't notice in the hopes that he'd eventually get bored and move on to someone else. I hoped this wasn't a sign of what the next few years of my life were about to become.

Late that night at the casino, everything had died down, and Laux disappeared into some meeting with the other Vinduthi in charge. I expected the rest of the night to be quiet.

Then, two Nazok approached the bar. "Ales, now."

They barely glanced at me long enough to toss money on the bar. To some species, humans were basically invisible, except for workers or as sex toys. At least these two weren't trying to flirt.

As I poured, the two Nazok kept talking to each other in the worst attempt at whispering I'd ever heard.

"We could place them anywhere in here. The initial blasts can claim a sizable number of lives. Then the rest will die in the ensuing chaos," the first said.

Uh, come again?

"True. But that's not what Munk wants, that was made very clear," the second added, taking his mug of ale from me without a second thought.

"Whatever. Regardless, this will be a Luminance Day to remember." They both unleashed a pair of ugly laughs as they walked away with their drinks.

I couldn't believe they just said all of that in front of me. I knew Nazoks were arrogant, but I'd never guessed they were that arrogant.

I had no clue who or what a 'Munk' was, but I needed to find Laux.

Fast.

## LAUX

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“One time, the cameras got hacked. One time,” Sakkar muttered. “I’m never going to live it down.”

“You can’t blame Draven,” I said as we exited the latest group meeting. “That one time was when his mate got kidnapped. Just because we got her back safely doesn’t mean he’s over it.”

“No, I guess not...”

Sakkar, myself, and the rest of our crew all moved back to our stations.

“Laux!”

Lila raced towards me before I even had a chance to pass by the bar. It seemed all my flirting had paid off. I thought it might be time to give up, that she wasn’t worth the trouble.

But here she was, racing right towards my arms, her gorgeous hair flowing in the air behind her.

I grinned as she approached. “Hello, Lila.”

I already planned the best way to sneak out with her. The last thing I needed was for my friends to see us leaving together.

All of those plans faded away once she got even closer. Over the years, I’d learned how to read nearly every species’ emotional tells, and Lila had an unmistakable look of panic on her face. She wasn’t calling out for me because she was ready to fuck. Something else was going on.

“Laux! I searched all over the casino. I need to talk to you,” she said, almost completely out of breath.

“Okay, Lila, then talk. What is it?”

“Can we... Can...” Her chest heaved as she desperately tried to control her breathing.

“Take your time. I’m sure whatever it is, it can wait for you to catch your breath.”

“No, no, it’s urgent. Can we go somewhere private?”

“Of course, follow me.”

I led Lila from the open area of the casino floor to a back room usually reserved for meetings with important clients and guests. It also worked great for what usually happened between two adults when they got some privacy. I smiled charmingly at Lila just in case I’d read her expression wrong, or in case she was just overwhelmed by how *much* she wanted to fuck me.

“There is going to be an attack,” Lila declared immediately after I closed the door behind us.

Never mind. This was not about wanting to fuck.

Too bad.

“What? What’re you saying?”

“I know this sounds crazy, Laux. But there will be an attack. Here. At the Black Star Casino.”

I tilted my head. Maybe there was something that made humans unstable. Shame it had to happen to such an interesting one.

“Of course, it sounds crazy. What makes you say that?” I used my best soothing voice, but she wasn’t having it. “What evidence do you have?”

“I overheard it at the bar just now.”

“They talked about their plans right in front of you?”

“Yeah, it was two Nazok –”

“Oh, that makes sense...” A lot of races on Thodos III don’t hold humans in very high regard. But none more so than the Nazok. They barely acknowledge humans long enough to get their drinks.

“They said they planned to place bombs around the casino on Luminance Day.”

My chest clenched. “Luminance Day? That’s coming up...” Mind whirling, I realized the most important fact. “The casino will be packed. They must be looking to kill a lot of people.”

“I don’t know...”

“What?”

“One of them pointed out that they could get a lot of casualties with the right placement. But the other corrected them and said something about ‘Munk’ having other plans.”

“Munk?” I stopped. That wasn’t good.

“Yeah, Munk. Do you know what that means, Laux?”

“Maybe...” I knew that name, but I needed to do some checking before I said anymore. “Did you hear anything else from them?”

“They walked away after that. I tried to follow them, but they disappeared onto the casino floor. The last thing I heard them saying before I lost them was something about ‘the hierarchy of Thodos III is about to change.’ That’s all.”

“Thank you, Lila,” I said. It was a lot to take in, but if someone was targeting me and my crew, I needed to know. “You were right to bring this information to me.”

I didn’t think I’d ever heard Lila say so much at once. In all my attempts at trying to get her to open up, I only got at most a few stiff sentences at a time. If the situation hadn’t been so dire, I might’ve stopped long enough to marvel at it all.

“I wasn’t sure who to bring this to, but you just seemed like the right person.”

“You don’t have to worry. I’ll figure this out and put a stop to it before Luminance Day.” I reached out and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. I half expected Lila to pull away, but instead, she leaned in.

Lila trusted me now. It was a little hard to believe. Since she started working at the casino, she never offered me anything more than vague answers or bland, inoffensive smiles.

There were a lot of people she could’ve gone to with this information before me. Her direct superior, the bar manager, Gwak... but I understood skipping him. He was an idiot. Still, she could’ve gone to any number of the security guards littered across the casino. Or even straight to Sakkar himself, our head of security.

But who did she seek out? Me. No one else. Just me.

Lila believed there to be some danger afoot. She thought her life might be in grave danger with this attack and came to me for help. I’m the one she thought best stood a chance at protecting her. Obviously, she was right, but it was still a big move from a girl who’d pretended to ignore me every chance she got.

But I didn’t bring that up to her. It might scare her away. Instead, I just took that information and stored it for my own use later. Then I kept our focus on the problem at hand.

“Are you sure they didn’t notice you listening in?” I asked.

“Yeah, pretty sure. They didn’t even look at me.”

“Good, then they have no way of knowing we’re onto them. I need you to go back to the bar and finish your shift like normal, okay?”

“Okay...”

“I’ll get the word out, and we’ll start checking cameras to see if we can trace those guys. But for now, both of us are business as usual.”

I went to pull my hand from her shoulder, but she took a small step towards me before catching herself and stepping

back. The simple action sent a thrill through my body. I wished I could just take her here and now.

“I like my job here. I do. As much as it can make me want to scream my head off, or make me deal with some of the worst of the worst that this space station has to offer. I do like it.”

“Good, I’m glad to hear it. Your work has been outstanding for someone just starting out. You’re a welcome addition to the Black Star Casino team.” I tried to fight back my grin. Maybe she was falling for me after all.

“Listen,” Lila said carefully. Her eyes were full of fear, commanding my attention. “I’ve heard horror stories of people whose contracts were bought by asteroid mining companies... Or stardust refinement firms. Those people hardly make it to the end of their service. This place is much better than the alternatives.”

Or maybe this wasn’t about me at all.

“Thank you, Lila. But I’m not sure why you’re telling me this.”

“I don’t have a choice of where I work. I’m forced to go wherever my contract dictates. And I really don’t want to be sent away from here.”

“What? Why would you think we’d do that?” I reached out again and placed my hand on her upper arm. She leaned into my touch again.

“Because we don’t know what the Nazoks are really planning. You might not be able to stop them. If something happens to this place and I survive, so does my contract. Without a place to work, my contract will get sold, and I’m terrified of who’ll buy it.”

I hadn’t even considered that. If those Nazoks succeeded, obviously I stood to lose a lot. My crew and I had worked hard to build up the Black Star Casino.

But Lila stood to lose a great deal as well. Her livelihood, her safety, her future. I’d thought she was just worried about



dying in the attack. If the Nazoks weren't stopped, dying might actually be the better outcome.

I'd heard horror stories about organizations that treated their human indentured workers as little more than disposable labor. Those workers rarely lived past their contract dates.

"Laux," she continued. "Sometimes working here can be tough. But if the Black Star Casino goes down, and my contract gets sold, I could quickly find myself actually in some living hell."

Never. That wasn't going to happen.

"Lila, you don't have to worry about that."

"But, Laux!"

"No, you don't have to worry about any of that." I took a step closer to Lila, still holding onto her arm. "You have my word on that. Understand?"

My words weren't reaching her, the fear still clearly stamped in her tight shoulders, her clenched fists.

"How can you promise me that? There's so much that could end up going wrong."

"First, we're in control of your contract. If something happens to the casino, I'll find something else for you to do. I won't let you be sold again."

Her eyes searched over my face, as if for any possible reason she could trust me.

"And the second?" Our bodies were so close together that I had half a mind to kiss her right there, and comfort her, making her believe me.

"Nothing is going to happen to the Black Star Casino. I'll be seeing to that personally. You think the Vinduthi are going to just sit here and take this? These Nazoks are going to be stopped."

She took a deep breath, her shoulders straightening. "I want to help."

“What?” That wasn’t what I’d meant. I’d half thought of giving her some job somewhere else, just in case. Something quiet and safe. She could organize my library. If I had one.

Or water plants in Elara’s greenhouse.

But the fire in her eyes told me I’d never get her to hide away like that.

And that made her even more interesting.

## LILA

---

“Get me another purple flame, human,” demanded the small rat-faced Ewani leaning nonchalantly on the bar. “And a sssspinner for my friend,” he added, nodding his head toward his companion.

It was surprising that security had even let them in. The Ewani had a reputation for unscrupulous deals and dodgy alliances. They were hired for the dirty jobs and never trusted by any reputable businessmen. Not that the Vinduthi were reputable in any way, but they did have an unbreakable code of honor that the Ewani just didn’t get.

“Get on with it, you Terran trash,” hissed the Ewani, noting my hesitation. His lips pulled back, revealing his long yellow incisors. It sent a reeking, fetid breath washing over me. He had a deep scar running across his face that ended just below his eye.

I forced a smile to my face. “Certainly, sir,” I said, kicking myself into action.

“I’m ssssurprissed they’re allowed to work in a place like this,” he declared to his friend. “Bloody human trash getsss everywhere.”

I refrained from spitting in his drink as I served him. “Enjoy your drinks, gentlemen,” I said in my sweetest tone.

They didn’t even glance at me in response. I had become invisible to them.

“Munk would never allow that kind of thing,” said his companion.

My ears pricked up at the mention of ‘Munk.’

Laux had recognized that name, I was sure.

Which meant I’d have to get close to this pair of rat-faced scum. Maybe I could pry some information out of them. My skill was getting people to talk, as an unassuming human most people didn’t think capable of understanding their big plans, anyway.

I might not be a fighter, but Laux couldn’t stop me from helping.

As tempting as it was to believe his promises of my safety, I’d rather do my best to make sure I didn’t need them.

But the bar was busy that night, so I kept getting dragged away from them. I continued to watch them closely though, and whenever their glasses started to empty, I made sure it was me who refilled them, plying them with large quantities of alcohol.

“Another,” the scar-faced one said, obviously slurring now.

The bar had emptied a bit, allowing me to give them my full attention. I handed them two brimming glasses. “Did I hear you mention Munk earlier?” I asked in a hushed voice. I knew I was risking everything, but I needed more info.

“Little humansss should keep their nosssess out of what doesn’t conccern them!” the Ewani growled, his small beady eyes narrowing to a slant, and the fur around his neck visibly rising.

“Do you think I work here by choice?” I hissed right back. “I could help you, I know this place like the back of my hand.”

“Munk doesn’t need human sssscum to help him,” hissed the second Ewani, revealing two broken front teeth, the stumps blackened and rotting.

But the scar-faced one looked at me speculatively. “Maybe sssshe could be useful,” he said to his companion. “If she can get usss behind the ssscenesss.”

“We can’t trust her. Munk won’t thank you for this.”

“I can get you into the basement and stores,” I promised them. “I just want a chance to escape this place myself.”

The scar-faced one looked at me with the glassy eyes of the truly inebriated. “Come with me,” he said.

I ducked out from behind the bar and followed the two weaving Ewani to a table where two Nazok were sitting deep in conversation. I didn’t recognize either of them.

They did not look pleased at the interruption, and my heart was beating a tattoo against my ribs. What the hell was I getting myself into?

“Thiss human workss here, she saysss she can get usss backsstage,” the scar-faced Ewani said.

“Why the fuck would you bring her to us?” These guys were not as drunk as the two Ewani and looked at me like I was a piece of dirt they had picked up on their shoe.

I realized I had to talk fast and try to take control of the situation. “I just want to help. I’m an indentured employee, and I hate it here. I want to escape. If there’s anything I can do to bring down the Vinduthi, I’d do it gladly.” My skin felt cold and prickly. I was in deep, shark-infested waters now.

The Nazok looked me over. “I’ll talk to Slaz,” he said. I couldn’t help but see him glance over to another table, although I’m sure he would not have been happy to know that I’d noticed. “Now, get back to work before someone sees you talking to us.”

I nodded once and turned away, managing to get a good look at the other table as I walked casually back to the bar.

I had to talk to Laux, but he wasn’t around. He was busy tracking down leads with his shady underground connections. He needed to know more about what I’d found out. But I would need to be extremely careful, or my life would be forfeit.

I spent the rest of my shift desperately trying to memorize all the details of the faces I had seen.

But Laux was nowhere to be found.

I spent a sleepless night, lying awake and worrying. I'd thought I would see him at the end of my shift, but he hadn't come back to the casino. What if something had happened to him?

I didn't understand the concern I felt for the welfare of this big Vinduthi brute. He was massive. A warrior, and part of the strongest syndicate on the station.

So why should I fret about where he was?

As soon as I woke up, I hurried to the casino, long before my shift even started, and grumbled a little at the wave of relief that washed over me when I found him there, checking on the stocks.

"Come on, I'll take you for lunch," he said when I caught up with him. "I'll tell you what I found out."

"I found out a thing or two as well," I replied with a smile, ignoring the fluttering in my chest.

I was rewarded with a bright grin in return. "I knew I could count on you," he told me, making me flush with pride.

He took me to the All-Stars restaurant. I would never have been able to afford to eat there even if I saved every paycheck for a year. The place was completely understated, just a simple portal with a sign above declaring the name. But inside the place oozed opulence.

Only Laux's large hand at the small of my back kept me from turning right around.

"Your usual table, sir?" asked the attendant as we walked through the door.

Laux nodded, leaning close to the attendant and whispering some quiet instructions.

"Certainly, sir," he replied with a smile in my direction.

I wondered what he planned as we were led across the floor to a private booth, Laux's arm still keeping me close. It was so distracting, I was barely able to keep track of our surroundings.

How could he do this to me by just walking near me?

The attendant adjusted some dials, and we were instantly transported to a magnificent forest clearing.

“You can speak freely here,” Laux assured me. “The All-Star’s privacy settings are second to none.”

“It’s a virtual reality booth,” I commented pointlessly. “This is a beautiful setting.”

“It’s ancient Earth, I thought you might appreciate it. The place is called All-Stars because they’ve got VR for pretty much every star system.”

The air was sweet-scented from the surrounding blossoms and full of birdsong.

“Oh, Laux, look, there’s monkeys!” I said, pointing at the near-mythical creatures said to be the distant ancestors of humankind.

“Whoever would think such ugly little things could evolve into something so beautiful?” Laux said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“As beautiful as you, of course,” he replied, making me flush.

I flicked through the menu choices conspicuously lacking prices. If you needed to ask, you couldn’t afford to eat there, I supposed. I didn’t even recognize the names of most of the dishes. I wondered if that was because I was a human or because I was broke. I suppose either one was a good enough explanation.

“The Tarazan is good,” suggested Laux, picking up on my indecision.

“Perfect,” I said. “I’ll have that.” I was utterly out of my depth.

I was grateful to not only have the opportunity to eat something better than my usual rations, but to have someone who could guide me through the experience as well. Laux was intimidating, sure, but he was also handsome and generous. He

could've taken me to any cheap little dive joint and I would've been thankful. But he chose to bring me here.

Thinking about it made me feel a slight buzzing inside. An excitement I couldn't quite place.

He ordered for both of us and within moments, the attendant appeared from between the trees with a fine wine from the Solava quadrant and a small plate of tasty morsels.

As the attendant poured the wine, I noticed a flash of light from inside his tunic. It made me look more closely at him. He was clearly Vinduthi, with mauve tracery and a circlet of horns protruding from his hairline. But there was definitely something strange about him.

"Is he an automaton?" I asked once he left.

Laux smiled. "Well spotted. Most people wouldn't notice."

"I've never seen one quite so lifelike. Or at least, not that I'm aware of. You can normally spot them a mile off."

"They're hybrids," he informed me. "The electronics are grafted inside a living skin."

The thought made me feel a little queasy. "What? He was once a live Vinduthi?" I asked incredulously.

"No, nothing like that," said Laux, laughing. "They grow the skins in vats, I think."

"Oh, of course." I allowed my vision of machines invading a living Vinduthi host to fade.

For a moment, I was lost for words. I sipped my wine, gazing out at the surrounding forest to cover my embarrassment but feeling my cheeks flush anyway. Why was I being such a klutz in front of Laux?

"So, what did you find out?" he finally asked. "You told me you had some information for me."

Grateful for the change of subject, I told him all about my encounter with the Ewani, filling in as many details of their descriptions as I could remember.



“That’s fantastic, Lila,” he said, sounding genuinely impressed with my efforts, reaching across the table to stroke the back of my hand. “Just promise me you’ll be careful, okay?”

Was the warmth in my chest in response to his praise or his concern?

I wasn’t sure, but I liked it.

“Before you get any more involved, I should tell you who we’re up against,” he said. “Munk isn’t exactly an unknown player.”

Oh.

I hadn’t expected him to share information with me as well. This was more than me reporting to my boss.

This was different. Almost like being partners.

“Not long before you started working at the club, there was a rival house led by a vicious bitch called Conii. She caused a lot of problems for us. The guys who run the Fallen Star knew all about him,” he told me. “Munk was one of Conii’s rivals. Looks like he’s climbed up a couple of rungs now that Conii has been weakened.”

“Shit, so he’s stepped into the power vacuum that Conii left?” I asked him.

“Yeah, pretty much. As far as I can tell, he used to harass Conii, but he was never really one of the big players. Now that the bitch has been taken down, he’s got a taste for the good stuff. But if he thinks he can go against the Vinduthi, he’s going to get a shock.”

Laux’s face was grim as he said it.

The expression on his face was like a bucket of cold water being dumped over my head.

What was I thinking, imagining I could be partners with a man like this?

But still, something deep in my gut wanted to try.

## LILA

---

L uminance Day was still two weeks away.

We met in a tucked away space usually reserved for VIPs. Laux and Sakkar had checked the room regularly for any bugs or ways someone could spy on our meetings. Thankfully, it was clean, and Laux insisted it would be the perfect spot to trade information.

Laux had alerted the other Vinduthi of the problems we faced, and I noticed while I worked how often they gathered quietly, doing their best to have frequent enough meetings that everyone stayed on the same page.

I felt a bit awkward joining in the first few times Laux insisted I sit in. I was sure the other Vinduthi were curious about what I was doing there, hardly expecting me to be of any real use.

Laux, on the other hand, seemed to have all the faith in the world in me. He was adamant that I had been the first one to uncover the ruse, and as such, I was as much part of the team as anyone else. The thought warmed my heart, despite the fact that I once worried I could never trust a man like Laux.

Sometimes, it warmed more than my heart, especially when he stared at me with his intense gaze across the backroom table. I imagined what it would be like for him to take me right there.

Squeezing my legs together and shaking off the thought, I tried to return to the task at hand. It was a matter of life and death. I didn't have time for these fantasies.

“I heard a couple of patrons talking together about making preparations for Munk and his men to have a meeting,” I told Laux and Sakkar, the only two who were able to meet me this late at night when the casino was still busy. “It sounded like the meeting was supposed to happen tomorrow night.”

“A meeting would be the perfect place to gather more intel, especially if Munk led it,” Laux mused.

“Did they say where the meeting was being held?” Sakkar, the head of security, asked. “It would be good if we could get in there early.”

I nodded. “The Galloping Garvoi.”

Laux grimaced. I could tell he knew exactly which pub I was talking about. “That’s a problem. It’s in Conii’s old sector. A Vinduthi will stick out like a sore thumb.”

“But I wouldn’t,” I squeaked.

Sakkar nodded slowly. “It could work. Conii’s places were open to humans.” He smirked. “Probably looking for a way to pick up any news from disgruntled workers. She might have been a vicious bitch, but she was smart.”

My smile froze for a minute. I saw that. Not that long ago, I might have been willing to spill a little information, too.

Laux’s fingers wrapped around mine. “I don’t like this. But unless we bring more people into the operation, we may not have a choice.” The warmth of his hand was echoed in his words. “Do you think you could plant a couple of bugs without being noticed?”

I considered it for a moment. As desperate as I was to prove myself to Laux, maybe in more ways than one, I didn’t want to agree to more than I was ready for. Being overconfident could lead to failure, and this was too important.

“Yes,” I agreed after a moment, certain of my answer.

Well, pretty certain.

“I could pretend to be getting a drink and maybe play a game of darts and plant the bugs that way.”

A smile tugged on the corner of his lips. “Very good. Then that’s what we’ll do.”

The next morning, I went into the pub for my part of the plan. Laux walked me there, giving me all the information he’d been able to find on Munk’s gang, before he stopped to wait in an alley running between two wings of the station.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” He growled, his broad back blocking me from the sight of any passersby. “I don’t like it.”

“It’ll be fine,” I promised. At least, I hoped it would be. “I’ll meet you right back here.”

“One hour. No longer.” His fingers grazed the side of my cheek. “I don’t want you to hurry and call attention to yourself, but I don’t think I can be patient for longer than that.”

“One hour,” I agreed. That was probably as long as my nerves would hold out, anyway.

“Or I’ll come to get you.”

Oh.

That was slightly terrifying.

And more than slightly exciting.

It was harder than I expected to turn away from him and walk the back way to the seedy pub. I was immediately hit with the stale stench of smoke and the odor of old, rotten beer that had soaked into the carpet.

Nazoks of various sizes and shades filled the booths and lined the bar, knocking back drinks, yelling over each other, and leering at the scantily-clad waitresses. I tugged self-consciously on the hem of the uniform I had borrowed from another girl in the Under who ran a trishem booth near my place down in the under, and glanced around, hoping that none of the Nazok’s I’d met before were here.

If any of them knew I worked at the casino, they might think it a good way to get more information about their target,

but the coincidence of me turning up here would be too hard to explain.

I weaved my way through the crowd, feeling several pairs of beady eyes following me as I claimed an empty stool at the end of the bar. It was more crowded than I had expected. I had mixed feelings about that, realizing more people meant it was easier to blend into the crowd unnoticed. However, more people also meant more eyes to catch me in the act.

I swallowed hard, trying to steel myself to give the performance of a lifetime. The bartender, a grizzled Nazok missing half an ear, gave me a distrustful once-over. “What’ll it be, human?”

“Just a light ale, thanks.”

He held out his hand for my percomm, obviously expecting payment in advance. I had a feeling the gesture was deliberate because I was a human, but it hardly mattered.

I glanced down, and it occurred to me how unfortunate it would be if Laux decided to send me a message right then. But my screen was clear, so I handed it over, trying to hide the shakiness I felt in my hands.

I don’t know if I breathed again until he slid my percomm back across the bar at me, nodding perfunctorily to indicate the payment had been processed. I let out a quiet sigh and subtly scanned the pub as I waited for my drink.

I noticed a particularly rowdy group rolling dice at a table in the back. At least one arm was adorned with the tattoo I was looking for. When my drink arrived, I carried it with me, pretending as though I just wanted to watch the game.

One of the rollers hit a lucky streak and I cheered with everyone else even as I subtly evaluated the crowd. I had a feeling this would be a good spot to listen in, and carefully slipped one of the bugs Sakkar had prepared for me out of my sleeve, concealing it in my palm.

“Looks like today is your lucky day,” I said flirtatiously, leaning toward the Nazok holding the dice to rub his tattooed

arm. He grinned, obviously enjoying the attention. I had to tear my attention off his stained teeth and remind myself to focus.

Setting my ale down on the table behind us, I draped myself over his shoulders and leaned forward so that my breasts were pressed against his back. Distracted, he didn't even notice when I gently stuck the bug to the underside of the chair, hidden in a recess and out of sight.

He finally released the dice, winning another round. I took the opportunity to stand up, cheering loudly with the crowd. In the commotion, I nearly managed to slip away before he grabbed my hand.

“Where are you going?” he said with a lecherous grin.

I had to work hard to keep a grimace from my face. “Just freshening up.” I gave him a wink. He let go of my hand to pinch my butt, and I masked the way I jumped with a forced chuckle.

This time, he let me go, his attention back on the game. I scurried into the bathroom, deciding to give it about ten minutes. I had a feeling his short attention span wouldn't even think to look for me if I just stayed out of sight long enough. Unfortunately, the bathroom here was so gross I didn't even want to touch anything, so I hovered awkwardly in the corner the entire time.

So much for not looking suspicious. Luckily, there didn't seem to be many women in the bar, and none came into the bathroom to notice me.

*Can't blame them, looking at the state of this place. Then again, this is the women's room. Doesn't that mean the women made this mess?* I found myself contemplating whether female Nazoks were just as disgusting as the males while I waited for an appropriate amount of time to pass by.

“The Vinduthi are kind of scary,” I admitted to my reflection in the water-stained mirror. “But they're scary in a polished, sexy way. Fierce and in control. Of everything, including hygiene. Some of these guys look like they haven't washed their clothes a day in their life. The Vinduthi look like

they'd drag you home and make you change if you got the smallest spot on your blouse.”

*And if that man was Laux, you'd be hoping he'd make you do more than just his laundry.*

I scowled at the thought, not wanting to admit it was true. For just a minute, my mind flashed unbidden to the thought of Laux sneaking up on me in the small laundry room in the back of the casino where we washed the bar towels and tablecloths.

I glanced at my reflection again, seeing the way my ears heated up at the thought, and had to wait another couple of minutes for my face to return to normal before I faced the crowd in the bar again.

This time, I kept to myself. I pretended to be exhausted from a long day of work, and every time I found a strategically located open seat, I would collapse into it as though I was just relieved to be off my feet.

Then I'd wait for the right moment to leave a bug and stand up as though I needed to fetch a napkin or return an empty glass to the bar—even if it was just an empty glass I found lying around. I'd wait for another seat to open up and do it all again, until I was satisfied I had accomplished all I was going to for one day.

I glanced at my percomm, realizing I had completely forgotten to keep track of the time.

*Shit. Laux is going to come busting in here thinking you're in trouble, all because you were too busy wasting time in the bathroom, daydreaming about him feeling you up. Good luck explaining that one.*

The hour we agreed upon was just drawing to a close now. I could make it out of here and back to him well within the fifteen-minute grace period we had set.

Probably.

I hurried out of the pub, relieved to finally get a breath of fresh air—or at least, fresh enough that I didn't choke on the stale beer odor that seemed to permeate every corner of that place.

When I found Laux waiting where I had left him, I couldn't help but wrap him in an excited hug, and before I realized what I was doing, my lips pressed against his in a giddy kiss.

Shocked, I pulled away, trying to figure out why I did that. "Sorry! I, uh, I was just kind of full of energy, I guess."

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh, I can give you some ways to burn off energy," he replied suggestively, and I felt that familiar twisting feeling in my stomach as something sprang to life I still didn't want to acknowledge.



## LAUX

---

Lila's face flamed red. The sudden naive action wasn't a deterrent in the slightest. I stepped forward unthinkingly, half ready to press her up against the wall and kiss her again.

She stepped back quickly as if she could tell what I was about to do. The action jarred some more sensible part of me loose, and I decided this was neither the time nor the place. I would have her, and soon, but for right now, we had to focus.

"The bugs are planted. And don't worry, I kept my head down and spoke sparingly. I made it seem like I had just come off of a long shift and needed a pick-me-up. That seemed to keep anyone curious away."

A touch of admiration filled me. She did good, and it sounded like she kept her head straight throughout.

Lila had also followed one of the most basic rules of deception. The best lies always stem from the truth. She looked exhausted, and I knew she had another long shift tonight.

"Go home and get some sleep. We'll talk about what I found tonight during your break."

The gratitude was evident on her face. "Thank you, I will."

And then she was off. A part of me wished she could have stuck around for this. When I had involved her in my plans, I'd been unsure about how much she'd be able to handle.

But so far, she'd been nothing but loyal and resourceful, and my respect for her was ever-growing. At the same time, if

she stuck around, I wasn't sure I would have been able to focus. I had set up a station to listen in on the bugs she placed in the pub back at my apartment, and I had a feeling if she had come with me, we might have tumbled into the nearest bed and not come up for air until hours too late.

From the security of my apartment, I tapped into the bugs Lila had planted. I flipped through the feeds until I heard a familiar voice.

Munk.

“The Black Star has had quite a profitable year. In fact, as far as I can tell, it's the reason our own casino isn't profiting,” Munk growled. “But if we can put them out of business long enough to remind people why we're superior, we might be able to tank them. For good.”

“Sounds risky,” a sharp voice commented. “If we bomb the place, we're going to have the rest of the Vinduthi on our asses faster than we can react. Can we really afford a turf war right now?”

“Maybe if we killed a lot of people or brought down the casino entirely, sure. That's why we're going for just a little accident. They'll be busy trying to get back up and running. If we do this right, they won't even think to come after anyone,” Munk said smugly.

I grit my teeth. He might be right. A massacre of patrons or the collapse of the casino entirely would bring the full wrath of the Vinduthi Syndicate. But something minor enough to put us out of business for a while, but not permanently, might be written off as a fluke.

“Gather the supplies and men we'll need to pull this off. And get it done quickly. We have a tight schedule.”

“I'll get on it, boss,” the annoying voice answered.

After that, their discussion drifted into something more casual. Or at least, casual for Munk. I listened to the feed until they left the pub.

Well, that at least confirmed that they were most definitely planning to bomb the Black Star. And that it was all for the

sake of trying to get Munk's own pathetic casino off the ground.

We'd have to look for areas around the Black Star they might target. Somewhere to do enough damage but nothing permanent.

That night on the floor after talking to the rest of the team, I did just that. I took note of every place that could be considered a weakness. To my dismay, there were plenty.

Lila was at the bar, chatting away with customers and laughing. Unbiddenly, a small smile of my own tugged at my lips.

She had grown on me. Not just for her beauty, though I still appreciated the softness of her feminine features. She was brave and smart, and not just for a human. Once this business was concluded, I'd find a way to keep her at my side. And mine alone.

As I walked past the bar, I caught bits and pieces of the chatter. And that's when I heard it. That annoying voice that had talked with Munk in the pub earlier.

He was here.

As subtly as I could, I glanced at the owner of the voice. It was a Nazok, no surprise there, with a too-wide grin.

If anyone was going to have more information about the bombing, it would be him. But I couldn't very well get it from him myself.

I locked eyes with Lila and subtly gestured for her to come away from the bar. She acknowledged it with the barest nod of her head, and a few minutes later, she made her way to where the alcohol was stored. In the small storage space, we were so close that her breasts couldn't help brushing lightly against me, and I felt my cock stirring to confirm it noticed as well.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

*I'm ready to take you in a storage closet and make you scream so loud the whole bar hears it, that's what.*

“That Nazok with the too-wide grin sitting at the far end of the bar is one of Munk’s men,” I answered instead.

Her eyes widened. “How do you know?”

“I heard his voice during the meeting. See if you can get any more information out of him.”

She nodded and headed back out. I waited a few minutes before heading back out myself, waiting for my erection to fade. When I did, I spotted her chatting up the Nazok. They seemed to talk amicably with one another.

Something strange stirred within me, a different sensation than the hard-on a few minutes earlier, but I couldn’t quite place what. I shook the thought away and went to the back room where we usually met to discuss our plans.

For right now, I could observe the floor on the camera and pull up the plan of the casino.

Where would they attack?

Rubbing the base of my horns, I wanted to kick something. This would be easier with Alkard and his team here.

More eyes, more resources. But he and the rest of his men had taken their mates to a long awaited excursion to Lasiae 9 and wouldn’t be back until Luminescent Day.

Besides, we weren’t exactly slouches over here at the Black Star. We’d take care of it.

An hour later, Lila walked into the room.

“Well, were you able to get him to talk?” I asked her.

She nodded. “Only a little. He’d noticed you following me into the back, so I pretended that you had called me back there to yell at me. After that, he wouldn’t shut up about how much he hated, in his words, ‘arrogant Vinduthi.’”

She grinned. “He’s not exactly good about hiding his feelings.” Her shoulder sagged. “But the only thing that I found out was that he was waiting for a package from a friend of his that runs a tattoo joint.”

I'd have to ask the guys to look for a Nazok with a tattoo parlor that might be in cahoots with Munk. Maybe Ryrik would know something. Ryrik, I swore, knew everybody on this station.

"You did good."

She snorted. "Believe me, I have a vested interest in this, too."

No doubt she meant her contract. I took a moment to study her. Her blonde hair, which was pulled back into a bun, was coming undone, outlining her face beautifully. And though her eyes were tired, they were still sharp.

I'd always admired her for her beauty, but again, I found I was just as drawn to her undeniable intelligence. Lila had never done something like this before. And yet she adapted so quickly and could think on her feet like an expert. She continued to impress me.

She cleared her throat and a small blush tinted her cheeks. "I suppose we should get to planning countermeasures?"

I scooted over on the wide couch. "Come look."

She took a seat beside me, and I enlarged the plan, showing her all of the areas that Sakkar and I identified as weak spots and relayed to her some of the possible solutions we had considered to protect them. I wasn't about to have her left out of the mission when she was the one who had alerted us to the problem in the first place.

As we spoke, I found myself just staring at her more and more. I'd been attracted to other people before, but it had always been something surface-level. A night or two together, and there was never anything more that I wanted from a partner.

But now, with her, I felt that this was something much deeper. She hadn't been susceptible to my flirting before, but I wondered if after the time we'd spent together...

When my hand grazed her thigh, she sucked in her breath but didn't pull away.

“Did you know your eyes take on this beautiful shimmer whenever you get excited about something?” I asked, deciding to go for it.

She blinked in surprise. Then color rushed to her cheeks in full force. She ducked her head, the adorableness of the gesture just driving me to want her more.

“It’s probably just a trick of the light,” she said in what I assumed was meant to be a joking tone. But her ears were tinted red with embarrassment.

“No, I think not. They are already stunning under normal circumstances.”

A small teasing grin made its way onto her face. “I’d return the compliment, but I think you get enough women fawning over you to have heard it all.”

“Perhaps. However.” I inched a little closer to her. “I think I would very much enjoy hearing it from you.”

She shivered, the pink triangle of her tongue flicking out to wet her lips, drawing my gaze towards them.

“Well, you’re, umm,” she stammered. “You have very beautiful eyes, too. Handsome! Handsome eyes.”

Then she seemed to study me more deeply. “They hold the power to invoke so much fear. But when you look closer, there’s so much passion and a keenness to them that makes you want to draw closer.”

I hadn’t even realized I leaned in until her lips were on mine. A soft sigh escaped from her, and I pulled her closer to me.

Her hands came to rest on my chest, digging into my clothes. I pulled away just enough to look into her eyes. They burned now, all traces of exhaustion gone.

The look she gave me stirred something primal within me. Something that had been awakened earlier that morning and never fully put back in the box it belonged in. I pulled her back to me and kissed her more fiercely this time.

Planning would have to wait.

## LILA

---

“L aux...” I moaned as his lips met my neck. The soft caress sent tingles ricocheting through my body.

He pulled away abruptly and leaped to his feet. Laux hurried to the door, double-checking that it was locked. His eyes were dark with desire, but his jaw was set in determination—no one was interrupting us.

I stood up from the couch to join him at the door on shaky legs, my core pulsing with need. As he turned back towards me, I rose up on my tiptoes, reaching for him. One hand brushed against the base of his horns before tangling in the hair at the nape of his neck and I pulled his face back down to mine, crushing my lips desperately to his.

The kiss was electric—like nothing I had ever felt before. My knees went weak and heat flooded my center. I was ready, I realized suddenly. More than ready. I needed this. I needed him.

“Laux...” I whispered his name again when we finally broke for air.

A devious grin spread slowly across his face before he dove back in, claiming my lips once more. Then in one swift movement, he wrapped his arms around me and switched our positions, pressing me back against the door, holding our bodies tightly together. I felt his arousal, hard and urgent, against my belly.

“Are you sure you want this, Lila?” His voice was tight and strained, the slightest tremor in his arms belying the rigid

control he exerted. “If you have even the smallest doubt, you need to tell me. Now.”

I had never been more certain of anything in my life.

“I want you,” I panted, rolling my hips against him for emphasis. Sparks erupted across my nerve endings from the contact. “So what are you going to do about it?” I challenged.

A low growl rumbled in his chest, vibrating through me and echoing between my legs. His arms and body tightened almost crushingly around me in response.

“I’m going to do everything about it, little one,” he practically purred. “If you keep grinding on me like that, I won’t be able to stop myself from taking you right here up against this door. So, unless exhibitionism is your thing...”

My face flushed crimson at the thought, but I forced myself to still my movements. As tempting as it was to let him ravage me then and there, getting caught in a compromising position by a coworker was not exactly the impression I wanted to make.

Laux chuckled at my reaction, the sound sending more tingles skittering across my sensitized skin. Then he spun us both around and walked me backwards, steering us towards the couch on the other side of the room without ever breaking contact. My calves hit the edge and I tumbled onto the cushions, Laux following me down to blanket my body with his.

His hands were everywhere, stroking over my thighs, hips, ribs, brushing the sides of my breasts. I gasped at the sensations, arching into his touch. My hands slid up the hard planes of his back, fingers digging into the ridges of old battle scars etched into his skin. Even through the layers of clothing between us, I felt the evidence of his arousal, insistent against my core.

I shifted restlessly beneath him, clenching my thighs together against the building ache. Sensing my need, one of his hands trailed down to grasp my knee, guiding it up around his hip. I locked my ankles behind him instinctively, opening



myself wider to the promise of penetration. But instead of surging inside me as I desperately craved, he pulled back.

I mewled in protest, trying to drag him back down, but he captured my wrists in an unbreakable grip and pinned them to the cushions above my head.

“Patience,” he chided, though I heard the strained control behind it. Holding my hands in place with one of his, his fingers on his free hand traced feather-light patterns down the sensitive skin of my inner arm. I shivered at the barely-there caress, writhing beneath him.

His touch drifted lower, tracing across my collarbone and down between my heaving breasts. I arched into him again, wordlessly begging for more contact, but he continued his maddening descent. His clever fingers danced along the waistband of my pants, then lower, skimming over my hips to trace every inch of newly exposed skin as he slowly peeled them down.

The sweet torture seemed endless, every nerve ending singing at his proximity. Finally, finally, he reached my aching center, fingers ghosting over slick, swollen flesh for one brief, glorious instant. My vision whited out and unintelligible pleas spilled from my lips. But again he retreated, leaving me empty and trembling on the brink.

I was mindless now, consumed by raging need. The entire universe narrowed to consist of only Laux’s hands on my body and the unfulfilled promise they carried. I thrashed against his hold, begging—no longer caring what I said or did if only he would end this exquisite torture.

Another low laugh vibrated through his chest. “Look at me, Lila.” The deep command in his voice resonated somewhere primal inside me and my eyes flew open to meet his burning gaze. The intensity there seared me to my soul.

“Do you want me?” he asked roughly, dragging his fingers once more over my soaked, quivering entrance.

“Yes!” The cry was wrenched from me involuntarily. “Laux please, I want you so badly...”

His eyes flared with possessive heat and triumph. “Then take me, Lila. Show me how much you want me.”

In one smooth motion, he released my hands and sat back on his heels between my splayed thighs. My arms felt limp and disconnected without the grounding pressure of his grip, but I forced them into motion, fumbling frantically with the fastenings of his pants. Never breaking eye contact, he helped me free his thick, rigid length. I halted, startled.

In general, it wasn't too different from a human's cock, but the thick shaft was studded with lines of soft flanges, the head more triangular.

He waited, watching me closely.

But I was too far gone to back down now.

Quickly, I wrapped my fingers around the hot silk of his erection. I sighed at the feeling, pumping him experimentally.

Laux's eyes slid shut, jaw going slack with pleasure. “Just like that,” he encouraged hoarsely. My confidence growing, I continued working him with one hand while the other drifted lower to cradle the weight of his sac. His breath left him in a rush and I watched in fascination as the powerful male came undone under my hands.

But all too soon, his larger hands wrapped around my wrists again, stilling my movements. “As fantastic as that feels, if you keep going, I'm liable to finish too soon,” he admitted ruefully.

I couldn't help the smug grin that lifted the corners of my mouth, gratified to know I affected him as intensely as he did me. Buoyed by newfound certainty, I wrapped my legs back around his hips, using the leverage to line our bodies up properly.

We both froze as the broad head of him nudged against my entrance. Laux searched my face intently one last time and I held his stare boldly as I finally—finally!—canted my hips just enough to take him inside.

I cried out at the feeling of delicious fullness, of finally being connected so intimately. Laux's eyes squeezed shut and

he muttered a string of curses under his breath, the cords of his neck standing out with the effort to remain still, allowing me time to adjust around him. But my body recognized him, wanting all of him, and after barely a moment, I urged him deeper.

Braced above me on one forearm, he began to move, long smooth strokes igniting every nerve ending. The rhythm built gradually, carrying me higher and higher, his pubic bone creating maddening friction against my clit with every thrust, those strange flanges setting me on fire. I felt pressure coiling tighter and tighter within me, my whimpered breaths coming faster. So close, just a little more...

Sensing how near I was to coming undone, Laux shifted then, releasing my hip to slide clever fingers between us, applying firm pressure directly to my clit. At the same time, he used the new angle to redouble the force of his thrusts.

The combined stimulation instantly hurled me over the edge with an ecstatic cry. Wave after wave of intense pleasure flooded through me, distantly hearing Laux's groan of release echoing mine as my inner muscles clamped and spasmed around him.

As the shudders slowly subsided, I went limp; every particle of strength leaching out of my body. Laux carefully eased us both down flat against the cushions, using the bulk of his larger body to shield me from being crushed against the upholstery.

I drifted lazily, aftershocks still fluttering through my system. As the endorphins gradually receded, I felt Laux softly nuzzling at my neck and hair, patiently waiting for me to return fully to myself. Such unexpected tenderness after the commanding intensity of minutes before made emotion clog my throat.

At length, I found the strength to lift my heavy eyelids open. Laux raised his head to meet my gaze, unguarded affection and wonderment shining clearly on his face.

With something that felt suspiciously like awe, I realized that I could see all the way down to his very soul in that

moment—all the dedication and passion he poured into everything he pursued laid bare before me.

Overcome, I cupped his face between trembling hands, trying to impart with my touch everything I couldn't find the words for yet.

His eyes drifted shut briefly at the contact before opening again, warm and calm. "Are you all right?" he asked softly, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear. Such simple care in the wake of our joining somehow meant just as much as the intensity beforehand.

"I'm perfect," I sighed truthfully, letting my fingers trace wonderingly over the sharp angles of his cheekbones, marveling anew that someone like him wanted me. That he was here, with me.

Something eased in his expression at my reassurance and a hint of his usual charming grin quirked his sculpted lips.

"Perfect, hm?" His eyes glinted teasingly. "Getting a little cocky there, are we, Miss Lila?"

I released a startled peal of laughter, swatting ineffectually at his shoulder. Leave it to Laux to ruin a tender moment.

With exaggerated dignity, he captured my hand mid-swing and pressed a courtly kiss to the back of it even as his eyes continued sparkling. Unable to help my answering smile, I tugged him back down atop me, sighing contentedly when his steady weight settled over me once more.

His idle caresses lulled me into a peaceful state of relaxation. As the minutes slipped by though, reality creeping back in—we were hidden away in the back room of the casino after all, not some private bedroom. As pleasant as the afterglow was, we couldn't hide here indefinitely.

Just as I worked up the willpower to point that necessity out, Laux heaved a sigh and reluctantly levered himself upright. I mourned the loss of contact immediately, skin cooling rapidly without his furnace-like body heat.

"I suppose we should make ourselves presentable," he admitted grudgingly, scrubbing a hand over his face before

passing a critical eye over my mussed appearance. I certainly felt thoroughly debauched and could only imagine how wanton I must look sprawled across the couch, clothing and hair askew.

Oddly though, his heated gaze only boosted my confidence—I had reduced this powerful male to just as chaotic a state after all.

Laux stood and restored his own clothing briskly before offering me a hand up. “We still have unfinished business regarding the situation with Munk,” he reminded me regretfully. “As enjoyable as the distraction was...”

The reminder landed with the weight of the galaxy’s largest asteroid, abruptly bringing reality crashing back down. The entire reason we had sequestered ourselves in this room to begin with was strategizing around the still very real threat targeting the casino. Distracted by more pleasurable pursuits, I had nearly forgotten entirely.

Munk’s plans were still in motion—the casino, our livelihoods, and contracts still at risk.

## LAUX

---

Two days later, I'd gotten a tip about one of Munk's men working in a tattoo parlor that he regularly used when he wanted something done quietly. Keeping to the shadows, I tailed the Nazok man as he walked to work.

Though he never made it to his shop.

An hour later, the Nazok was suspended mid-air from a chain. Blood covered his body and matted his hair. He was strong, I had to give him that, but everyone had their breaking point. And the Nazok reached his.

"I warn you, I've held back for now. So if you don't start talking, I'm going to cut off your fingers and drive needles into your eyes until you beg to spill everything," I said in a low, dangerous tone.

The Nazok shuddered, and I knew he believed every word. To add to his fear, I took a needle from my coat and grabbed the back of his neck as if to hold him in place.

His eyes went wide and he stammered. "No, wait! I'll talk! Stop it, I'll talk!"

I lowered the needle but never loosened my grip on the back of his neck. "Then stop blubbering and start talking!"

He nodded as well as he could with his neck still in my iron grip. "Munk came to me about a month ago wondering if I could get parts in to build a bomb for him. I've done these sorts of things for him a few times before, so he let some things slip about the plan. He's going to make a move on the Day of Septenary Luminance."

My jaw clenched slightly. Now we knew for sure we were correct about the date. It was a logical move, too.

Day of Septenary Luminance, or Luminance Day as many called it, was a day rooted in celebrating life and the seven galaxies. What it had become was a day for non-stop parties and parades and people drinking until they blacked out. Especially since at midnight, it was tradition to wish everyone well in the year to come and buy a drink for the person closest to you.

And it was also a very profitable day for the casino.

“He plans to set them off at midnight to cause chaos,” the Nazok finished shakily.

I narrowed my eyes on him. “We know that. Where are they planning to place the bombs? How are they planning on getting the bombs placed?”

The Nazok shook his head wildly. “I don’t know! I just gave them supplies, I don’t know any other specifics about the plan.”

I growled and pulled out a knife, stepping into his personal space. The Nazok’s eyes widened. “Wait! I can give you a name!”

I raised an eyebrow, waiting for him to continue. He swallowed hard. “Strom, he does a lot of the grunt work for Munk. He’ll know more than I do, I swear!”

Grunting, I leaned away from him. “Oh, I believe you. That’s why I’m going to show you mercy.”

Then, in a flash, I drove the blade into his heart. The Nazok opened his mouth in a silent scream. He convulsed, once, twice, and slumped over, completely still.

After dragging his body into an incinerator and washing the blood off my hands, I headed back to the casino.

Reporting in with Draven, Sakkar, and the rest, we planned our next move.

“They’re planning to bomb the casino at midnight on Luminance Day. Which we knew.” I leaned back against the

couch, wishing the shift was over and the whole business with Munk was over and I could just take Lila home with me.

But that wasn't going to happen.

“The Nazok didn't know any more specifics other than that, though. He did mention someone named Strom who he thought would know more.”

Lila hummed. “Strom. I think I might actually know that name.”

I frowned. “And how exactly do you know the name of someone involved with Munk?”

She huffed. “Oh, please. You'd be surprised who I meet in this gig. There's another bartender who comes in every now and then and complains about some of her patrons. I've heard her mention a Strom guy a few times before. Apparently, he's a loud drunk and a lousy tipper.”

“Do you know where she works?” Draven asked.

“Yeah, it's called The Endless, and it's just outside the Narrows. She sounds like they get a lot of shady characters so it fits the bill.”

I grunted. “Very well. Jalik and I can get in there, find Strom, and —”

“Whoa, hold on there,” Sakkar interrupted. “If you go barging in looking for a fight, Munk's going to know you're on to him and change his plan. We need a more subtle approach that's not going to get us caught.”

Suspicion gnawed at me. “You already have an idea, don't you.” It was not a question.

Draven turned to Lila. “Would you be willing? I hate to ask this of you again, but you did well in the last mission.”

I set my jaw. “No. She's not going.”

Lila's eyebrows rose. “I don't remember you being in charge of what I do,” she snapped, then softened her face. “Yes. If it makes you feel any better, you can hang out somewhere nearby.”



“Fine,” I muttered. “But I don’t like it.”

## LILA

---

I took a steadying breath as I approached the grimy entrance to The Endless bar. Getting information out of Strom was crucial, but that didn't make the task any less unsavory.

Pasting on a sultry smile, I slipped inside. The stench of stale beer and body odor assaulted my senses immediately. I scanned the shadowy room while keeping my expression alluring. Raucous laughter and shouting echoed around me as shady figures leered from their seats. My skin crawled, but I steeled myself and sauntered up to the bar.

The bartender, a bored looking Fanaith, raised an eyebrow at my skimpy outfit. "What'll it be?"

"Oh, just browsing for now, honey," I purred, leaning over the sticky counter. "But you wouldn't happen to know if Strom's around tonight, would you? Big guy, works for Munk. Said he'd show me an exciting time." I flashed a coy smile.

The bartender jerked his head toward a corner booth. "There's his usual spot. Can't miss him."

Perfect. I already felt eyes tracking me as I sashayed across the room. Sliding into the booth, I arranged myself provocatively and waited. Right on cue, the entrance swung open and a hulking Nazok lumbered inside—Strom.

His beady eyes found me instantly. I beckoned invitingly and he wasted no time sliding in across from me, blatant lust in his expression.

"Well aren't you a treat for sore eyes," he leered. "Ain't seen you around before. What's your name, sweet thing?"

I laughed lightly. “Melanie. And I could say the same about you.” I leaned forward, providing an ample view down my top.

His grin widened, exposing rotting teeth. “Bet this is your lucky day then, me walking in. How’s about you sit a while so we can get...acquainted.” His hand groped my thigh under the table and I suppressed a shudder.

I draw Strom into idle small talk, plying him with compliments and leaning into every touch. All it took was a few well-placed comments about how much I hated the Vinduthi for him to fall right into my trap. He lapped up the attention and bragged grandly about his status as Munk’s right-hand man.

“Got some big things in the works real soon,” he remarked conspiratorially. “Those Black Star bastards won’t know what hit ‘em.”

“How exciting,” I murmured, trailing a finger slowly up his arm. “I do love a man who knows how to make things happen.”

Strom chuckled. “Maybe when it’s all said and done, I’ll bring you up to my place. Give you a private demonstration of my... skills.” His hand slid higher up my thigh, and I forced myself not to recoil.

“Mm, I look forward to it. But first, I want to hear more about how smart you are.” I leaned in close, pretending to be captivated by his gruff voice and rancid breath.

Still, I had a job to do.

Our faces nearly touched, and I noticed how Strom’s eyes glittered with arousal and triumph. He was confident he had me right where he wanted.

Seriously.

I ran my fingers teasingly along his jaw as he talked. All I had to do was giggle at the right spots and pretend to be amazed to get him to keep talking.

“To think I almost didn’t stop by this charming little bar tonight.” I sighed dramatically. “Imagine missing you by mere minutes!”

“Lucky for you, you got me all night, sweetheart.” Strom slid his hand further up my skirt. I struggled not to wrench away in revulsion. Just a little longer...

After another twenty minutes of pandering to the brute, I made my excuses for leaving. “I must freshen up for later,” I told him with feigned regret. “But I’ll think of you...” I trailed a hand slowly down his chest.

Strom caught my wrist and pulled me forward aggressively. Before I could react, he crushed his mouth to mine in a forceful, slobbering kiss. It took every ounce of self-control not to shove him away in disgust.

Instead, I extricated myself as gently as possible. “Patience, now,” I murmured, wiping my mouth as I slid from the booth. “I’ll see you later...” With an alluring smile, I turned and sauntered toward the exit, ensuring I was well outside before I let my facade drop.

I released a shuddering breath and wiped furiously at my mouth. Even the most disgusting kiss of my life had been worth it, to have so much of Munk’s plan exposed. I only prayed I would be able to wash the slimy touch of Strom’s hands from my memory so easily.

But the thought of foiling their attack helped to steel my nerves. I vowed I wouldn’t let creeps like Strom intimidate me. The information I gathered could save lives.

Besides, as far as I could tell, it was just a good excuse for another pleasing round with Laux. I could let him wipe off Strom’s fingerprints and replace them with his own.

## LAUX

---

For nearly an hour, I waited in a rundown trishem shop across from the Endless. It took everything in me to fake nonchalance. I had never waited on *anyone* as much as I had waited on this temptress over the past two days.

Finally, Lila walked into the shop. She wore a spaghetti strap top with her jacket tied to her waist. It left her arms all but bare, and the neckline dipped low.

Her grin was confident, and she quickly spotted me in the back.

“Well, what did you find?” I asked her as she sat down.

“Strom was a bit difficult to crack at first, but he’s male through and through. A little ego-boosting and letting him think that I fell for his charms, and he spilled everything. They’re planning on targeting the load-bearing columns underneath the dance floor.”

Despite getting exactly what we needed, I felt like my blood was boiling a little. “You flirted with him?”

She snorted. “Well, yeah. It was the quickest way to get him to talk.”

It took an effort to bury the rage inside me. I knew it shouldn’t bother me that she’d flirted with Strom. She was getting information that was vital to us, and it wasn’t as though she’d slept with him.

And yet I couldn’t help the hot surge of jealousy that coursed through me. It was completely illogical and like

nothing I'd ever felt before. We might have only known each other a short time, but I suddenly felt something primal insisting that she was *mine*.

I clenched my jaw and urged the voice away. She was a human. Interesting and fun as she was, I wasn't sure I wanted to get possessive of such a creature. And I certainly didn't want to encourage that line of thinking unless I was sure I meant it.

"Right. I guess we should get going then. See if we can find what weaknesses they intend to exploit."

"Hang on, what's your deal?" she asked before I could get up. "Are you mad?"

The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. "I don't think you should flirt to get information. It's dangerous."

She huffed and looked at me like I'd just insulted her. "Excuse me? First of all, I'm well aware of how dangerous it is to live here. I'm human, after all, so don't try and belittle me by trying to explain it to *me*. Second, you have your weapons, and I have mine. Sometimes, that weapon takes advantage of the fact that they like my breasts."

A low growl emitted from my throat. "Everyone likes your breasts. That's too easy."

There was a tinge of anger on her face. "Easy? We're trying to stop a catastrophe. Are you really saying we need to make this a little more *challenging*?"

Some of the patrons looked at us. I glared at them and then back at her. "We don't have time for this now. We'll talk about it later."

She huffed, standing up from the table so quickly, the chair teetered backward for a moment. With her arms crossed over her chest, she didn't even wait to see if I followed behind her as she made her way out of the shop and through the station to the casino.

Gritting my teeth, I followed behind her. I had half a mind to grab her by the hair and remind her of her place, but I knew

that would only make her think that she had gotten to me. She had a nice body and had been a fun lay, but she hardly owned me.

And I certainly didn't want her to get the idea that she could get me to blow my cool just by flashing her breasts at a stranger. Even one of Munk's.

Still, a voice in the back of my head growled furiously every time I noticed anyone checking her out as she stormed down the promenade. The way she crossed her arms certainly did put her form prominently on display, though I doubted she was aware of it. I was too angry to enjoy the view, however.

At the casino, I stiffly called Sakkar over so that Lila could tell him what she had learned. The tension between us was palpable, and Sakkar looked back and forth between us uneasily.

Lila's face was flushed, reminding me of how she looked when I had my way with her in the backroom the other night. That experience had been nothing but joy, however, and now I was filled with a nearly blinding rage.

We barely spoke as we examined the casino one more time for weaknesses. It became clear, though, that there were plenty of other places where Munk could set up the bombs.

"We're going to need backup if we're going to do this," I muttered. "We should call a meeting tonight. For everyone."

"Great, how about *you* seduce some help this time, and I'll chop up some bad guys for intel. Will that make you happy?" she asked sarcastically.

"Don't test me," I snapped. "I have no shortage of women willing to join me in bed, so I don't suggest you pull at that thread and find yourself without a sweater. Of course, you might find it a bit easier to operate in that condition."

Even Sakkar looked at me now with an expression that told me I was in a very, very dangerous place. He walked clear across the casino, evidently not wanting to be a witness to whatever crime was likely about to happen next.

I truthfully wasn't sure if she was about to kill me or vice versa, and I didn't know as I cared anymore.

"Are you kidding me?" she retorted, her face paling. "I didn't give him a lap dance, you ass. It's not like it was fun for me. I didn't *like* it, but sometimes you make do with what you have."

"Look, I appreciate that you got the intel, I simply disapprove of your methods."

"No, you got jealous, and then you were an asshole."

"They're not worth your attention!" It was more than I'd meant to say, and I clamped my mouth shut.

"You know, it's a shame you're such an ass sometimes, because I really do like you," she murmured.

And with those simple words, something soothed the jealousy inside me. Just a bit.



## LILA

---

After my sort of confession, the tension seemed to simmer down a bit. We managed to get back to working on a plan.

In the back booth at the casino, Laux gathered all of the top Vinduthi around the casino. There was Draven, the boss, Sakkar, the security specialist, Ryrik, the entertainment director, Thelev, the casino host, and Jalik, the chief guard.

As a team, they started going over what they knew. Occasionally, Laux would invite me to speak, but I mostly sat and listened, intrigued by how professional these guys were. It was like they faced danger every day of their lives and didn't even break a sweat. This potential bombing was the scariest thing I had ever faced, but they all maintained Laux's calm composure.

Despite all of the talk and debate, there was one conclusion that everyone reached an agreement on. We would need someone on the inside to tell us what Munk was planning. After all, there were still too many variables, and we couldn't be sure he wouldn't change plans.

Suddenly our eyes were pulled to a commotion near the middle of the room.

Some Talimarian jackass had Queegan by the arm, ranting on about "renting" her for the night. First off, the Black Star isn't that sort of place, and second, the terrified look in her eyes made it clear that she wasn't having any of it.

Laux growled, and Jalik dashed across the floor, but before they got there, a Xyloxi male had risen from a nearby table,

casually backhanding the Talamarian to the floor. Queegan ran off, and the Xyloxi returned to his table as if nothing happened.

“He might be our guy,” Ryrik mused. “Actually, I think he’d be perfect for the job.”

“Who is he?” asked Draven.

“His name is Koll. Isn’t affiliated with any one of the Syndicates, has a history of doing odd jobs, keeping his head down and his mouth shut.”

“And apparently he’s not afraid to rescue a lady,” Thelev said. “Didn’t even ask for her contacts in return.”

Draven nodded. “I like that. Get him over here.”

Ryrik already waved over one of the servers. “If you would send that man another of whatever he’s having, on the house. Oh, and be sure he knows who it’s from.”

Draven rose from the table. “I have more plans for the celebration to check over. The rest of you, go back to work and let Laux handle this.”

The server rushed off to obey, while the rest of the Vinduthi dispersed around the casino, mingling once more with the guests. A few minutes later, Koll had another drink passed his way. Though we were too far to hear, the server had clearly followed instructions. Koll looked at us and grinned, showing all of those sharp needle-like teeth.

He took a big swig of his drink and sauntered over to our booth where he slid into a seat across from us.

My skin crawled a little. I knew it was unreasonable, but Xyloxi were the one species on the station that always creeped me out, with the unnervingly pale skin and sunken eyes. And really, the needle sharp teeth didn’t help, either.

“I appreciate the booze, chief, especially when it’s free,” he purred. He had a laziness about him that made him seem vulnerable. But his eyes were far too sharp for his relaxed posture. “Though something tells me it’s not completely free,” Koll continued, his gaze locking onto Laux.

Beside me, Laux straightened. “I’m looking for someone who can gather information on a tight schedule. I’ve heard you have a reputation for being a discreet worker.”

Koll tilted his head, not seeming to rise to the bait. “Oh, I’m good all right. Which is why I’m picky about my work. What’s the assignment?”

“Munk and his crew are planning something during Luminance Day. We need someone on the inside who can give us more specifics on his plan.”

Something flashed across Koll’s face, but it was hard to tell exactly what it was. One thing was for sure, though. It put me on edge.

“Munk, eh?” Koll asked, taking a slow swig of his drink. “He’s a tough one, and Luminance Day isn’t all that far away.”

Laux raised an eyebrow. “Are you saying you’re not up for the challenge?”

Koll grinned. “Oh, I’ll do it. That is, if you can make it worth my while.”

“How about free drinks for a year,” Laux offered.

The man seemed to ponder it a moment before his grin grew wider. “And 2% of the take for the next month.”

“Don’t be greedy,” Laux growled, but I put my hand on his thigh. “If we can’t stop Munk, there’s no percent of the take for anyone.”

Laux nodded sharply. Koll made to get up when Laux suddenly grabbed his arm. For the first time, Koll truly looked startled. But he quickly smoothed his surprise into something neutral.

“One more thing,” Laux said in a low voice. “If you decide to double-cross us, I’ll make sure you suffer until you’re begging to die.”

Koll had the good sense to look serious and nodded. “Of course.”

Laux gave him a long look before finally releasing him. The Xyloxi straightened, his grin returning. "I'll be in touch."

And with that, he made his way towards the exit.

My stomach churned uneasily as I looked up at Laux. "Are you sure about this?"

"Right now, we don't have a lot of choices," he admitted. "We'll keep looking for operatives, but right now we have to play the cards we're dealt."

With a sigh, I slumped in my seat. "Fine. If you're sure."

But by the next day I was nothing but a ball of nerves, cleaning the bar counter over and over.

"I don't think you can put a hole in it with that cloth," Laux said, coming up behind me during a quiet moment.

"I know," I sighed. "Just my mind is running around in circles. What are we doing just waiting here?"

Laux interlaced his fingers with mine, his rough thumb pads tracing delicate circles on my knuckles.

"I think we could both use a break from the tension," he suggested, his eyes gleaming with mischief. "Some rest, relaxation and a good meal."

I bit my lip. "I don't know. Shouldn't we stay close in case something happens?"

Laux squeezed my hand. "We'll only be gone a few hours. The Black Star will still be there when we return."

His voice was soothing, but my doubts persisted. "But we don't know what's going on," I fretted. "What's happening with Koll or Munk or any of it?"

"All the more reason to steal away now, enjoy the calm before it arrives," he countered with a wink. "Trust me. If you stay this keyed up all the time, you won't be any good when something finally does happen."

I sighed, feeling my reservations crumble. "Well, when you put it that way..."

Laux grinned, the red swirls on his cheeks seeming to glow brighter. He pulled me in close, his lips brushing the ridge of my ear.

“You won’t regret it, love,” he murmured. “I’m going to go get some things. I’ll pick you back up in an hour.”

---

AS THE FLITTER went on and on through to the station, I wondered where on earth we were going.

There were no fancy restaurants out here, were there?

Finally, Laux landed, and as he pulled a small bag out from the back, I realized with a jolt where we were.

“A full zero-G chamber?”

His grin somehow made my heart feel lighter, and he slid his hand into mine, tugging me inside.

I let out a delighted squeal as the sensation of weightlessness took hold.

Laux laughed, his voice bouncing off the sleek metal walls. “You’re adorable, you know that?”

I shot him a playful scowl. “Adorable? Is that all I am to the infamous Laux?”

“Adorably sexy,” he purred, pulling me close.

As Laux busied himself with setting up a small net in one corner, I closed my eyes, reveling in the feeling of floating untethered.

“Feels like we’re the only two people in the galaxy right now,” I murmured.

“That’s precisely the idea,” Laux replied with a grin.

When he finished, he reached for me, his hands grasping my waist firmly. “Ready for some fun?”

Our bodies collided in a passionate embrace before he pushed off, sending us spiraling into the vast expanse.

We tumbled and chased one another, our joyful shouts echoing off the walls, playing a mad game of tag with no rules.

Before long, Laux grabbed me around the waist. “Gotcha!”

I wriggled in his arms. “Unhand me, you scoundrel!”

Pushing against the wall, he carried me to what I realized now was a hammock. Twisting our feet through the netting, we stayed anchored, yet still floating, both breathing hard. Laux’s eyes roamed my body hungrily. “Have I told you how beautiful you are?” Slowly, his hands smoothed the hair back from my face.

A small whimper escaped my throat as he brushed a kiss against my lips.

“I can’t get enough of you,” Laux murmured. “Not even an eternity could sate me.”

“I’m yours,” I breathed. “As long as you want me.”

Laux’s tongue plunged deep into my mouth, and my hips lifted to grind against him.

He kissed a path down my neck and slipped his hands under the hem of my shirt.

His rough fingers found my nipple and pinched it lightly.

I gasped as a jolt of pleasure surged across my body. “Laux, please,” I begged, my voice thick.

“You’re so beautiful,” he rumbled. “I could listen to you beg all night.”

Laux’s hand trailed down the curve of my belly and cupped me firmly through the thin fabric of my pants.

I cried out, bucking against his palm.

“You’re so wet,” he purred. “So ready for me.”

His fingers dipped inside my pants and teased my entrance before pushing a finger inside.

I shuddered as pleasure racked me.

Laux's thumb found my clit and rubbed it in tight, lazy circles. "Tell me what you want," he demanded, his voice low and dangerous.

"I want you inside me," I gasped, desperate. "I just want you."

"You make me crazy, Lila," Laux groaned. "Are you ready for me?" he growled, his voice thick with desire.

"Yes," I gasped.

Laux removed his finger and tugged my pants down, holding me in place on the hammock as our shoes and clothing drifted away.

I shivered as the cool air hit my skin.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured, trailing his finger up the length of my inner thigh.

I arched my hips, desperate for more contact. "Don't make me wait," I begged, my voice a whisper. "I need you."

"I'll give you what you need," he rasped, his eyes flashing. "In my own time."

Laux's hands were everywhere, caressing, teasing, exploring. My skin tingled, and my heart raced as his mouth captured mine.

"You're like a drug," he growled, his hand cupping my breast and I cried out as his thumb grazed my nipple. "With every taste of your skin I want more."

His words were like fire, burning me from the inside out. I arched against him, my body begging for more.

His hands trailed down my back, leaving a trail of heat in their wake and I shook, my body aching with want.

"I can't wait any longer," he growled, his voice raw with desire.

He sank into me, his eyes never leaving mine, the strange shape of his cock sent sparks of pleasure through my core, threatening to push me over the edge instantly.

Laux growled, his thrusts growing faster and more desperate, his teeth nipping at my neck.

I gasped, my body trembling.

“Mine,” he growled, his voice thick with desire. “You’re mine.”

My body felt as if it were on fire, my skin tingling, my pulse racing, the oncoming orgasm almost too much. As if he felt it, Laux’s thrusts quickened, and the pressure inside me intensified.

“Oh god,” I cried, the pleasure so intense, it was almost painful.

“That’s it,” he said, his voice husky. “Come for me.”

He continued to stroke me, and the pleasure built until I thought I would explode.

And then I did, a wave of pleasure crashing over me. In response, he let out a primal growl, his thrusts becoming faster and more desperate.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, urging him on.

“Yes,” I cried, my body trembling.

“Oh, God,” I cried, the pleasure so intense, it was almost painful. He drove deeper into me, until finally he let out a primal roar and came. We clung to each other, our bodies slick with sweat.

Afterward, we lay together, our bodies intertwined as he fed me tasty morsels from the bag.

“I told you. Relaxation and a good meal,” he teased as he flitted about the chamber retrieving our clothing, “does wonders.”

I threw my shoe at him, laughing.

I kinda hated it, but he was right.



## LAUX

---

Luminance Day was only one day away, which meant we made sure we had all our boxes checked. We wanted to be certain we had thought of every possible blind spot we might have missed.

I had become immensely grateful to have Lila helping us. Though we Vinduthi were certainly equipped to handle many threats, her human perspective was still useful. She had a different way of seeing everything, and I think all of the guys were finally beginning to admit that she had her merits.

During her meal break, we'd all found a quiet corner to review Koll's latest update.

"Munk has three different men to plant the bombs. A Nazok with a scar on his left cheek. A Fanaith that's smaller than average. And, of course, Koll." I read the message out loud so everyone could hear it.

"Munk's plan is to have them go one at a time to plant the bombs, mingling with the dancers. Our man, Koll, is scheduled to be the last to plant his bomb, so if we can catch the other two, we can stop the bombing."

Sakkar frowned, his brows knitting together. "My security systems are top of the line, but even then, I'm not sure we'll be able to see much in that crowd."

Jalik nodded. "Even knowing what species the would-be bombers are, it will be difficult to identify them. At midnight, the dance floor should be swarming with patrons. Someone could easily slip in and out."

I sighed in frustration, raking a hand through my hair. “Then give me some answers, guys. Not just excuses.”

Lila placed a hand on my arm, her gentle touch instantly calming me. “Hey, we’ve been going over this all week. And since we know exactly where they’ll be planting the bombs, we’ll have eyes there constantly.”

I frowned, but she was right. It didn’t matter how good Munk’s men were. Even a professional would have a difficult time getting around our security measures.

“So, did you get all the security people you needed?” she asked Sakkar.

“Not as much as I would have wanted, but they’re people I know I can count on. I’ve already let them know what columns Munk plans on targeting. They won’t take their eyes off them.”

Lila grimaced, her nose scrunching up in that adorable way it did when she was deep in thought. “Munk might try to send someone to try and distract them while someone plants the bombs.”

She had a good point. A patron feigning illness or drunkenness. Someone causing a minor disturbance to get the guard to leave their post.

“I’ll plant a few guards in the shadows. That way, they’re less likely to be noticed by Munk and his men,” Sakkar decided.

“Sounds good. Are all the special traps we’ve made ready to go once we set them up? What about the stage?” Jelik asked, his voice a deep rumble.

We’d decided the best way to protect the columns was to work in traps to the decorations. Sparklers and lights were a big part of Luminance Day, so we’d made ribbons to wrap around each column. Woven inside each ribbon was wiring that would shock anyone who touched the column.

And to keep back any random drunk patron who might stumble into the column, we’d created a barrier of sorts of the faux sparklers that most places used so as not to catch their

business on fire. The sparklers would go around each column, hopefully ensuring people wouldn't get too close. And also hopefully making it obvious if someone tried to get close.

"It'll be difficult to have guards watching the columns and the stage," Lila muttered, chewing her bottom lip.

I grimaced. That had been tricky to work around. We would have performers entertaining the guests all night, and of course, we needed security around the stage as well, dividing their attention.

"Security, traps, intel, do we have it all down?" Lila asked warily.

I grunted. "You'll find that no matter how much time you have to plan, something always goes wrong. That's why you have backup plans and friends at your side when everything goes sideways," I told her, gesturing around the table to the rest of the Vinduthi.

"That's comforting," she muttered, though a small smile played on her lips. "But is there anything obvious we're forgetting? Isn't there something else we could do?"

Everyone thought for a moment, reviewing everything we had learned and gathered. Everything that we had done to counter whatever Munk threw at us.

"No," I finally said. "Anyone?"

Lila looked around the room, still wary, but no one spoke up. They all just nodded their heads in agreement.

"See? At least not that we know of, which means it's time to step away."

She frowned, clearly not fully convinced. "How can we just step away? The casino might get blown up tomorrow if we're not careful. Shouldn't we keep working?"

Sakkar shook his head. "One of the dangers in planning is to overthink it. You could easily drive yourself to paranoia trying to add up all the possibilities in your mind. The problem is, when you do that, you tend to stretch yourself too thin."

I nodded in agreement. “We don’t have the luxury of that with the reduced security. And besides, if you’re too tense the night before, you’re going to be too tense the day of. It’ll be a dead giveaway that we know something’s up. So now we relax.”

Lila still didn’t look completely convinced, but she also didn’t look like she was going to argue. “All right then. So now I just have to try to relax knowing everything could go wrong at any moment, and my life will be turned upside down. At best. Yeah, shouldn’t be hard to do at all.”

Though her tone was sarcastic, I heard the very real fear in her voice. I had to remind myself that this wasn’t what she usually did.

She seemed like such a natural. But this wasn’t her world, and these weren’t the games she usually played.

I gave her my best cocksure smirk. “What if I treated you to a nice dinner? Would that help distract you for a while?”

She blinked in surprise. Then she laughed, the sound like tinkling bells. “Well, as long as you’re buying, I’m never going to say no.”

I nodded. “Very well then. I’ll walk you.”

For the time being, we all went back to our various jobs around the casino. After work, we went to a little restaurant I liked to dine at every now and then. It was peaceful, and the food was always delicious.

The host recognized me immediately and led us to a tucked-away booth. The restaurant had been done up for Luminescence Day and beautifully so. There were lights of all shapes and colors on the ceiling over each booth. Gold ribbons and streamers hung everywhere, glinting in the low lighting.

“Wow,” Lila murmured, her eyes wide as she took it all in. “They really outdid themselves.”

The host handed us some menus, and Lila frowned at it. I looked at her quizzically. “Is something wrong?”

She looked a little sheepish. “I can’t usually afford any of the good stuff on this station so I’m not really sure what to get.”

I hummed thoughtfully. “Would you be opposed to me making a suggestion again?”

She shook her head, her hair brushing her shoulders. “Not at all.”

When the server came over, I ordered a variety of food. Sweet and savory, spicy and tangy, crispy and smooth. Lila laughed nervously after I’d finally finished ordering and the server ducked away. “When you said you had a suggestion, I didn’t think you’d order the whole menu.”

I smirked. “Only half the menu. Besides, this way you get to try a little bit of everything.”

She shook her head, amusement dancing in her eyes. “I suppose so.”

When the food came out, it took up nearly the entire table. Lila looked a little overwhelmed. “Wow, just, wow. That is a lot of food. I mean, I heard you ordering so I knew it would be, but... wow.”

Even I had to admit that I’d gone a little overboard. But I also didn’t want her to miss out on anything. I wanted Lila to have the best experience she could. To feel special.

She laughed, a real, hearty laugh this time. “I guess we better get started!”

We took bits and pieces of everything, passing around what we liked best and setting aside other items for later.

Lila quit long before I did, and even when I was finished, we still had plenty left over.

“I suppose you take half, and I’ll take half. Maybe we can finish it by next Luminance Day,” she quipped.

I grinned. “We’ll eat like kings for a while then.”

“That’s a good way to look at it!”

We both laughed a tired, satisfied laugh. She was relaxed. It seemed I had successfully distracted her from her worries about tomorrow. And it helped distract me as well.

As many times as I'd planned a job or planted countermeasures to an operation, still the night before always put me on edge. I always felt like I had to be doing something, and I rarely got any sleep.

Never before had I been so at ease. So content to simply sit, laugh, and share a meal with someone.

A twinge of red colored Lila's cheeks, and it was only then that I realized I'd been staring. It was hard not to. Especially with the way her rosy red cheeks and her shy smile made her look absolutely ravishing.

She wasn't wearing anything fancy, not even more makeup than she usually wore. It was just her. So beautifully her.

And I decided, right then and there, that I wanted her. Not just physically, but in my life. Forever. I already knew I loved her. That she was the woman I wanted in my bed every night.

"Thank you for all this," she said quietly, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Not just for the food, but the company, too. I think if I'd been alone tonight, I'd have gone out of my mind with worry."

A small smile tugged at my lips. "I'm afraid it's entirely a selfish choice. I'd rather be with you than stuck alone in my quarters any day."

Her blush deepened, and there was a touch of nervousness in her face now.

I frowned and took her hand, reveling in the soft warmth of her skin. "Lila, you don't have to be worried about tomorrow. We will succeed."

She shook her head. "It's not that. Well, it's not just that. I'm not even sure if I should say."

"I think you should," I murmured, rubbing small circles on the back of her hand with my thumb.

She bit her lip and studied me for a moment. Then she took a deep breath. “As strange as it is, as much danger as we’re in... All this time that we’ve been working together, I’ve felt strangely alive. I look forward to getting to work with you, to plan and think up ideas together. You treat me with respect and even though you’re an asshole, you’re somehow still so charming.” She let out a small laugh. “When I’m with you, I feel like I really belong somewhere. With you.”

Lila looked away, a pretty blush staining her cheeks. “I don’t know what the time we spent together meant to you, but ever since then, my feelings towards you have only grown. It’s more than just attraction and admiration. And I know you might not feel the same way, and that’s all right. I just thought you should know.”

She glanced back up at me uncertainly, and I furrowed my brow. “You’re not sure how I feel?”

Confusion crossed her delicate features. “No.”

I huffed in frustration. “What have we been doing this whole time? I don’t waste my time on people who aren’t worth it. I think it’s quite obvious that I want you for my mate.”

She gaped, her lips forming a perfect “o” shape. It suddenly struck me. She really didn’t know. All my silent gestures and actions must not have been as obvious as I’d thought.

I drew her closer, tilting her chin up to meet my gaze. “Lila, do you have any idea what you do to me? How you take up my every thought? How I want to pull you to me every spare moment we have?”

Slowly, a radiant smile spread across her face. She squeezed my hands, her eyes sparkling. “The feeling is very mutual.”

I leaned in, brushing my lips against hers in a feather-light kiss. She tasted like the sweet cream dessert we’d shared, with a hint of spice from the drink she’d sipped. Addictive. I wanted more.

As we parted, her eyes remained closed a beat longer. When she opened them, her pupils were dilated, lips parted. My heart stuttered at the desire in her face.

We stayed like that for a moment, suspended in our own world. Then the spell broke as the server came by to clear dishes.

Lila insisted on taking her share of the leftovers home despite my protests. I walked her back to her tiny apartment, relishing the feel of her small hand clasped in mine.

We paused outside her door, neither wanting the night to end.

“Thank you again for everything. You were right. I needed that,” Lila said softly.

I brushed a lock of hair from her face, my fingers trailing down to trace her jaw. “I should be the one thanking you. I’ve never felt as at peace with someone as I do with you.”

She nuzzled against my touch like a cat. My pulse jumped.

I cleared my throat. “I should let you get to bed. We have a big day tomorrow.”

Disappointment flashed in her eyes, but she nodded. “You’re right. Goodnight, Laux.”

My name on her lips sent desire curling through me. Before I could stop myself, I pulled her into my arms, ravishing her mouth with mine. She melted against me, fingers tangling in my hair. I backed her against the door, deepening the kiss. A small moan escaped her that nearly undid me.

With effort, I gently pulled back, both of us breathless. “Sorry, I couldn’t resist. But you should rest.”

Lila touched her swollen lips, a dazed look on her face. “I’m not sure I can after that.”

I chuckled. “Try your best. I’ll see you tomorrow.” I pressed one last kiss to her temple before turning to leave.

As I made my way back to my quarters, anticipation thrummed through me. Tomorrow couldn’t come soon enough.



## LILA

---

The casino was bustling with everyone preparing for the festivities, and in the midst of it all, the Vinduthi and I set about finishing our plans.

The decorations, checking in with the guards, testing our traps. Koll was only to call us if something went wrong. And so far, we hadn't heard anything from him.

All too soon, it was time.

I wasn't working the bar tonight. We decided I'd be out on the floor passing out drinks. That way I could move around without suspicion.

I quickly found out the hardest part was acting like everything was normal. Like someone wasn't coming here to bomb the place. I reminded myself over and over again that we'd prepared for this, that we had a plan. It didn't make it feel any easier.

"Relax," a voice from the comm in my ear murmured. "Just breathe and serve drinks."

I dared not glance up at Laux from where I knew he was watching the casino. He and Sakkar had put me on comms with the rest of the security staff. And with that, Laux had given a strict warning that if things should go wrong, I was to get clear.

And so instead of looking at him, I stood a little straighter and forced a pleasant smile onto my face.

Serving drinks at least kept me somewhat occupied. Despite the promise of free drinks at midnight, everyone seemed to be gearing up for the event. The casino was more packed than I'd ever seen, and I had no idea how we were going to spot our targets in all this mess.

It was hard enough just trying to keep from knocking into people with my tray, let alone attempting to spot specific people. The blinding and flashing lights didn't help, either. I mentally kicked myself for not considering that. Munk was sure to use it to his advantage.

As many times as I could, I circled the dance floor, keeping an eye out for anyone getting too close. Every now and then, I'd hear the guards muttering about some kind of a disturbance, and every time, I'd hold my breath.

But it was always a false alarm. Someone getting too steamed at a table, or someone wanting to climb the stage, or a couple getting too frisky in the open.

With every false alarm, my anxiety grew.

Midnight was fast approaching, and we still hadn't identified the men Koll had warned us about. We were running out of time, and we couldn't rely on the fact that our traps would work. The number of people in the casino had only grown, and it was almost suffocating now.

I made another round across the dance floor, scanning it for a shorter-than-average Fanaith and a Nazok with a scar on his cheek. Who was I kidding? How in the seven galaxies was I going to spot either of those features without being right next to them?

But then I saw it. A group of rowdy males, clearly way too drunk, began to brawl. Right next to the pillars.

The chatter in my comm increased. The Vinduthi noticed it, too.

It quickly got out of hand as a mess of bodies toppled towards the edge of the dance floor. They were heading right towards the column.

That couldn't be a coincidence. Especially since it was one of the columns that was weaker compared to the others. Exactly the target Munk was looking for.

Three guards moved faster than I could blink toward the brawl, trying to break it up and protect the column.

When the brawl had finally dissipated by the guards, I quickly looked around the column.

I held my breath as I listened to the chatter in my ear.

“Anything? Did they plant the bomb?”

“Negative.”

“Someone check the other columns quickly! It's almost midnight.”

As if on cue, the entertainer on stage who sang while juggling flaming daggers spoke into the mic.

“Attention, all Black Star Casino patrons! We are officially about to start the countdown to midnight!”

There was a deafening roar from the crowd.

Then the countdown appeared on every screen in the casino. The attendees began to countdown along with it.

“Sixty! Fifty-nine! Fifty-eight! Fifty-”

My heart began to beat faster with every number gone. Where were Munk's people? We should have found *something* by now.

Apparently, all the Vinduthi on comms seemed to think so, too.

“Have you found anything?”

“Not yet!”

“Wait, I think I saw someone dart away from one of the columns!”

“Where is he now?”

“The crowd is swarming towards the stage. I can't get to the far column!”

Everyone chanted louder.

“Thirty- three! Thirty-two! Thirty-one! Thirty!”

Thirty seconds left. Still nothing.

What were the odds Munk had given up on this whole plan and just decided to go home and have a nice Luminance Day?

“Twenty-four! Twenty-three! Twenty-two!”

“I see something on one of the columns!”

“I lost him!”

“Does anyone have eyes on the column near the stage?”

“The crowd’s moving against me!”

“Seventeen! Sixteen! Fifteen!”

Then a Nazok bumped past me, but not before I saw a scar on his cheek.

It was one of the demolition experts.

“I have eyes on one of the targets!” I shouted quickly into my comm as I shoved passed my way through the crowd, my smaller form making it easier to slip through. I had no worries about the man hearing me over the drunken roar echoing around me.

He moved fast, going towards the bar. And very much against the flow of the crowd.

“Ten! Nine! Eight!”

“Lila, stay back!” Laux warned, but I ignored him.

We didn’t have time, and I knew no one else was close enough.

I was so close, I almost touched him. I just had to –

“Three! Two! One!”

Boom!

An explosion rocked the casino.

An explosion that had not come from the dance floor.

In front of me, the bar was splintered, broken, and up in flames.

They'd bombed the bar.

Not the columns. Not where we'd put all our focus on.

No, it had been in the exact opposite direction of where we'd focused all our time and attention.

It all occurred to me in barely a second because the next, everything was chaos.

Screams filled the air, and even the Nazok in front of me seemed taken aback.

His mistake.

I swung my tray with all my strength and cracked it over the Nazok's head. He crumpled like paper to the ground. The satisfaction of taking him down was brief as all of a sudden, swarms of people pushed past me for the exit.

People rammed into me from all sides, everyone shouting and pushing to get through. The tray in my hands became a shield, and I struggled to keep my footing.

As I was jostled around by the crowd, I got a look at the dance floor.

Smoke poured out as if a raging fire consumed it. My heart nearly stopped at the thought.

*We have to get out of here. The columns must have collapsed, and the fire will kill us all.*

Except, through the smoke, I saw the columns. All the columns were perfectly intact. And there were no flames to accompany the smoke.

I didn't have time to wonder about it further because just then, someone knocked into me hard and I lost my balance.

Panic engulfed me at the thought of falling to the ground. In this crowd, I'd be trampled for sure.

But I never hit the ground. Instead, strong arms pulled me tightly against a chest. I looked up to see Laux's grim face.

“Laux!” I cried. “What’s happening? Why did they blow up the bar and not the columns?”

He shook his head, his eyes darting around the casino. Laux tugged me through the crowd, keeping me close to him and shoving away anyone who got too close. Finally, we came to a platform. He pulled me up onto it.

Now safely out of the stampede, I could finally focus on the comm chatter in my ear.

“I see another one of his men!”

“There are two making a break for the exit!”

“One of them is in custody.”

“I’ve got another one!”

I shook my head. “There were way more than just two of Munk’s men here.”

Laux’s jaw tightened.

There was more chatter.

“Where is that blasted smoke coming from?”

“The fire’s been contained at the bar.”

“Most of the patrons have evacuated.”

“Someone go check on the columns! I bet that’s where the smoke was coming from.”

For the first time, I sniffed the air. With as much smoke that poured out of the dance floor, the smell should have been overwhelming. But the smell of sweat was heavier than smoke.

“It’s artificial smoke,” I whispered. Then I furrowed my brow. “But why? Why just blow up the bar and only create artificial smoke in the arguably more crowded area?”

Laux shook his head. “I don’t know. It doesn’t make sense to me, either. If Munk really wanted to put us out of business for a while, this isn’t going to accomplish it.”

So then why had he done it?

Then a figure caught my eye, trying oh so hard to slip into the shadows.

“Who is that?” I whispered and gestured as unobtrusively as I could.

Laux immediately followed my line of sight. He let out a low growl and jumped down from the platform. Not about to be left behind, I jumped, too.

“It’s Munk!” he yelled.

By the time Munk caught sight of Laux, it was too late. Laux tackled him to the ground and pinned him there.

“Munk!” I’d never heard Laux so furious before. “Explain yourself and this absurd plan! Just what was your goal here?”

Munk growled. “Get off me, and we’ll talk like civilized beings.”

Laux narrowed his eyes, and for a moment, I thought he was going to punch his captive. But then he roughly set Munk on his feet. “Try anything else, and you’ll regret it.”

Munk scoffed. “Oh, please. Believe me, my plan was to do a lot more damage than this. Bombing the bar wasn’t even part of it.”

“Hold on, you don’t know what’s going on, either?” I asked.

Munk gave me a distasteful look and scoffed. “What’s the point of planning all this, only to take out something that can be replaced in a day? Those bombs on the columns were supposed to explode, not just make smoke. So, yes, I don’t know what’s going on, either.”

If Munk hadn’t planned on this, then who had?

Suddenly, all the pieces fit together.

The reason we weren’t prepared, the reason Munk had been fooled. There was only one overlapping figure between us.

Koll.

## LAUX

---

We handed Munk off to the guards and tried to help any remaining patrons escape. It was incredible how fear could affect a person. People who normally would have known exactly how to get out banged on random doors as if it were the exit.

Others were huddled in corners screaming and shaking, too afraid to even move. And then there were the ones who had tried to run but had lost their footing. There were at least a dozen people who were trampled and had serious injuries. There were half a dozen more that hadn't been as lucky.

One of those had been one of Munk's men, the Nazok with the scar on his cheek that we'd watched out for.

When Lila learned he was dead, her face went ashen.

"I hadn't meant to kill him," she murmured. "I know he wasn't a good man, but still, I hadn't meant to kill him."

I pulled her close to me. She wasn't like us. She wasn't used to the blood and the violence and the killing. And the first kill was always the hardest.

Finally, we evacuated everyone. Someone took down the smoke generators that had been placed on the dance floor. Munk was escorted away by none other than Alkard himself. And the fire from the bar had been put out.

The bartender was dead.

I clenched my jaw, thinking how it could have easily been Lila.



*Koll.*

My blood boiled just thinking about the scum bag.

Ever since things had started to go wrong, Koll had immediately come to mind. Lila was right. I shouldn't have trusted him. I shouldn't have banked on the fact that he would be intimidated enough to not cross us.

And yet it didn't make sense. Why would he risk my wrath just for this? If he was really going to betray me, why not do some damage? Why not bomb the place like Munk wanted?

What exactly did all this accomplish?

Sure, we were going to take a big hit tonight and lose out on the profits from a big night like Luminance Day. But we could recover. The damage wasn't irreparable.

The bar would be replaced and any damage done by the fire could be fixed in no time. So why risk so much for so little?

I'd already told the men to do a sweep for Koll, though I wasn't confident they'd actually find him. Koll had known the real plan longer than any of us had. Odds were, he already had an escape ready. He had a reputation for being able to disappear without a trace. It's what made him so valuable.

And dangerous.

"This must have been a set up from the beginning," Draven snarled. "That handsy Talamarian, the rescue of Queegan... all an act to get Koll in with us."

A growl crawled from my throat. I vowed that when I got my hands on that traitor, I was going to make his suffering utterly excruciating.

With the fire out, we went back inside to inspect the damage. The casino looked like it was in a fog from the smoke still lingering in the air. The ground was littered with debris, trash, and anything people had dropped in their mad dash to escape.

And then there was the bar. The actual bar top itself had been split wide open, there would be no fixing that. The bar

stools were either melted or flung across the room, and glass was everywhere from where the drinkware and bottles exploded.

There was also a fair amount of fire damage done to the surrounding area. Security had been good about getting the fire contained quickly, but they'd still had to fight their way through the crowd to get to it.

Logically, I knew it could all be replaced. I knew it could all be fixed, and we could move on from this. That Munk's plan would have done ten times more damage than this.

But maybe it was because we had been betrayed. Maybe it was because Lila could have been the one behind that broken splintered bar.

But something inside me just felt like it was ready to snap. Like I was going to tear out into the streets like something feral. Focused solely on hunting down my quarry.

Lila put a hand on my arm. "You should get some rest."

I shook my head. "Not until I have Koll in front of me begging to cut his own throat."

She let out a sigh. "You've got men scouring the station for him. If they find any clues, they'll let you know. You're not going to be any good to anyone dead on your feet."

I wanted to argue. To go out into the station myself and hunt down Koll. But she was right. If I pushed myself now, I'd be useless later.

So, I allowed myself to be taken back to my apartment above the casino.

When we got inside, Lila shuffled on her feet. "Should I leave?"

I immediately shook my head. "No, Koll knows how closely you're working with me. I don't want him coming after you. You'll be safer here."

She nodded. After washing and trying to decide whether or not to eat before deciding against it, we lay down in bed.

I traced the outline of her face, for the first time really coming to grips with how easily I could have lost her today. She leaned into my touch and put her hand on mine. It was as if she knew exactly what I was thinking.

The thought should have unnerved me. That someone could read me so easily, knowing what was going on in my mind.

But instead, I felt a strange sense of security in having someone who I could trust so wholly with myself. Someone with a strength of their own, even if it wasn't like mine.

We fell asleep pressed close together.

Even then, we both slept fitfully. Lila would wake up, gasping for air and crying that she was about to be trampled. I would wake up from dreams of seeing Lila standing at the bar one moment, and then the next, engulfed in flames.

When morning finally did come, I was almost glad to be up. We were both groggy, and I put on some trishem for us.

For a while, we drank in silence, neither of us caring to fill the air with chatter.

I checked my percomm for any updates.

There were plenty of messages from the Vinduthi relaying what they had found and heard, but it all amounted to nothing.

Nothing was out of place except what had been blown up. So it wasn't a cover-up for something else. No one had left a note or sign or signal or clue as to why Koll had done what he'd done. Not even a taunting message.

Of the people who had died, none of them were particularly notable. Even Munk's demolition expert had been a nobody punk who happened to be good with bombs. So it wasn't just to get to somebody.

So what in the seven galaxies was this about?

The whole thing just felt like a giant middle finger. But why?

Why?

And on top of that, there was still no sign of Koll. Though that wasn't a surprise.

I handed the report over to Lila, hoping she would see something I couldn't. She frowned as she read through it.

Finally, she shook her head. "No, I can't tell what this accomplishes, either. None of it makes sense. Unless maybe he's crazy. Like actually crazy. Because otherwise, this just feels like an annoyance. But why purposefully tick off someone so powerful?"

That was the question that had run through my mind ever since I had suspected Koll.

"No, he's not crazy. Actually crazy as you say, at least. He's rightfully confident in his skills, though."

"Maybe this was just his way of making a statement then? That he can screw over two of the biggest syndicates just because he can?"

"It's a possibility." Maybe he tried to create his own crew. Or maybe he tried to impress someone enough to join theirs.

Either way, he'd made a grave mistake in crossing me.

I groaned and scrubbed a hand down my face. "I suppose I'd better join the search for Koll. We'll go over everything we know about him and try to see if any of it is usable."

I didn't add how frighteningly little we actually knew about Koll aside from his reputation. I cursed myself for the hundredth time in being so stupid in recruiting someone like that.

The rest of the Vinduthi had ignored Lila's warnings to leave Koll out of our plan. Of course, they had. They didn't see her the way that I did. They didn't know how sharp her mind really was. But I knew better, and I dismissed her as well. And look who had been right all along?

"I'm about to say something, and I want you to take as little offense to this as possible," Lila started.

I raised an eyebrow.

She took in a deep breath before continuing. “I don’t think this is your area of expertise.”

She was right in her warning, because offense was my first reaction. As I objected, she held up a hand. “Hear me out. You’ve dealt with lots of scum in your life, but you don’t usually work with them. Typically, you tend to stick to your own.”

I narrowed my eyes but let her go on.

“What you need is someone who regularly deals with his kind. Someone who would know that world better than you would because they work with them.”

“What are you suggesting?” I asked warily.

“I think you need to work with Munk.”

I clenched my jaw. “Absolutely not.”

She gave me a deadpan look. “Why not?”

“Because he’s a treacherous Nazok that would gladly stab us in the back given the chance!”

“Exactly! Which means he’s the perfect person to track down Koll,” she said smugly.

I frowned. “You didn’t address the part about him stabbing us in the back.”

Lila let out a frustrated huff. “Don’t you think he’s pretty pissed off that his plans have been thwarted, and now he’s in jail because of it? I bet he’s just as vengeful as you are now. I bet you could strike a bargain off that.”

I wanted to dismiss the idea. But I couldn’t. We needed to find Koll, and frankly, Lila was right. Munk had just as much chance of getting access to him as we did, and he might have information that we didn’t. Teaming up would make figuring out just what had gone down more possible. But I still had my doubts.

“There’s no way he’ll agree to this.”

She lifted her chin defiantly. “I bet he’d like to not be in jail right now.”

I sighed. There went my last argument.

We made our way to where Munk was being held under heavy guard. Alkard had reluctantly allowed the visit and shared my doubts regarding our plan, but he also didn't have a better idea. In the end, he agreed we should at least talk to him one last time.

Munk sat on the hard bunk in his cell, looking thoroughly irritated. When he saw me, he sneered.

“What do you want?” he snapped. “You can't even let me rot in peace? Or maybe you've come to torture me for information. I hate to break it to you, but there's a reason I'm in charge, and it's because I'm made of stronger stuff than anyone else.”

I growled, already rethinking this idea. But one look at Lila and I was reminded of why we needed to do this.

“Actually, I came to offer you a deal.”

Munk rolled his eyes. “What's that? Talk or die?”

“No. Help us find Koll, and you walk free.”

## LILA

---

“You must be crazy,” said Munk, his voice barely a whisper. “Hell would freeze over before I help you.”

“If you don’t, you’ll really know what Hell feels like,” replied Laux, his voice equally as quiet.

Munk leaned forward, baring his pointed teeth. “You Vinduthi think you’re so wonderful, lording it over the rest of Thodos, but you’re just jumped up dogs of war as far as I can see.”

Laux leaned in to match him. They were nose to nose, eye to eye. “Says the pirate scum Nazok that’s in our custody. You’d better watch your words, or I’ll feed you your balls. You have one choice. Help us or die. Slowly.”

The tones of their voices made them sound like old friends, but their words chilled me to the bone. I had no doubt Laux would follow through on his threat, and it was clear Munk believed him, too. He leaned back, breaking the deadlock.

“Surely you want to see Koll get what he deserves?” I asked. Sometimes honey works better than venom. “Your own men betrayed you, Munk. Doesn’t that get under your skin?”

He stared at me, looking me up and down like he wanted to know how a pathetic human woman got to ask the questions. But I noticed those questions had gotten to him by the subtle twitch of his top lip. “Yes,” he admitted. “I do want to bring those traitorous fuck-heads to heel.”

I continued. “The way I see it, they probably thought they could betray you, and Alkard would kill you, so they would

get away high and dry. I think it would come as a bit of a shock to them if you were to walk out of here alive.”

There it was, the twitch of his lip became a vicious sneer. He liked the idea of that.

“We both want the same thing right now. We have a common enemy. It makes sense to work together,” I told him.

“And what’s to stop me just blowing you out as soon as I walk out of here?”

“I am,” said Laux, grabbing him by the collar and slamming his head against the wall with a sickening thud. “I know what your scheme is now, and I *will* kill you without giving it a second thought if you so much as think about crossing us again.”

Munk finally had the decency to look afraid, his gray skin paling to the color of ash. When Laux released him, he left a red smear across the white wall behind him. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll do it. I’ll bring my guys back and get you the information you need on Koll.”

“You can start by telling us the names of your recon guys,” Laux demanded. I forced my expression to stay blank. But his question confused me. We already knew their names. They were in custody just down the hall.

“Slaz and Anton,” he replied reluctantly.

Laux’s smile was feral. “Good boy,” he said, patting his cheek. “They’re actually your neighbors right now, just two doors down the hall.”

Munk pulled his lips back in a snarl. “You’re playing games with me, Vinduthi.”

“No, just testing you. I had to check to make sure you weren’t just going to lead us on a merry dance as soon as we let you out. One piece of false information, and the deal’s off. My guys will come for you and make you wish you’d never been born.”

Munk swallowed and nodded once.



Laux turned and left, and all I could do was follow along after him as he strode down the hall. I felt awkward as he banged on Alkard's door. The big boss made me nervous, and I wasn't sure he would appreciate my presence.

The door slid open, and Laux strode in. With a pounding heart, I stepped into the room behind him. Alkard sat at the head of a long conference table, looking angry.

"What have you learned?" he demanded.

"Munk is willing to work for us," said Laux. "He'll force his rogue men to heel so we can find Koll and get some information on his motives."

"And you think he can be trusted?" asked Alkard.

"As much as any Nazok can be trusted," replied Laux. "I trust that he understands what will happen to him if he thinks about turning against us again."

"Okay, good. Let's see what he can come up with. He could turn out to be useful."

I tried to suppress the smile that was threatening to spread across my face. I couldn't believe my plan had been approved by Alkard. I just prayed it was going to work.

"Sit down," Alkard said. "The others are on their way."

The room soon filled up with Vinduthi. Some of them I knew, but most of them, I didn't. For a while, there was a general hubbub as everyone greeted each other. The noise slowly subsided as people sat around the long table. Eventually, the room fell silent.

Alkard spoke into the hush. "Does anyone know what the fuck Koll was up to? I don't like not knowing his motives."

"He was playing both sides for sure," said Laux. "Munk is as livid as we are at being double-crossed."

"He doesn't have enough clout to be working on his own," Makar added and I blinked.

Didn't Makar just run the cupcake bakery? Having him here added an extra sprinkle of surrealness to the day. "The

explosives he used were too sophisticated for the likes of him. They were Nazok-made, but that doesn't mean much. He could have exploited Munk's arsenal or acquired them from whoever he's working for. There's no way of telling."

"Fuck the Nazok, we should have a cull," declared a tall Vinduthi with golden tracery across his face. "It would save a lot of problems in the long run."

"We'd have to take out a chunk of the damn station, Tazhr. As much as I like your plan, it lacks a little finesse," said a guy with black tracery. He looked well groomed, his hair tied neatly back at the nape of his neck.

"Someone must have a more solid idea than this," Alkard said, his gaze sweeping the table.

"The closest thing I've come to anything like a lead is that the couple of the guys on Koll's crew that we managed to intercept used to work for Conii," Sakkar said. "But I don't know whether they're still connected to her."

There was a general grumbling from the gathered Vinduthi. Conii was a dangerous rival that had taken a lot of force to squash. No one wanted to think that she was raising her head again.

"I don't know how much that means," said the guy with black tracery. I couldn't place his name, although I'd seen him several times around the club. "There must be a lot of out-of-work employees after we took that fucking bitch out."

"Razov, I want you to work on those two. If they are still connected with Conii, I want to know about it. The last thing we need is that fucking woman making a comeback." Alkard had a look of thunder in his eyes as he scanned the table. "Ryrik, what have you got?"

"Conii is definitely back in business," he replied. "I've got a couple of little birds in her nest, and she just happened to stage a spectacular job on the very night we got bombed."

"Well, that's a bit of a fucking coincidence," said Laux. "Everything's coming up Conii."

“Yeah, it is a bit. What about you, Thelev? What have you got to offer?” Alkard asked.

“Koll’s been working the strip and double-crossing players for a long time. I’ve spoken to at least three clients that he’s shafted. I don’t know how he’s still getting away with it. No one will weep when we take him down, I know that much.”

“Has anyone found out where he’s holing up? I don’t like leaving him at our backs a moment longer than we have to,” Alkard growled.

His eyes took in each member that sat at the table. But as his gaze fell on them, each and every one shook his head.

“Find out where he is.” The command was delivered in a quiet flat voice, and it was somehow worse than anger. “Now get the hell out of here.”

I followed Laux from the room. I couldn’t help but notice the tension in his shoulders as he strode ahead of me. I also couldn’t help but notice his tight ass. It hypnotized me as I followed him to his apartment.

“That slippery fucker is going to suffer when Alkard gets his hands on him,” he said when we were alone in his room. “When he goes quiet like that, you know someone’s going to end up in a world of pain.”

He sat down heavily on the bed and rubbed his furrowed brow. I was both worried about him and pleased that he felt he could talk to me about Alkard.

“Come here, you!” he said, grabbing my arm and pulling me so I sat straddling his lap. “I think your plan could work out well. Releasing Munk could get us exactly what we want.”

My heart skipped a beat at the praise. I hoped Munk wouldn’t let us down.

Laux slipped a hand up my shirt, tweaking my nipple. It felt like ice and fire shooting through my body, but I pulled back. “Lie on the bed,” I said. “Let me give you a massage.”

He grunted his approval, quickly stripping off his shirt and laying down on the bed. *Shit, he was hot.* His back was broad

and the muscles of his biceps bulged even when he was relaxed.

I ran my hands over the tracers that swirled across his shoulders. The blue of them was almost the same shade as the gray of his skin, making them look much more subtle than a lot of the others I'd seen. I ran my hands over them, working the knots out of the muscles as I went.

“Wow, that feels good,” he said.

I smiled, enjoying feeling the tension ease from his body. I slowly but surely worked my way down his back, untying all the knots. I knew once I got to his ass he would want more, and so would I, so I left that until last. I massaged his glutes, amazed that he allowed me to do it without having me on my back. And then he let out a snore.

I couldn't help but laugh. I felt so horny, but I realized I wasn't going to get any of that right now. Carefully, I pulled the covers over him so as not to wake him then curled up facing him. He looked so gentle and vulnerable as he slept. I'd obviously done a very good job relaxing him.

I felt a quiet contentment rise up in my chest as I watched him sleep. It would appear that I had earned the trust of this powerful man.

Now if only we could put together the shattered clues and get on with our lives, everything would be perfect.

Well, perfect enough.

## LAUX

---

“Wait here,” I told Sakkar. “If I’m not out in half an hour, call the crew in.”

Sakkar set the timer on his comm. “Got it.”

I left him skulking in the alley opposite the bar. I knew I could trust him to be discreet and have my back. He was the best damn surveillance expert on the station.

The bar was empty, the air bitter with the stench of yesterday’s dragon weed. On a station that never sleeps, I thought it was odd. Was I walking into a trap? Not much I could do about it if I were.

“Drink?” Munk stood behind the bar with his back to me. His long matted hair hung loose down his back and was braided with beads and tokens. Without waiting for my answer, he pulled down a bottle and a couple of glasses.

“Sheer wine?” I commented, impressed despite myself. Sheer wine was said to be the most expensive spirit in the galaxy. I wondered if it was fake.

Munk poured a generous measure into both glasses and pushed one across the bar to me with his long, gray fingers. I hesitated. But then I took up the precious liquid. If he was going to kill me, I doubted he would use poison. The taste was like sweet, silken fire as it slid down my throat.

“Mmm,” said Munk. “Worth every credit. I was going to open it as a celebration of bringing down Black Star Casino, not as a celebration of my alliance with you.” He chuckled at

the irony, his lips pulled back to reveal a neat row of filed teeth.

The memory of the recent attack and the ensuing chaos was too fresh in my mind to share in his mirth. I placed my glass back on the counter half finished. “You know why I’m here, Munk,” I told him. We may have had a tentative alliance, but I was not ready to hold out the hand of friendship. “Time to make good on your bargain. Alkard is expecting information.”

“Yes,” he replied, still savoring his wine. “I thought I’d better shut the bar from prying ears to give you this little piece of joy.”

I said nothing and simply raised an eyebrow, awaiting the news.

“Koll’s a slippery fucker. He covered his tracks well, but there’s always someone who will break, given the right leverage.” At this, a feral grin spread over his face. I noticed one of his front incisors had a diamond embedded in it. I swore to myself I would wear it as a necklace if he double-crossed us. “He got to some of my men, but I got ‘em back. Now they’re groveling to get back into my good graces. We can use them to get close to him.”

“Good. Nothing worse than a man who will betray his own boss.” I picked up my glass and swirled the amber liquid around. “Did you find out where Koll is holed up?”

“Yeah, he’s at The Filtch. Region five in The Under. But that’s not all.”

“What else?” I asked.

Munk took a long pause.

“So tell me what you think about Koll? What do you know about him?”

“This meeting was supposed to be about what you figured out about him,” I growled. “You trying to get us to do your work for you?”

“No,” Munk sighed. “Because you think Koll is this two-bit grifter, I think.”

“And?”

“He’s actually not,” Munk said. “There’s a lot more than that. His name is more than just Koll”

“What?”

“Yeah,” Munk said. “All my guy reported to me was that Koll has operations and interests that go deep. Pretty fucking deep. And the only name he got was one word.”

“What name?”

“Namor,” Munk said. “And then he went dark. Never checked in. Whatever he discovered, it spooked him and he just cut off all ties.”

Well.

That was unexpected.

A major player, hiding in plain sight on the station.

Alkard would want to know about this immediately.

But he’d be even happier if we could bring in the bastard.

The Filth.

I knew of the seedy backwater joint. It was run by Ewani. “Shit, we’ll never get him out of that rat hole. One whiff of a Vinduthi in the vicinity and he’d be gone into the ventilation duct.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. That’s why my guys are going to lure him out. You were right, they never expected to see me again. I have them eating out of the palm of my hand for their treachery.”

I smiled at the thought of getting hold of Koll. Namor. Whatever. The soon to be dead man.

“Where and when?”

“I’ll talk to my men and get the details.”

I stared at him for a moment. Was he playing us? “And I’ll talk to Alkard. If he’s agreeable, we’ll pull you into a meeting via comm.”

Munk looked a little disappointed but nodded his agreement.

“So, he was working for the Ewani all along?” I asked.

“No, I think that’s what he wanted everyone to think. But I dug a bit deeper.” He paused and looked at me, wanting to be sure he had my full attention. “He’s working for Conii.”

“Fuck,” I spat. “I thought we’d heard the last of her for a while.”

“Conii had a massive push to get her club back in the limelight. She had people out on the strip offering free drinks to anyone affected by the bombing of Black Star. She scooped up all the business you lost that night and offered him a big cut of it.”

“She’s a fucking sly bitch, that’s for sure.”

“I think she was being opportunistic. She’s had Koll in her pay for some time, and when she heard about the attempted bombing, she thought she’d capitalize on it.”

“She knew Koll played both of us and thought she’d have a bit of fun on the side. She knew we’d guard all the integral points of the building, but saw no reason why she shouldn’t put us out of action for a few nights. *And* ruin our reputation in the process.”

I emptied my glass and brought it down hard on the counter. I felt fired up and ready for vengeance. “We’ll be in touch,” I said, standing to go.

“I want in on bringing Koll down,” Munk said quietly. “I don’t like leaving that piece of shit standing at my back.”

I glanced at him for a long moment, neither confirming nor denying his request. “I’ll be in touch,” I told him.

Sakkar offered me a grim smile as I got outside.

“Conii,” was all I said to him.



“Shit.”

We walked together back to the Glimmering Moon. Alkard was going to be furious.

The whole gang was gathered in the long meeting room when we got there. Alkard’s eyes turned to me as I entered. He must have recognized my expression as his face hardened.

“He was working for Conii,” I informed the gathering. “And he’s a much bigger player than we thought.”

The room erupted into cursing and swearing.

“Fucking bitch, I’m going to kill her.”

“I thought we’d seen the last of her.”

“I’m going to slit her fucking throat.”

“Silence.” The word was delivered quietly, but the cursing instantly ceased. “And where is Koll?” Alkard asked.

“He’s staying at The Filtch,” I replied.

“The Ewani dive in the Under?” Alkard’s lip curled into a snarl. “That place is a rat run. It must have twenty entrances that we know of. And only the Night Mother knows how many that come out into the bowels of the station.”

“Munk said his men could lure him out. I don’t know how much we can trust them, they’ve double-crossed him once. But he says they were rather surprised to see him alive and are being extremely compliant right now,” I told the group.

There was a tense moment as Alkard thought. “Fine,” he said. “But I don’t want Munk or his boys near us when the firing starts.”

There was a general murmur of approval at his decision.

“And I want a backup plan in place,” said Alkard. “I want The Filtch staked out and some Ewani bought in for ‘questioning.’ I want to know as many exits as possible from that stinking rat hole. Razov and Kovas, I want you to pick up some Ewani for questioning.”

“Good, some action at last,” Kovas replied.

“The rest of you, go do what you’re best at,” he finished with a savage grin.

“I can help,” said Lila when I found her in my room and updated her on the day’s events. “Even the Ewani have humans to do the work that no one else wants to do. I could get in there disguised as a cleaner or something. No one looks at the cleaners. They’re below most people’s radar, even the Ewani.”

“I don’t like it,” I replied. “I won’t have you put in danger.”

“I’ll be careful. You know I can do it. I’ve collected information for you before.”

She was right, but I didn’t have to like it.

“I’ll keep my comm on so you can hear what’s going on at all times,” she said. “And I’ll just ask around in the kitchens to find out what the other humans know.”

“Okay,” I reluctantly agreed. “But you’ve got to promise me you won’t take any risks.”

“I promise,” she said.

I seated myself in a bar close to one of the many entrances to The Filtch. The mic on Lila’s comm was open, giving me a modicum of reassurance. If anything happened to her, I swore I’d kill every Ewani on the station.

I heard the clamor of the kitchen, and some kind of argument going on in the background.

“Hi,” came a female voice. “Are you new here?”

“Yes, it’s my first day,” Lila replied. “Is it always like this?”

“Sure is. Sometimes it’s worse. People don’t last long here unless they’re indentured and have no choice.”

“Shit. I’ve heard the place is massive, that if you’re not careful you could get lost down in the bowels of the station for weeks and never see another soul.”

The woman laughed. “Yes, it’s big. But it’s not *that* big. Most of the exits are blocked off because they don’t want people coming in and causing trouble. They’ve got enough of that amongst themselves, without outsiders coming in and causing more.”

My heart leaped at the news. Maybe we could trap him after all.

“Have you worked here for very long?” asked Lila.

“Me? I’ve been here for years. I was indentured when I was fourteen. Sold to them by my father because he couldn’t afford to keep me.”

“Shit, that sucks,” replied Lila. “You must know everything about the place by now.”

“Ha, yes, the stories I could tell you would make you weep.” The woman sounded jovial, but you could hear the tension beneath her words.

I thought about Lila being indentured to the Vinduthi.

The Vinduthi were fairer than the Ewani. Indentured servants only got punished if they did something seriously wrong. But still, it rankled.

“Is it only Ewani that stay here?” Lila asked. “They scare me a little.”

“We get all sorts here. Anyone who has sunk beneath the levels above. And there are plenty that have sunk lower than this place, I can tell you. They say there are things living in the lowest levels that have not seen light for years. They live off the garbage that washes down from the nice bright levels above. That’s why so many of the tunnels have been blocked up. To stop the flotsam from rising up.”

The comm noise returned to the general hubbub of the kitchen. Five minutes later, to my relief, I held Lila safe in my arms once more.

## LILA

---

“Did you find what you were looking for?” I asked over the most expensive plate of naafti I’d ever tasted. Laux looked past my shoulder, checking the exit before he answered. Since the bombing, he’d been more on edge than I’d ever seen him before.

“Now that we know what we’re looking for, it was easier to get some answers.”

Laux took a sip of his trishem. “Koll’s base is pretty well fortified, but even a well-guarded base has a weak link somewhere.”

With that, he took another glance around the room, and once more over his shoulder. I’d have loved to help him relax a little, but I couldn’t deny I’ve been jumpy since the explosion. Waking in his arms at night had been my only comfort from the night terrors.

“You think Munk will live up to his end of the bargain?”

“We can only guess,” he said, this time taking a giant gulp of his brew with a furrowed brow. I couldn’t help but notice, he hadn’t touched anything but his drink.

“I’m sure you can handle him, Laux,” I said, hoping to share the confidence I truly felt in him. “Munk knows he only has more to lose if he double-crosses us. He *has* to.” An awkward silence took us both as our server refilled Laux’s glass. My glass sat bone dry, but I just smiled, happy to be here with him. If only he would just *talk* to me.

“I can’t believe the nerve Koll had. You were right, Laux. Too much planning, and you miss something. Even if it’s in plain sight.” I forked another mouthful of the naafti onto my tongue, just as the server snatched it for the next course.

“You saw it,” he admitted, looking down at my hand enfolded in his.

“Hey.” I started, then waited until his eyes found mine. “You had no way of knowing Koll would cross you. He planned that little play well, knowing that the Vinduthi would be impressed by someone protecting a weaker being.”

Laux only nodded as the next course was placed in front of us. My eyes caught the server’s, and I did my best not to stare. She was the most, dare I say, *attractive* Mondian female I’d ever seen. Her upturned nose told me it was a sentiment she didn’t share.

“Will there be anything else, sir?” she asked, ignoring my empty glass yet again.

“My date will have more water, obviously,” he said in a cold response. His muscles flexed deeply under his suit. Despite his moodiness, I just wanted to rip his tailored clothes to shreds.

“Yes, of course, sir!” She moved quickly, refilling my glass, but Laux didn’t seem to notice. He shifted back into a pensive mood even the glittering ambiance of The Nebula couldn’t touch.

In any other circumstance, I’d be over the seven galaxies to so much as to look inside The Nebula, let alone eat there. I wanted to enjoy my plate of glazed linnear, garnished with tomit sauce and brankini. I wanted to stare into the digital cloud at our table and compare it to the grand display across the room. I could hardly take my eyes off the ever-changing colors that lit up the artwork on display.

But none of it interested me if Laux wasn’t happy.

Something told me he wouldn’t be able to relax here of all places. But this was a date, and he needed a distraction whether he wanted one or not.

It was my turn to surprise him.

“Hey,” I said. I looked at him and smiled. “Let’s get out of here.”

---

“YOU’RE KIDDING, RIGHT?”

“Oh, come on!” My hand reached for his through the entry of Thodos III’s only underground zero-G skating rink. “You just have to trust me.” Laux’s eyes were huge as he hobbled beside me on his skates. I heard his breath catching in his throat as he waved his free hands wildly. I couldn’t help but smile seeing him so unpoised.

“You know,” he said through gritted teeth as he tried to get his knees to cooperate, “I have a certain *reputation*.”

“What are you saying?” I laughed, twirling my hair like a bimbo. “Would you be embarrassed if you fell?” Gliding smoothly, I skated around him in a wide circle. A devious smile eventually found its way onto his face.

“Hey,” I said, pulling him to face me in the middle of the rink. “It’s easy, just don’t fall.” Our two hands entwined as we floated over the air. Beyond us, a holo-projector displayed Thodos III drifting in space. Between work and work, I didn’t usually get out much. But when word hit my ears that a skating rink was on the station, I had to see it for myself.

“Don’t look down,” I warned him, watching his gaze fall below our knees, but it was already too late.

“Whoah!” he hollered as his feet flew out before him and threw him straight down on his ass. “Ow!” His roar filled the rink, causing some to stop and stare while I turned red all over. A Fanaith couple avoided us with awkward glances as they made their way around.

I skated an elegant loop around Laux, my face calm and serene until he threw a wide arm across my hips, knocking me right over him. I fell easily into his lap and burst into a fit of giggles. Laux was not the kind to cut loose in public, but it

was nice to see the ease on his face that at least, there and then, we had nothing to do. We had plenty to worry about, plenty yet to uncover, but for the time being, we could just enjoy the moment.

I fell over beside him, letting my arms fall to my side, making an imaginary angel with my arms and legs.

“The fuck are you doing?” he asked, cutting a wide grin. Maybe it wasn’t my imagination. Maybe I did have a calming effect on Laux. At least, he seemed more at ease with me than he had all night.

“Making a snow angel,” I said, pulling him down next to me. The zero-G rink held us both in the air by just a small amount. Still, it was as close to laying on a cloud as possible. “Back on Earth, I mean *before*, you know. When there were cities that weren’t flooded when the tallest mountains still had ice on top. There were places where it got so cold in the winter the lakes would freeze, and people would skate on them.

“Course, I’d never seen one. I’ve never seen snow or ice, but I read about it in school. So, when I landed on Thodos, it was rumored that somewhere in the Under there was a rink. It became my first, I dunno, pilgrimage on the station. And now I come once a week.” My shoulders relaxed with a tension I didn’t realize I was clinging to. In all this time, I’d never really told anyone anything about myself. I guess I thought there wasn’t anything to tell.

“You come down here by yourself? Once a week?” he finally said, breaking the silence between us. The Under had a reputation for high crime at all hours on the station. I shrugged. I knew what he was suggesting.

“And who would care if I went missing?” I reminded him, in case he forgot. I’m a human indentured to his casino.

Laux sat up quickly, turning to me. “I said I would take care of you.” I know I’d teased him all night, but I knew the gentle tone in his voice meant he wanted me to take him seriously.

“You mean it?”

“I do,” he said, sending shivers down my spine. A kind of softness fell over him that he quickly pushed away when the Mondian couple made their way back around. An idea popped into my head.

“Are you starving?” I asked him. “Because I’m starving.”

“Huh,” he said, thinking with a hand on his chin.

“I loved The Nebula, don’t get me wrong, but the third course was literally a cloud. I need something deep fried, with meat on a stick!”

A deep smile cut into his face. “I know just the place.”

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LAUX WEAVED us into a side corridor that appeared to be a dead end with a lighted display for the new Rexen percomm series 7. With a flick of his wrist, he opened the signage to reveal a well-lit corridor I’d never seen before.

I smelled the stand long before I saw it, and there wasn’t just one. Laux had taken me to a fringe area off one of the wings of the Promenade. A place for the upper classes to deal illegal merchandise without getting their hands dirty in the Under.

“Try this!” he said, taking me to a sweets stand that poured a rich batter over a vat of hot oil. I looked around for a food replicator in one, or any of the stands, but came up short. Everything here was made the old-fashioned way. Jazzy Earth music filled the space with a lively atmosphere that set my heart jumping. I’d never seen anything like it.

“This is amazing!” I saw sentients of every class, some in very expensive clothing that told me this place was uniquely exclusive.

“They call it The Corridor,” he said, ushering me to another food stand where a Zequinid stirred a large quantity of *something* in a pot. Laux assured me it was the best food at the station.



“How come I’ve never heard of this place before?” The stew, quickly devoured, sat warm in my belly as we made our way around.

“It pops up in a different place every time to avoid raids,” he said, pushing us through the crowd. “I just happened to get a tip about it this week. I wasn’t sure if it would still be here, then you said you were hungry, and I knew I had to bring you. If I still could.”

“That’s very thoughtful,” I said, taking his arm. He pulled me in closer. His fingers snaked into my palm. It occurred to me, just then, that he trusted me.

Laux’s life depended on his poker face. It was flattering when he said what he thought, not what he *should* say. He wouldn’t be like that with just anyone.

I stopped in the middle of the crowd, still clutching his hand. Enclosed in a sea of faces, my eyes met his. Everything around us faded as he tilted my head back, pulling me close for a long deep kiss.

“I want you, now,” I said as he opened my mouth with his tongue, shoving his way inside with a hunger that sent chills running through me.

“Where can we go?” I asked him when he let me up for air at last.

“Leave that to me.”

## LILA

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“This way...” Laux held my hand as he dragged me through the crowd, a Vinduthi on a mission. His eyes were straight ahead on the destination.

“Where are we going?” The crowd parted for him as his huge hulking body barreled towards them, with me meekly in tow.

“Some place private, where I can have you for myself.” He squeezed my hand. A fire within me roared. His taking charge like this was exhilarating. But one thing didn’t quite make sense...

“But Laux, your apartment is the other way.”

“I can’t wait that long to have you, Lila. I know somewhere closer.”

“How often do you come to this part of the station? How do you know where to go?”

“Let’s call it a perk of working with the Syndicate. I know all the best places to hide for a minute.”

“Well, I hope we’ll be there for longer than a minute.” I flashed Laux a smirk as he looked back at me.

“Oh, I’ll make sure we’re there much longer than that.” With that, he returned my smile and picked up the pace.

I was about to suggest that Laux should just pick me up so we could move faster than dragging me when we finally arrived. We ducked into a dank alley between storefronts.

Laux led me down before stopping at a side door and raising his fist to knock loudly.

A moment later, the door swung open and a Mondian stood before us in a dirty apron. Their reptilian eyes darted from Laux to me and back to Laux.

“The wind outside is getting strong,” Laux said, leaning in.

“Then one should put away their umbrella,” the Mondian responded after flicking out their tongue.

“And shut all the windows.”

The Mondian seemed to pause for a moment, then retreated back into the door. “Come on, then.”

“Laux, what the fuck was that?” But he responded by simply holding a single finger up to his lips, telling me to be quiet.

The Mondian led the two of us into the building, which it quickly became clear was a restaurant. The sounds of customer chatter and kitchen chaos echoed around us. We were brought to a back storage room where the Mondian pushed aside a larger crate, revealing a trap door.

Laux flung it open and the two of us crawled down it. The crawl space was small, with a low ceiling that we could still hear the customers through. Some old forgotten boxes of wine made the space even smaller to navigate in.

“We can talk now, just be quiet,” Laux said after closing the trap door behind us. Then, everything shook as the crate was pushed back on top.

“Where the fuck did you take me?”

“It’s an old hideout, I’m just glad the code still works. It’s meant to lay low if you have any heat with the authorities. But in a pinch, it’ll serve our needs, too.” Laux lowered his eyes and sauntered over to me.

“Oh? And what need is that?”

“This.” His hands grabbed my hips and pulled me close against his body for a kiss.

I let myself get absorbed into him. His arms wrapped around me, not letting me escape. As if I'd ever want to. Our lips pressed together, and all other concerns drifted away. All that truly mattered at that moment was him and me.

My hands gripped the front of his shirt as I sighed in contentment. I could've stayed like that forever without a single complaint. Though, I certainly didn't mind what came next.

Laux's lips slipped from mine. He kissed my cheek. Then down to my chin before planting his lips on my neck.

His touch was like ecstasy. The simple graze of his lips on my skin fanned the flames within me. I opened my mouth to moan, but before I made a sound, Laux placed a hand over my mouth.

"Quiet..." he whispered and then pointed above. I'd been so focused on Laux that I almost completely forgot where we were.

I nodded my head, and Laux returned his lips to my neck. But I again felt a sound coming up my throat. I couldn't hold it in.

I grabbed his hand and brought it back up to my face. I pulled his fingers into my mouth and softly sucked on them, to which Laux responded by growling into my neck.

As I gently traced Laux's fingers with my tongue, I felt his cock start to grow. It pressed through his pants against my body as he held me tight.

Silently, I pulled his fingers from my mouth. I then slowly lowered myself down to his cock. My hands rubbed against it through his pants as I moved. Laux stifled his own groan as his cock twitched against my touch.

I looked up at him as my hands loosened his pants. Slowly, I gripped both his pants and undergarments and pulled them down just enough to expose the base of his shaft. Laux grunted as I wrapped a hand around the base and pulled out his cock.

Even by this point, I wasn't used to its size and certainly not to those ridges. But I only let myself marvel at it for a

moment. Laux ran his fingers through my hair as I brought the shaft to my lips.

His cock gently slid into my mouth, guided by my hand. I hadn't really noticed how much I craved his taste until that moment. Whether it was all Vinduthi or just Laux, I didn't care. I savored his skin.

My tongue started with his tip as it entered me. I was absolutely sure to lick all of it as it slid by, slicking it with my saliva. I then positioned my tongue to lick the underside of his shaft as inch after inch passed by.

With a hand kept on the base of his shaft, I slid his cock in and out of my mouth, the ridges stretching my lips to an almost painful degree. Laux gripped my hair tighter as I worked his body. His erection grew stiff against my touch.

I looked up at him and felt a surge of pride. His face was contorted with strain. He desperately tried not to make any noise, and I clearly made it harder for him.

After a moment, Laux let go of my hair. His hands reached under my arms and lifted me up to my feet. He leaned down and planted his lips back on my neck. One of his hands found my chest and massaged my breasts over my shirt.

"Laux," I moaned as quietly as I could, barely a whisper. I reached down and slowly stroked his erection as he held me.

Without warning, Laux then spun me around to face away from him. He placed one of his giant hands on my back and bent me over the long-forgotten crate in front of me. Instantly, I picked up on where he was going and slightly spread my legs while gripping the crate for stability.

Behind me, Laux pulled my pants and undergarments down to my knees. I took a deep breath, waiting for him. I heard him shifting into position.

"Are you wet?" he whispered, leaning towards my ear.

"Why don't you find out for yourself," I whispered back.

My whole body shuddered as the tip of his cock ran along the lips of my pussy. He rubbed it back and forth for a

moment. All I heard was his breathing in my ear.

“Fuck, yes you are,” he whispered. I then bit my tongue to hold in a cry as his cock slid in. I was still just as shocked by its size as the first time.

Laux reached a hand to my face and I immediately took his fingers into my mouth. I whimpered into them as he thrust into me. The crate shook and rattled with each one.

I closed my eyes, and let my mind go blank. The fire within me roared brighter and brighter with the sweet pressure coming from both sides. I had no clue how much time passed, and I didn't care. I loved all of it.

My eyes flung back open as Laux pulled out of me. He quickly flipped me onto my back, so I was laying on top of the crate. My legs swung up to rest on his shoulders and his cock went right back inside me.

If I wasn't so focused on how good Laux made me feel, I would've been amazed at how strong the crate he was fucking me on was. With each powerful thrust, it shook beneath me, but it never fell apart.

Laux returned one of his hands to my mouth and I gladly accepted it. Another moan was about to escape my lips, but I held it in long enough so it could be muffled by him. My tongue played with each of his fingers, giving each one the same treatment as his cock.

His other hand reached down to my body. He pulled down my shirt by the collar until one of my breasts popped out. Laux bent down and took it in his mouth.

As he continued to thrust, his lips wrapped around my nipples and began to suck. The fire within me was now an inferno. It consumed my whole being and I couldn't hold it back anymore. I was concerned his fingers in my mouth wouldn't be enough to subdue the noise I was about to make.

“Laux,” I whispered after maneuvering his fingers out of my mouth. “I'm... oh my... fuck... I'm about to come... Please don't stop.” It took all my strength to keep my voice at a whisper. I quickly put his fingers back in my mouth.

“Come for me...” Laux whispered back before returning his lips to my chest.

A moment later, it happened. The fire within exploded, consuming my entire form. I bit down on his fingers as a powerful cry traveled up my throat from my core. I was worried I’d hurt him, but Laux simply laughed into my breast.

My hands gripped the sides of the crate as my whole form quivered. I uncontrollably shook as Laux kept fucking me. My mind went blank again as the fire consumed me. The overwhelming pleasure took over every one of my senses.

After who knows how long, my senses slowly returned. I opened my eyes and found Laux looking down at me. He beamed with pride.

“You really liked that, didn’t you?” he whispered.

“Fuck yes,” I whispered back. “Now, it’s time for something you’ll like.”

“Believe me, I’ve liked all of it.”

“Yeah, but I know you’ll love this.”

I slid off the crate and reached my hands up to his head. I pulled him in for a quick kiss. It was clear that he didn’t want to pull away, but I did.

“Now, I want you to come for me, Laux,” I whispered.

I kissed my way down his body. Placing my lips against his neck, chest, and abs until I reached his cock.

With my hand guiding it, his cock approached my mouth. As my tongue touched his tip, I already tasted his precum. Fuck, I needed more.

I gave his cock the same treatment I had earlier, which I knew he enjoyed. After I was sure the tip of his cock got enough attention, I welcomed the rest into my mouth. My tongue was positioned to lick the underside of his shaft as each inch entered.

Then with a hand still on his shaft, I stroked him as his cock slid in and out of my mouth. Laux ran his fingers through

my hair again. I looked up at him to see his head thrown back in silent ecstasy.

“Fuck...” he grunted, almost not even bothering to whisper anymore. “Lila... I’m about to...”

I pulled his cock deeper into my mouth. Laux’s hands gripped my head as he released a low rumble of a roar. A beat later, his cock exploded into my mouth.

Finally sated, we pulled ourselves together, just a little shakily, then looked at each other in silence for a moment.

“Okay,” I broke the silence with a whisper. “Now, how exactly do we get out of here?”



## LAUX

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“So it’s agreed then. We come at Koll and his crew from all directions and take them out as swiftly as possible.” I looked around the room to see various nods of approval.

Draven frowned. “I do see one problem with the plan, though. There’s no place to let in a big group of people quietly. We’d have to either split up even more or go in one at a time. Either way, it’s risky.”

It was true. Koll’s base was heavily fortified, and he had made it quite difficult for anyone to get in without an invitation.

“I have a thought on that,” a haughty voice drawled from the percomm in the center of the table.

Gritting my teeth at the voice was almost a knee-jerk reaction. Munk still wasn’t allowed to meet with us in person, for obvious reasons, but we still included him in the meeting. He was after all going to be a big part of the plan. Too big for my liking.

“And what’s that?” Thelev snapped. He was obviously not okay with including Munk in all this. Not that I blamed him.

“Koll has a way of disappearing into thin air. Now that we know he’s been operating under the name Namar, we’ve found a lot more information. We’re not the first people to try and break into his base. A few years ago a group of Fanaith pirates tried to get back at him for conning them out of a big payday, so they swarmed his base. They had it completely surrounded

and knew he was in there, and yet when they barged in, Koll disappeared into thin air.”

“This story sounds like the opposite of being helpful,” Alkard growled.

“Then I’ll speed it up a bit so your small brains don’t get left too far behind,” Munk sneered.

The Nazok was very lucky that he was talking over the phone and not in person. Otherwise, Alkard would have pounded him into the ground.

“I had one of my spies look into the area, and she found a small retail store a few blocks from his base,” Munk continued. “She did a sweep of the store and found a grate in the back that led to a tunnel. Then she did a terrain scan and, low and behold, that tunnel leads right to Koll’s base.”

So Koll had a secret escape route. An escape route that we could access to get *into* his base.

Everyone in the room seemed to catch on as well.

“That tunnel is probably going to be monitored,” Sakkar muttered. “We’ll need to knock out their security first.”

Draven jerked his head in a nod. “Good, we’ll assign teams and be ready to move in an hour. Munk, are you and your men in position?”

I could tell Draven had a hard time saying the words out loud. Actually getting them all to agree to work with a Nazok, and Munk no less, had been hard enough. But Munk’s part in the plan had us all on edge.

We’d agreed early on that having Munk with us in the initial raid was a bad idea. We’d have enough on our plates by taking down Koll. Keeping an eye on Munk would only complicate it.

But we also hadn’t wanted to exclude him from the raid entirely. I’d been quick to point out how much of a waste that would be.

And so we reluctantly came to the conclusion that Munk and his crew would be our backup should it all go wrong. The

thought made my stomach twist in knots that we'd have to rely on Munk of all people to bail us out. It wasn't my favorite idea, but unfortunately, it was the best we had.

"My men and I are all set and ready to go. It's all of *you* I'm afraid will muck this all up," Munk taunted.

Several of the men bared their teeth and growled at that. It took a lot in me to not do the same.

My eye caught Lila, leaning against the wall across from me, watching it all play out. Something about her mere presence instantly calmed me.

Munk was just trying to bait us, I realized, and we weren't going to give him the satisfaction.

"We don't intend to muck anything up, Munk," I said evenly. "We'll contact you just before go time. Laux out."

And with that, I hung up before Munk shot off a snarky response. How was it that one man could be so incredibly irritating?

Apparently, the rest of my squad seemed to agree.

"Are we sure this is a good idea?" Ryrik muttered.

I grunted. "You tell us. You've been the one fact-checking everything he's told us."

He grimaced. "As best as I can. I hate to admit it, but Munk is far more familiar with Koll's territory than I am. So far, everything has checked out, but I could have easily missed something."

"Or Munk's fed Koll intel at the same time he's fed it to us," Sakkar pointed out. "This whole thing could be an ambush for us. Or are we forgetting that not too long ago, Munk wanted to bomb us?"

"Technically, casualties weren't his main goal," Thelev pointed out. "Though he probably wouldn't have cared if we died in the process."

"Which is why it's crazy to expect him to watch our backs when we raid this place," Sakkar argued. "Whether or not he's

still working with Koll will be irrelevant if he just decides to leave us to die.”

“Maybe we should go in now, in case he really has betrayed us,” Jalik suggested. “That way they’ll at least be more surprised by us being early.”

“It might be our best bet.”

“Munk can’t be trusted.”

“He’s a Nazok for crying out loud. Why is this even a debate?”

Everyone turned to look at Draven, who hadn’t said a word since we’d hung up on Munk, as if looking for his approval. He had a thoughtful look on his face. Then, to my surprise, he looked up at me.

“Laux, you’ve dealt with Munk a lot lately. Do you think we can trust him?”

All eyes turned to me.

I didn’t answer right away. My instinctual answer was to say no. He was a Nazok, he was Munk. Of course, we could never trust him.

And yet I had been the one to set this plan into motion.

My gaze flickered briefly to Lila to see what she thought of all this. Working with Munk had been her suggestion after all. I only ever considered the suggestion *because* she had been the one to make it. She looked as curious as the others about my answer.

I wasn’t completely sure myself. As much as I didn’t like working with Munk, he had provided good intel so far. Ryrik and I were good at what we did in gathering intel. Surely we would have noticed at least one slip-up if Munk had lied.

We would have never gotten this far this quickly without Munk’s help. And the backup he provided would be invaluable should we get in a tight spot. A situation that was very likely considering who we were going up against.

And Lila was right, Munk wanted revenge right now for being cheated. We'd resume our little private war later.

"I don't trust him fully," I finally said. "I'd be a naïve dolt if I did. But I do believe we can at least trust Munk to hold up his end of the bargain in this case."

Draven studied me for a moment before finally nodding. "You heard him, for now, we trust Munk to hold up his end of the deal. Everyone gather your gear and be prepared to move out in an hour."

Now that Draven had spoken the final word on the matter, everyone seemed to accept it. Though some more begrudgingly than others.

We all dispersed to go get our gear and anything else we might need. Before I headed for my equipment, though, I went over to Lila.

She gave me a teasing grin. "You know, I didn't hear my part in the plan. Decided to kick me out of the crew?"

A smile tugged on my lips. "No, the opposite actually. You are far too valuable to risk being out on the field."

Though I meant it in jest, there was a part of it that was very true for me. If I lost Lila in a firefight, I knew without a doubt that I would be utterly devastated. It was amazing in such a short period of time how completely irreplaceable in my life she had become.

She seemed to sense the direction of my thoughts, and her gaze became serious. She raised her hand to brush her fingertips against my horns. Her touch sent a wave of warmth through my body, making me feel more motivated and ready than ever before. Lila was my muse, my reason for fighting. I knew, then, that this would be the case for the rest of our lives.

"Don't worry," she whispered. "I'll be safe. It's you that I'm more worried about coming home alive and well."

Gently, I took her hand in mine and looked her straight in the eye. "I promise you that I will."

Lila seemed to relax a little at that.

“Laux.”

I turned at the sound of Sakkar’s voice and dropped Lila’s hand. “What is it?”

“I just need to have a word before we go.” He gestured for me to follow.

Lila nudged me. “Go ahead, I’ll be here.”

I nodded and went to follow Sakkar. The rest of the men were gathered in the arsenal, waiting.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Sakkar grimaced. “We can’t be certain Koll hasn’t gotten wind of this plan, whether or not he’s talked with Munk. Koll’s crafty enough on his own.”

I frowned. “What are you getting at?”

“That whoever we leave behind here might not be as safe as we might hope.”

My blood ran cold at the thought. It had never occurred to me that leaving Lila behind might actually make her more vulnerable to Koll.

Sakkar lifted up a placating hand. “Don’t worry, we already have an idea. Alkard has offered up his mansion in the Greenbelt, as well as his personal protection.”

I raised an eyebrow at Alkard. “You’d be willing to stay behind?”

He nodded. “I know what it’s like to have your mind split between the mission and your heart. Hopefully, my presence will let you focus on the mission.”

“I appreciate that, but who’s going to lead the men through the tunnels now?”

Alkard smirked. “You are. This whole operation was your idea, after all. That and you’re plenty capable.”

I glanced at Draven, who nodded. I dipped my head. “I will do my best then.”

“Good. We’d better move quickly then if we’re going to be making a pit stop first,” Draven said. “Everyone be ready to move out in ten.”

There were a series of agreements, and then everyone hurried to get their things. I packed up my own gear and checked it once over to make sure I didn’t miss anything. I then returned to the main room to tell Lila the change in plan.

## LILA

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“Well,” I said to Laux. “If you insist.”

“I do. It’s the safest place on the station.”

I didn’t need more convincing. Not to go to the Greenbelt. I’d dreamt of seeing it since arriving in Thodos III.

Laux wanted to take extra precautions to keep me safe. As far as we knew, Koll wasn’t wise yet to our plans. Alkard’s mansion seemed the perfect site, so we left straight away.

“I still hate the idea of you going without me,” I said as we parked the hover cart Laux had “borrowed” from the Promenade and made for Sector 245F. “I’m stronger than you think.”

Laux swept me into him as we walked towards the decontamination corridor. After we were cleaned and cleared for entry, we stood still for a moment on the soft ground of the dome.

“Woah,” I said. “It’s so... green” My eyes couldn’t keep still from staring at everything around me. I’d never seen a garden like this before. Not on Earth and certainly not on the station. It filled every bright corner of the dome. To think this was where our clean air came from.

“Can I touch it?” I asked, with a finger ready.

“Yes,” he said hesitantly. “Within reason.” I switched immediately from index to pinky finger, to show him I was serious about being careful before I allowed it to cascade down to the tip of the fern. I looked back up at Laux, shooting



him a sly glance. I wanted to grab him and pull him down with me into the soft grass, but something else caught my attention instead.

Rather like a willow tree on Earth, the rare Alluvian Ambrosia filled my eyes. I'd seen it on old promovids for Thodos III. Bright fluorescent purple-blue leaves cascading one after another to the ground below. The tips of its delicate branches trickled onto a large fountain.

Looking back at Laux, I couldn't help but feel incredibly lucky. Despite everything we'd been through and all that we had yet to accomplish, I was grateful. My life on Thodos III wasn't looking any better than surviving on Earth had been. I could hardly believe it, but things were looking up in a way I never thought possible.

Laux's blue tracery, caught in the Greenbelt's artificial sunlight, pulled my focus from the lush flora only for a moment. I stood quickly, dotting a swift peck on his cheek in appreciation. With his hand on the small of my back, he ushered me towards a lovely picnic pavilion close to the fountain.

As we got closer, I noticed we weren't alone. At first, I was let down, hoping for a hot minute of having this lovely lighted place all to ourselves. But as we got closer, I saw more of Laux's crew. And if my eyes could be trusted... No. Were those other humans?

Alkard came first to greet Laux in a brotherly embrace. Then a small woman came up behind him, extending her hand to greet me.

"Welcome," she said. "I'm Tessi, Alkard's mate." My jaw nearly hit the floor. Laux hadn't told me that he knew another couple like us. A Vinduthi and human crossing was rare enough.

"Hi," I said, my throat suddenly dry. "I'm Lila." Was it the artificial sunlight? I couldn't be sure and didn't want to stare. But there were distinct markings all over her skin, purple tracers, just like her husband. I shot a look back up to Laux,

hoping he would enlighten me, but another couple came into view.

“Draven, Elara! How are you?” Laux greeted his friend, along with yet another woman. Human again. This time I looked back at Laux ready to slap him.

“You never told me we weren’t the only mixed couple. Laux, *seriously*, how did you not tell me?” He looked back at his friends with a desperate ‘save me’ glare that they knew well enough not to go near. Draven ducked back with Alkard, his hand behind his head. They pulled him in to talk, going over the night’s plans.

“I’m Elara.” A woman with curly red hair and red tracery held her hand out to me. “Don’t let it worry you. Draven did the same thing. I was just as shocked when I met Tessi.”

Tessi nodded with her hand on her hip. “Vinduthi. You know?” She gestured for me to sit with them at a picnic table. Looking back, the men were wrapped up in their plans, so I grabbed the chance to get to know their women.

“So...” They had no idea how many questions sat on the tip of my tongue. I didn’t get the chance to ask as the next moment, Laux was standing over me. I guess it was time.

He walked me over to the Ambrosia tree. It was something between plant and intelligent life. Since the Ambrosia disliked being touched by strangers, it parted for us as we approached, creating an arched space to make our goodbyes. I hated to think about it, but what if this was it? What if I never saw Laux again?

“You’re ready to go,” I muttered, unable to meet his eyes. Doubt had hold of me, just as much as his arms held me close.

“The plan is set,” he said, holding me tighter. I wanted to believe him, but a sinking feeling held me down. The purple-blue leaves of the tree illuminated his blue tracers so they stood proudly against his cheekbones.

“About this,” I probed, as I pulled his face into my palm. His tracery glowed under my skin with a warmth that filled me from within. “The women have them, too.” It was more a

question than a statement. He wanted to tell me. He wouldn't get to.

"Laux," Draven interrupted. "It's time." He looked deeply into my eyes, filling me with the words he wanted to say. I felt he wouldn't like me to worry, so I pulled him close for a long kiss as proof of my trust.

"Good luck." We left it simple.

I stayed a moment in the quiet branches, wanting to cry but knowing that wouldn't do him any good. Finally, I braved my way through the tree, blinded by artificial sunlight on the other side. Alkard and the other women were waiting for me.

"It won't get better by worrying," Tessi warned an hour later over a friendly game of Roll-jak. Meeting the other human women was nice, but I needed a better distraction if I was going to stop fretting over Laux.

"Laux's team can more than handle Koll and his men." Alkard offered two cards to the table along with his advice. He stayed behind to keep an eye on his base along with myself and Elara. If Koll caught wind that two members of Laux's crew had human partners, we'd be walking targets. Tessi seemed to understand it better than anyone.

She seemed to be able to read the questions in my mind, too. "Alkard, love," she said, throwing her cards down. "We're out of trishem. Dear?"

"What? Oh." Alkard's wife yanked him from his vested interest in the game. "Oh, right, course."

I felt more relaxed as he stalked away with his wife's useless errand. I couldn't be sure, it was early days yet for Laux and me, but I felt comforted there with them. There was a hominess to this table of women, all mates of the notoriously fierce space vampires we called lovers and partners. Strange to think I wasn't alone in finding one to call my own.

"I can't thank you enough, Tessi. You *and* Alkard, for giving me a safe hideout in case things go wrong." The cards long discarded, Tessi slid me a platter of sweet zinns.

"Never mind that. Tell us, how did you two meet?"

The story came out easily enough and took my mind off things for a minute. But I could tell the other women were wondering something.

“What?” I blushed, reaching for another bite of my zinns. “You two keep staring.”

“I was just thinking...” Elara grinned over a cup of trishem. “How cute you would look with blue sigils, just like Laux. Have you thought about it?”

“About what?” This had to be it, the thing Laux didn’t get the chance to explain. I *was* missing something.

“About the mating bite?” Tessi’s eyes poured into mine. “Surely he told you something?”

“Wow,” Elara sighed. “Well, I guess now’s as good a time as any.”

“Will it take my mind off whether or not he’ll come back from Koll’s in one piece?”

“Definitely.” They shared a knowing glance that told me I was in for a ride.

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“MY DNA WOULD... change? Would I become Vinduthi?”

The ladies smiled.

“Oh, no, honey,” Tessi assured, patting me on the arm. “We wouldn’t do that to you, no.”

“It does change you, though.” Elara’s eyes brightened with Tessi’s. “You would be different.”

“Different, how?”

“Touch was the first thing I noticed.” Elara’s eyes went dreamily into her past. “The way things felt and sounded. So much sharper. Your senses become keener, more distinct.”

“Yes, and the smells. I swear, I can smell an Ewani up to no good from across the station.” Tessi leaned in closer. “But

best of all is the sex.”

“The sex.” Elara agreed by dropping her chin with raised brows.

“Imagine feeling his heart beating in your blood. Taste the sweat on his skin before it leaves his pores.”

“Do I want to taste his sweat?”

“You do if you’ve been claimed,” Tessi assured me, crossing her legs. “Even my scent changed the day he claimed me. He saved my life with his bite, you know. The Vinduthi can heal themselves, so he made me one of them to save me.”

“Alkard. Really?” It was hard to believe. The top crime boss of the station and everything. If there was a softer side to him, though, she would know.

“Was it the same with you, too, Elara? Did the bite save you?”

Elara blushed, thinking of her past.

“No, I chose mine, and when it would happen. I woke up the next day, my DNA rewritten. I could see and sense everything so clearly. I was toned with better reflexes, too. Faster, stronger—”

“—Better!” They both threw their heads back in laughter. But I just sipped my trishem, looking back at the Ambrosia tree with worry.

“Have you heard anything yet, Alkard? From Laux?” I fretted as he rejoined us at the table.

“No,” Alkard glanced at his security detail for confirmation. “It’s too soon. But Laux, the boys, and Munk’s men should be more than enough to handle anything.”

I drank my trishem in silence, tentatively enjoying the artificial breeze and sunlight. I had a thought sitting there, with the mates, how fun it would be if I were one of them. They were right, Laux’s traces *would* look great on me. If he made me his mate, that is.

But I had no way of knowing if I would ever be his mate. I had no way of knowing if he would make it back at all.

## LAUX

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“Thirty seconds until go time,” I murmured into the comm. “Remember, we go dark unless it’s an emergency.”

There were a series of agreements from the rest of the crew. This wasn’t the first time we’d done something like this before. Koll had messed with the Black Star, and we were all raring for a fight.

Just the thought of that night made my blood boil. But I needed to focus. Blind anger would only get us killed.

To calm myself down, I mentally checked off everyone and their positions.

Thelev and Ryrik were our stealthiest members, and they’d entered Koll’s base through the roof. From there, Ryrik would open a side door for Draven and Sakkar while Thelev took out the alarms.

Meanwhile, Jalik would provide a distraction. I would enter with the rest of the team from the escape tunnels. A smirk twitched at the corner of my lips at the irony.

I would use their secret method of escape to break into their base.

Slowly and stealthily, we would pick apart their defenses before they even saw it coming.

That was if everything went to plan. And it rarely ever did.

“Fifteen seconds until go time,” I said.

There was a grunt from one end. “You know, I knew Vinduthi were slow, but I at least thought you all knew how to count.”

It was almost as if Munk tried to be annoying on purpose. Especially since we didn’t have time for an argument right now.

That and it was never a good idea to argue with the person who provided you with backup. Our whole plan hinged on the hope that Munk hated Koll right now more than he hated us.

Sure, we’d run checks of our own to try and verify the validity of Munk’s intel. But truthfully, he knew this side of the business better than we did. We had no idea if this would all be for nothing.

There was also the fact that if this all went wrong, Munk and his men were supposed to come in to help. This meant that at any point he changed his mind and didn’t come in our hour of need, we’d be royally screwed.

But something told me it wasn’t the case. Munk was good at what he did, and he was extremely prideful. He wouldn’t take the insult of being betrayed lightly. I also didn’t believe he’d take the cheap way out of taking us down.

Remembering that, I bit back the sharp retort I had for him and counted out the rest in my mind.

*Four, three, two, one—*

And like that, we were all on the move.

We arrived at the rundown retail shop where the escape tunnels led, and quickly picked the locks in the back. We moved in. It didn’t take me long to find the discreetly hidden sewer grate entrance. I wrenched open the grate, and we all dropped into the tunnel.

As much as I would have liked to run, I knew the tunnel could be lined with traps.

So far, no alarms had gone off, which meant Thelev must have been successful. Still, I kept a watchful eye out for anything out of place.



There was the slightest glint near the ground and I froze instantly, signaling the others to do the same.

I crouched down slowly to examine the glint. It was a tripwire, razor-thin and nearly invisible. And more than likely, tied to an explosive of some sort.

“Big step over,” I warned the men. Carefully, I stepped over the wire. The rest of the men followed my lead.

Then we headed down the tunnel once again. I glanced at my watch. We were making good time so far. Jalik would be getting into position for his distraction while we came out from the other side of the tunnel.

There were a few more traps we had to avoid, but soon enough, we’d reached the entrance to the base.

“Remember,” I reminded them. “Don’t blow the charges until or unless we’ve been had.”

The others nodded, and I pried open the grate. If Jalik hadn’t been successful in distracting the guards, we’d be swarmed immediately. But when I lifted it up, no one was there.

I permitted myself a smile and then we all made our way out of the grate. Just as the last of us was up, someone came around the corner.

He went wide-eyed at seeing us there and tried to scramble to either use his comm, shout, or grab his blaster. But he never had the chance.

In the blink of an eye, I rushed over to him and snapped his neck.

“Holster your weapons for now and engage them hand to hand if you can. We’re going to try and keep this quiet for as long as possible,” I ordered in a whisper.

And so we made our way through the base, taking down anyone we came across swiftly and silently. Our goal was to get to the rotunda where Munk said that Koll spent most of his time training.

If we could get to him, we could end this.

But just as we approached the rotunda, a dozen guards came barreling around the corner. They had us.

As if in confirmation, the comms flared to life in my ear.

“Security room’s been compromised! They have access to their alarms and comms again.”

“They know we’re here, everyone buckle down.”

“We’ve been compromised, too.”

I growled. It was all breaking down at once.

I didn’t have time to be properly angry, though, because the men that were coming at us already had their weapons out.

“Take them down and push forward!” I shouted. And then, it was a firefight.

Bullets flew through the air, and I ducked quickly behind a wall to return fire. We were outgunned, but we were also the better shots. One by one, the guards fell and we pushed them back.

The comm buzzed in my ear. “Security’s a lost cause. I’m moving to join you at the convergence point,” Thelev growled.

The convergence point was what we had agreed upon as a code for the rotunda should our comms be compromised.

“We’re heading that way, too,” Draven said.

Good, they’d all be together to take down Koll. The double door to the rotunda appeared just up ahead.

“Guns out, be ready for another firefight,” I said, drawing out my own blaster.

I kicked the doors. They flew open with a loud thunk. We rushed into the rotunda and were greeted by two dozen guards surrounding us, weapons trained on our heads.

And at the center of them all, Koll.

That lazy grin was on his face, the weapon held loosely in his grip. Almost as if it were a toy rather than a weapon.

I wanted to rip that smile off. I wanted to bash his head into the ground and make him scream in agony for hours on

end.

“I’m not sure how you all got in but stealth doesn’t suit you,” he drawled. “Once we noticed a few people with snapped necks lying around, it wasn’t difficult to figure out what was going on.”

I snarled and aimed my blaster at him with a bang, the weapon flew out of my hand. I looked around widely to see where the shot came from when I noticed the sniper on the balcony.

The Xyloxi’s smile widened. “You didn’t think it would be that easy, did you?” He gestured to his men. “I’ve had enough of this intrusion. Kill them all.”

Suddenly, a door from the balcony flew open. Draven and the rest of the men ran in. Draven tackled the sniper on the balcony while the others opened fire on the guards below.

Koll looked slightly taken aback for a second. A second that I exploited. I hurled towards him and took him to the ground before he could even raise his weapon. It clattered away from him as he hit the ground, hard.

I reached for his throat, but Koll was quicker. He punched me hard in the throat and rolled out of my grip. Koll tried to make for the blaster, but I grabbed his shoulder and swung him back to me. I landed two solid hits before he gave it back.

I was bigger than him by quite a bit, and obviously much stronger. But Koll? He was quick. He easily dodged several of my blows and managed to get in a few himself.

Koll made to punch me in the throat again, and all too late, I realized it was a distraction from the knife he’d pulled from his belt. I tried to rear back, but he managed to slash me across the stomach.

Still reeling, Koll tackled me to the ground this time. He put one foot on my wound and tried to drive the knife into my head. Normally it would be easy to keep the blade away, but with the searing pain from the pressure he put on my wound, I barely kept it back.

I noticed then that there were more guards pouring in from everywhere they could. Too many for us to take.

The knife inched closer to my head, and I felt myself losing my grip.

Then, suddenly, there was a bang and Koll howled in pain, springing away. Blood poured from his shoulder.

I looked up to see Munk standing on the balcony with his men around him.

“That’s what happens when somebody screws me over!” he shouted. “Take them down!”

Dozens of Nazoks poured in, fighting Koll’s men head-on.

I got to my feet and didn’t waste a moment barreling towards Koll. This time, Koll wasn’t so fast.

I landed hit after hit after hit, until Koll was on the ground again, bloody and helpless. A part of me wanted to savor this, take my time in killing him.

But then I thought of Lila waiting for me. Of the woman who was counting on the fact that I was coming back to her alive.

Koll was smart and could get the upper hand again at any moment.

So I picked up a stray blaster from the floor and fired directly between his eyes. Koll’s head hit the ground with a satisfying thud.

Around me, the rest of his men fell, too. As much as I didn’t want to admit it, we could have never done this without Munk. And from the look of things, he’d lost a lot of his own in order to bail us out. Without him, we’d all be dead.

I made eye contact with the man in question from across the room. I dipped my head towards him. Slowly, he returned the gesture.

Normally, I would take pleasure in hunting down and executing any enemies left. But now, more than anything, I just wanted to get back safely to Lila.

## LILA

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“Lila,” Tessi called my attention back to our game. “It’s your draw.”

“Oh, right.” I blushed, throwing down two cards. It was a loser’s hand. I did my best not to take it as an omen. My toes tapped incessantly, and my palms filled with sweat. There was still no word.

“Sorry, ladies,” smirked Razov’s mate, Amy, with teal markings and a sly drawl. By then, we had been joined by more of the women. “It’s me again.”

The girls groaned in unison, throwing cards on the table. Emma drew them up to shuffle them. She was Tahr’s mate, with gold markings like his. I couldn’t help but stare at the way her fine gold tracers blended with her sunshine locks.

What most fascinated me was the way each woman wore her mate uniquely. Some had markings across their faces, along one arm, or across the chest. It was hard to take them all in at once. I thought about Laux’s sigils and wondered what would happen to me.

“Should we take her around, Tessi? See if we can take her mind off things?” Lucia, a dark-haired woman with green sigils, offered. Between a tour of Alkard’s mansion and a light luncheon, I had plenty to distract me. But check-ins with Alkard’s security kept coming back with no word. Not yet.

“I’m sure everything will be okay,” Elara assured me, though I could tell she was just as distracted as I was. What if Laux’s intelligence was faulty, if Munk double-crossed him, or

if Koll got the upper hand? They were thoughts I wouldn't entertain but couldn't keep away.

Eventually, we made our way back outside to enjoy the lovely artificial sunlight. Tessi had been a fabulous hostess, and I'd never been with women so inviting to a stranger.

Together, they were a cornucopia of radiance, illuminated in the artificial sun like a celestial rainbow. It was obvious they had become a kind of sisterhood. I guess they had to be given the line of work their mates were in. I realized watching them laugh together by the fountain that I wanted a color in their palette.

Amy eventually called us back to another round of cards. I could hardly look at anything. I had begun to give up hope. Then a long shadow cast over the table. My head shot over my shoulder, and I breathed the first easy breath I had in hours.

"Oh, thank Celestia!" I jumped out of my seat and pulled him into my arms. "I was so worried." Laux pulled me into a long kiss that tasted of blood and victory.

To my left, Elara pulled Draven into her arms as well. I noticed when they held each other, the sigils within them seemed to glow in unison. Whether it was because they were close, or thinking of each other, I didn't know. But I couldn't wait to find out.

"Worry?" he asked, his arms wrapped tightly around my waist. A hush fell over the team, as Alkard arrived to assess the damage.

"So?" he asked, hands on hips. As the top brass on Thodos III, Alkard would need to be the first to be informed, in case the danger wasn't over. I took Laux's hand in mine to let him know that no matter what happened, I wasn't going anywhere.

"Can't say he didn't put up a fight," Laux answered. I can't believe I didn't see it before, but the massive slash across his chest lit up before me. My eyes shot up to see if he was in any pain. Upon closer inspection, the wound was nearly healed already.

“And he’s done, right?” Alkard was very serious. He shot his head at his men for confirmation. Bruised and bloody, the nod of each head told us what we needed to hear. Koll was dead. But did that mean it was over?

“He’s done.” Laux confirmed. “But I couldn’t do it without some help.” Then another figure emerged from behind a shadowy oak.

“Munk.” Alkard seemed displeased. His mansion in the Greenbelt wasn’t secret, but that didn’t mean he would entertain his enemies there, either. “Laux, what do you mean by bringing this Nazok scum to my home?”

The mood changed in an instant. With everyone on edge, Laux spoke up. “I couldn’t have done it without this scum. We had the plans, the team, and Munk’s men, but Koll still had the advantage. Just when I thought I was lost, he came through for us. He lost a lot of his men, too.”

Alkard acknowledged Munk with a slight nod. “Condolences for your men, Munk.” It was as close to a thank you as he would get.

Munk shifted uneasily in the artificial sunlight, blocking his face from the glow like it wasn’t to be trusted. “Don’t get used to it, Vinduthi. It was a one-time deal.” His head bobbed over each shoulder as if Alkard was about to sic his guards on him. It was clear that while they needed to watch the other at the moment, that moment had passed.

Alkard glanced over to Tazhr and Razov to suggest they should be ready if he made any quick movements.

“One thing, Laux.” Munk caught us all off guard by daring to open his mouth. The palpable awkwardness of him being there at all had us ready for anything. “It was a blast. But don’t expect me not to kill you next time.” A sly, indiscernible look came over his face that left me puzzled. Laux seemed to understand it, though.

It was a strange moment between the pair of them. Locked in a game only they knew the rules to. Something told me this

wasn't over. But would they be enemies next time or friends? What team would Munk choose to play on?

Tahzr and Razov kept Munk company as he slouched back toward the decontamination corridor. The rest of us just sat there feeling puzzled and unsure of what Koll's death meant. What it spelled for the future of the Black Star Casino.

"That may not be the last we've heard from Munk," Laux said to Alkard. "Or Conii, for that matter."

Alkard took a moment to think, looking out at the group gathered at his home. "We'll get to that tomorrow," he announced. "For now, let's eat!" He ordered a massive feast that he had spread across the soft grass. Before long, the men were engaged in war stories, showing off scars from battles fought long ago.

I couldn't take my eyes off Laux. Night, day, it didn't matter under the glow of the Greenbelt. Suddenly food tasted better knowing he was alive and that Koll couldn't do anything more to us. We spent the rest of the evening sharing in the valor that got them through the night.

"The look on your face!"

"I know, I know."

"Thought you were done for, 'til Munk came through." Thelev chugged a brew as he patted Laux on the back.

"No. I knew he would come through for us," he said to Thelev, but he looked at me. "Sometimes people surprise you." I stared into his eyes as long as I could, full of hope for our future. But mostly, I wanted him to myself.

I pointed my chin to the side, suggesting we make an early exit. He caught my drift, and before long, we were back at his place taking it all in.

"I'm just so glad that you came out alive," I said, inspecting his injuries back at his apartment as we stood in front of the bathroom mirror. His stomach wound was nearly healed, but the shirt was done for. I pulled it off of him and tossed it onto the floor to look for more damage. The way he



trembled under my touch sent a wave through me that made it hard to focus.

“Were you really that worried?” He had forgotten about his injuries and took to kissing my neck from behind.

“You have no idea,” I said, turning to face him. His pants fell to the floor with a flick of my wrist.

The thrill of holding him with my fingers sent a wave of anticipation straight through me. But it would just have to wait. I still had words for Laux and wasn't yet sure how to say them.

“Let's get you cleaned up.” I started the shower, contemplating my next move. I wanted him to bite me, that I knew. Whether or not that was something I could just ask for was a different matter.

“Let's get *you* naked,” he replied, pulling my jacket, shirt, and bra off one at a time. Steam filled the bathroom mirror and as his bulging muscles disappeared from view, I turned to face him.

“I thought I'd lost you,” I said, hoping this was the moment.

“Lila...” His face became serious. “There's something I've been wanting to ask you. I wanted to tell you before, but I didn't know how to explain it.”

“Do you want me to be your mate, Laux? And receive the bite?”

“You know?” He looked puzzled, but he shouldn't have.

“What else were us girls going to talk about all that time you were gone?” We were nearly lost in the mist, the air around us was heavy and damp. It didn't matter, though, because we were truly found in each other.

“I've tried all night to tell you. I know. I know what it is and what it will do to me. And I can't wait. I want to be with you, Laux. I want to be part of you.”

Laux took what little breath I had left in me with his full demanding kiss.

“You mean it, this is what you want?” He was serious, and rightly so. Whatever happened from this point on was a mystery I could only solve myself. If I didn’t, I’d spend the rest of my life regretting it.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

“And the mates, they told you everything? That you’ll be unconscious for a while? Not just asleep.”

“Well, how else do you rewrite DNA?” Joking aside, I needed him to hear me. “I want it, Laux. I want you. I love you.”

“And I love you.” Laux held me closer, our wet skin sticking together like our hearts. “Lila, will you be my mate for life? Will you wear my colors? My sigils that mark you to all Vinduthi as my life partner?”

I almost couldn’t believe he really asked. I pulled him into my kiss, water dripping from our mouths when we came to the surface. I felt his hands reach behind my neck as I threw my head back as far as it would go.

“Do it, Laux. I want you to bite me.”

“Oh, I’ll bite you,” he said, running his fangs lightly across my skin. “After I’ve played with my human one last time.”

## LAUX

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“Don’t go far,” I joked as Lila stepped into the shower and disappeared into the steam. The cloud was already making me glisten.

“Never.” Her voice drifted through the air.

I waited a moment longer before joining Lila. Giving the mating bite is no simple thing. It is a life-changing act for both parties. But it was what I wanted, and it was what she wanted, too. There was no point in waiting any longer.

Slowly, I walked through the blinding steam towards the shower. My only guide was the sound of the water as it fell off Lila’s body. As I got closer, she came into focus for me.

Her gorgeous face appeared through the steam. I reached out and cupped her face, holding her still as I leaned in for a kiss. The heat from the water was nothing compared to the warmth I felt from her lips.

Lila’s arms wrapped up around my neck as mine snaked around her waist. We held each other as we kissed, our tongues sliding past each other as I savored her taste.

It still baffled me that I felt this way for a human. I never expected I’d ever bite one of them and make them my mate.

But, when it came to Lila, I couldn’t bear the idea of going another day without doing it.

“So...” Lila pulled away from our kiss, just a hair’s length. “Walk me through this again? How... how do we do this?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make it as comfortable as possible for you.” I squeezed Lila’s hips, and she giggled in response. “We’ll have our fun, and at the moment of climax for you, I’ll give you the bite. Then... Then we start the rest of our lives together, as mates.”

“Then let’s start the fun.” Lila pulled me back in to continue the kiss. Meanwhile, one of her hands moved down my body until it found my cock.

Lila’s hand wrapped around my shaft at the base. Her soft, delicate hand slowly ran up and down, getting me hard. I couldn’t control myself and moaned against her lips. Her simple touch just drove me crazy.

I couldn’t let her be the only one doing the work. One of my hands left her hips and slowly inched towards her pussy. Lila shuddered as my fingertips glided down her skin.

When my fingers found her lips, I didn’t waste any more time. I slid two fingers into her already soaking-wet folds. I smirked as I felt Lila’s entire body freeze at the action. Her lips stopped against mine, her hand stuck on my cock.

A soft moan escaped her lips as my fingers slowly glided along the inside of her. After a moment, she regained her focus. She pulled me in for a deeper kiss and her hand stroked me faster.

“Fuck,” she moaned. Her voice was almost drowned out by the thunder of the shower water.

“What was that?” I gave her a gloating smile. “I can’t hear you, Lila. Get louder.”

“Fuck,” she cried. “Keep doing that, Laux! Your fingers feel so fucking good.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I pushed deeper into her and watched as her eyes rolled to the back of her head. “Any other requests? This is all leading to your bite after all.”

“Oh... fuck, fuck, fuck... Laux... Suck on my breasts.”

I did not need to be told twice. I bent down and took her left breast in my mouth. My tongue circled her nipple, softly

flicking it with each pass.

“Laux,” she moaned as she threw her head back.

Lila stroked my cock harder and faster as I worked her breast with my mouth. I sucked on it, bringing more and more of her into my mouth. My fingers still played in her pussy. I felt her body convulsing around my digits.

“Yeah,” I said, releasing her nipple from my mouth. “You like this?”

“Oh...” She nodded and looked down at me. Her stroking my now rock-hard cock slowed down. “Laux...”

“Yes, my mate?”

“I need you to fuck me now.” She reached down and pulled my hand out of her. Then she led my cock right to her pussy.

Lila rubbed the tip of my cock along her pussy lips. I watched as she closed her eyes and bit her lips. Her mouth rumbled as she moaned.

“Can you?” she asked. “Please... please can you fuck me?”

“Of course.”

I took my cock from her and guided it into her pussy. Lila gasped as I entered her. My cock fit perfectly as her pussy opened up for me.

The hot shower water continued to pour all over us. But it had been a while since my mind focused on any of that. Every thought in my brain was of Lila, watching her move, listening to her every sound of pleasure. This was her night, and I was determined to make it special.

I pressed Lila’s back against the shower wall while gripping both hands on her hips for stability. My hands supported her as her feet left the floor and wrapped around my waist. We kissed as I held her up between my body and the wall.

“Now fuck me, Laux. You got me so close, now please finish the job.”

Lila moaned as I thrust into her. My cock slid along the inside of her pussy. I felt every inch inside her.

She leaned her head towards mine. Lila pressed her lips right against my ear. “Fuck, you feel so good. Harder please.”

I followed her command and thrust into her harder and deeper. She responded by moaning even louder into my ear.

“Yes, just like that,” she moaned. “Fuck me just like that! Laux, this is your pussy, use it. Use it just like that.”

Her sultry words just made me thrust even harder. Lila’s pussy felt like heaven. There was nowhere I’d rather be in this world than right here.

I held her hips and kept fucking her. Kept her pinned against the wall. Lila’s fingers dug into the skin of my shoulders.

“Laux... Oh... Oh... I-I’m... Fuck!” I kept fucking her harder and harder.

“Yeah. Scream for me, Lila!”

She moaned louder and louder until suddenly, she stopped. She looked at me with a confused look. I stopped thrusting.

“What?” I asked.

“You didn’t bite me.”

“What?”

“I just came... Why didn’t you bite me?”

“Oh, fuck.” I got so lost in the moment that I’d completely forgotten what we were doing. “I guess I’ll just have to make you come again.”

Lila laughed out loud. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

Still holding her up in the air, I reached a hand out and turned off the shower. We kissed as I carried her out of the shower and towards the door to the bedroom. As we moved, the steam faded, and the automatic dryers kicked on. By the

time we reached the bed, we were both completely dry and ready to go.

As I stood at the foot of the bed, I pulled my cock out of Lila and gently tossed her onto the mattress, watching her body bounce for a moment as she softly settled. Everything about Lila was absolutely perfect.

I crawled onto the bed with her. First, I parted her legs and kissed my way up her body. Starting at just above her knee, my lips trailed up her thigh. I gave her little pecks until I reached her pussy.

Lila's body squirmed as my lips brushed against her folds. Still as perfectly wet as I left it, she was ready for me. I extended my tongue into her and heard Lila moan from above.

My tongue teased Lila's clit as my hands reached up to hold her body still. With each flick of my tongue, Lila's body writhed with pleasure, her hands gripping my horns. She was unable to hold it back and I had to keep her in place so I could keep giving it to her.

"Laux," she begged. "Oh, fuck. I need you. I need your bite... please... Give it to me."

"In due time, dear Lila. But first..." I pulled my lips away from her pussy and moved further up her body. When I was finally in place, I prepared to slide my cock into Lila.

"Wait..." Lila said before I could. I held my cock against her entrance. "Let me... Let me be on top... I want to make you come, and then you bite me... Okay?"

I grinned and without another word rolled onto my back. Lila quickly crawled onto my body. Her tiny frame fit perfectly on me.

Lila first kissed my lips. Then my neck. Then kissed down my chest. She kissed my body as her fingers ran along my tracery. She then got in position.

She slowly lowered herself down onto my cock. As I was engulfed in her warm, wet pussy, I watched Lila's face freeze with pleasure. She placed her hands on my chest and slowly began her ride.

“Fuck...” I muttered. “Your body is incredible.”

I watched her move on top of me, and she was glorious. As she slid up and down on my shaft, her body shook perfectly. Her magnificent breasts bounced with each movement.

Her hair fell perfectly in her face as she sat up and grinded against me. I reached up and pushed it out of the way. Lila grabbed my hand and one by one, put my fingers in her mouth. She softly moaned into them as she continued to ride me.

With my other hand, I reached up and grabbed her breasts. My fingers pinched her nipple as she groaned even louder. She grinded even harder against me. I felt I was getting close.

I sat up and took her other breast in my mouth, sucking her back into my mouth. A pressure began to build in my cock. The moment we were waiting for was almost upon us.

Lila released my fingers from her mouth and bent down to whisper in my ear. “Laux... I’m close again. Can you... Can you come with me? And give me the bite?”

“Of course. Final chance to back out. Are you –?”

“I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life, Laux. Do it!”

I looked up at Lila as I thrust from beneath. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head and her mouth was open in a silent scream. Meanwhile, her breasts bounced in my face as I fucked her. I couldn’t imagine a better woman to be my mate.

The pressure in my cock grew stronger. Her pussy got slicked down my cock. Lila looked down at me, her eyes begging for more.

“Laux... I’m about to... Come for me, please!” As her words hit my ears, I couldn’t hold it back any longer.

Three things happened in quick succession. My cock exploded into her pussy. Shot after shot of my seed filled her up.

Then Lila screamed out a powerful cry, louder and more guttural than I’d ever heard from her. Now was the moment.



Finally, I sank my fangs into her neck. My whole body went numb at the sensation. I released everything I had into her.

A breath later, Lila's moans went silent. Her whole body went limp against mine. She started to fall back away from me, but I caught her.

Gently, I laid her unconscious body on the bed. I kissed her forehead as I pulled a blanket over her. Already, her breathing was more and more labored, but I knew that was all just part of the process.

When this was over, when she finally woke up, she'd be stronger and faster. She'd officially and undeniably be my mate.

She'd be mine, and I would be hers, forever.

I couldn't wait.

## LILA

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“Tell me.” I held two data pads impatiently. “Which one do you like best?” I pushed the invitations into his face, just in front of his nose. With only a week before our grand reopening, I had seconds to get Laux’s approval and have them sent if we planned to have a reopening at all.

“This is a trick, right?” he asked, his face screwed up with confusion. “They’re identical.”

“No, they’re not,” I said while reinspecting the two data pads in my hands. “One is razor blue and the other is incandescent. It’s as plain as can be.”

“Uh, you pick.” He tossed the decision back to me. I knew and hoped he would. The crazy rush of the past few weeks had me at his side constantly. I still planned to go back to bartending once we reopened, but the flurry of plans and organizing had me flushed with energy.

“Incandescent it is.” I swiped the pad on the left four times and that was it. “Okay, all sent. We reopen in a week, no matter what.”

It had been three weeks since the ordeal with Koll and his men. Three weeks exactly since I had taken Laux’s bite. My newfound strength and keener senses proved valuable to the rebuilding efforts as well. Laux often needed someone to communicate the Vinduthi’s expectations to the other humans without terrifying them.

I’d become a natural bridge between the staff and upper management. Not to mention my newly toned muscles and

quick senses meant I could defend the place if I needed to.

I stepped through to the dining area towards a massive new mirror for the dining hall. It lay against the wall, half-sheathed and waiting to be hung. I made a full turn, taking my reflection in again. I was still human in a lot of ways. Still curvy. Laux loved that the bite didn't change my ass.

My blue tracery, caught in the ballroom light, glowed along my right cheek, down my neck, and over my arm. I was mostly used to it by then, but couldn't stop myself from admiring it like jewelry if ever I caught my reflection. The mates did their best to explain it, but nothing could prepare me for the change once it took place.

I remembered Laux's arms that morning, rattled awake by the smell of food. Someone was having breakfast nearby, and I was ravenous. I shot up out of bed, much as I wanted to eat, suddenly remembering the night before. I just had to see. I ran back to Laux's bathroom mirror to take myself in. The dots on my neck confirmed it as if I couldn't see for myself.

The bite didn't disappoint. There they were, the bright sigils pulsing gently under my dermis. *What are they?* I wondered, but as I looked, my eyes sharpened in a way they never had before.

The sigils magnified in front of me in an instant. I was audibly shocked, so much so that Laux could be heard waking. I ran to him, excited to show myself off. When I cleared the room in less than half a second, it became apparent. I was more than different and more than human.

I stood over Laux, excited to feel his heartbeat pulsing in my ears like my own. He peeped his eyes at me and gasped.

“You're stunning.”

I giggled in response.

“Look at you.” He smiled.

“Look at me!” I smiled back.

“Feel different?” He had no idea.

On my insistence, Laux took me to the Promenade for breakfast. Excited to take it all in, I savored every taste and smell. Everything was on the next level from the night before.

“I want to go somewhere,” I finally said after a feast of pancakes and eggs lay in demolished bits on the table. “Somewhere where I can really move.”

“You want to run.” He understood me, or at least, I thought he did. Months on the station and constantly being reduced to jabs like ‘weak humans’ left me feeling powerless. But there was a strength inside me greater than anything I had ever experienced or would experience if I had stayed human.

“I want the air to rush past me.”

“There’s only one place for that.” The Greenbelt.

Luckily, Alkard and Tessi found it amusing how empowered I felt by the transformation. I didn’t mind being their entertainment if it meant running barefoot and free through the gardens, in a lush existence I had never seen on Earth.

My life had taken a turn I never could have dreamed, not in my wildest imagination. I took each leap and bound as a promise of more to come. Not surprisingly, I heard Laux’s breath catching up to me from behind. He chased me down into a shaded glen and took me there and then.

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“TAKE THAT TO THE STOREROOM!” I heard him shout to the new bar staff, snapping me from my memories back to the work ahead. Store supplies were being delivered on top of construction yet to be finished by the Uune. Laux’s arms pressed around me from behind.

“Still admiring yourself, I see?” I shot a look back to the mirror.

“I’m just hoping that the grand unveiling won’t pale in comparison.” He showed me he agreed by shoving his tongue

down my throat. My heart raced with the thought of taking him back to our room, but Thelev caught our attention.

“Laux, Lila, it’s time,” he said, gesturing back toward the bar area. Behind it, the display was covered with a massive sheet. “Word is, they’re gonna drop it at any second.”

Strangely, the Uune didn’t need telling to come and rebuild the bar and casino. The day after the bombs, they were in place moving debris and clearing the site for construction. But no one could’ve anticipated *what* they would build. As the weeks dragged on, our anticipation to see what they were up to had reached its peak.

Draven, Sakkar, and Thelev joined us in front of the space the old bar used to occupy. Laux had ordered a new Ricktorglass counter, which was still in pieces yet to be unboxed.

“So, how do we know they’re about to drop it?” I asked.

“We don’t, actually.” Thelev confirmed with a gesture toward the sheet. “But more and more of them have lined up there all day. If you look closely, the last Uune is about to take hold of that corner.”

“I will.” My newly powered eyesight zoomed into the space to observe the last Uune, hovering towards the top of the sheet. Once it was in place, the other Uune hummed in unison. With their hive-like mind working in synchronicity, they dropped the sheet to reveal Black Star Casino’s new back bar and display.

“Celestia.” My mouth dropped open. “What is it?”

“By the seven galaxies.” Laux’s expression changed from worried to relieved. “It’s a zero-G holo-display.” I could hardly take it in. The Uune had built us a floor-to-ceiling display area supported by zero-G tech. It glowed in a rich gold hue that filled the entire bar with a radiant welcoming light.

“Holy shit!” I couldn’t wait to try it. “Can I? This *is* my bar.” I reminded him.

“Your bar?” Laux laughed, handing me a bottle of Fanathian gin. “Might as well.” I took it from him and hurled

it with all my strength towards the bar. Within a nanosecond, it was caught up in the holo-display. Slowly, it rotated midair until it was upright, and then it sailed gloriously up to the top. Our heads followed it to the ceiling where nano-tech formed a shelf that caught it and held it into place.

“Wow...” I looked at the boys, eyes all aglow with a new toy. “People are gonna love this.” I checked my shoulder to see that they weren’t as excited about it as I was. Then Alkard came into the room, and the usual hush came over everyone.

“Well, that’s different.” He seemed as unsure about it as the others.

“I think it’s great.” I grabbed another bottle of gin, hurling it at the wall to show it off. Within seconds, it was next to its brother on the nano shelf. “Imagine a busy night, this place filled to the brim with people, every bottle flying. Every head turned to see it. It’ll draw a crowd.”

“As long as you figure out how to get the bottles back down quickly enough.”

Right. I could do that.

Alkard turned to Laux. “Any word on Munk’s activities? It’s been quiet since you took down Koll.”

“A little too quiet,” Draven confirmed. “He lost a lot of men, though. He’ll likely stay quiet, for a while at least.”

“Just like Conii.” Sakkar stepped in with a grim look on his face. “Short on power, but still out there. What are the odds they find each other?”

“And team up?” Alkard’s face was concerned. His men seemed to agree.

Laux shot a look over to me. “There’s no telling. But they’re enemies. It wouldn’t make sense.”

“If they needed each other enough, they would.”

“I doubt it.” Laux disagreed, never taking his eyes off of me. “With as many people as this new display’s going to bring to Black Star, you never know. We may need Munk again.”

“No way.” As head of security, Sakkar was least likely to be convinced. “We crossed that road.”

“Never say never.” I stepped in between them. “Munk made this day possible, whether we like it or not, gentlemen. If you’re smart, you’ll keep this enemy close.”

“He made himself clear when he left the Greenbelt, Lila. We’re enemies. It was a one-time thing.”

This time I was face to face with Alkard himself. I froze my expression. “Allies. Enemies. It’s all the same in the casino business, sir.”

The air cleared an hour later, with Laux still impressed at my candor.

“I’ve never heard anyone talk to Alkard that way, maybe except for Tessi,” he said.

“Well get used to it, mister.” I twirled myself into his arms, swaying us back and forth under the glow of the display. “I’m not a puny human anymore.”

I was more, so much more.

He laid his head on my shoulder, taking my scent with a deep breath. I was right, I’d discovered. When he held me in his arms, when he sent my heart into motion with his touch, the sigils within my skin sang out for him.

“Did you get everything you wanted, Lila?” His arms crept closer around my waist. Encircled in his warmth, I turned to face him.

“I got so much more.”

With that, he pulled my chin up to face him and kissed me.

“So did I, my mate, my love.” He kissed me again. “So did I.”

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