



GEMMA VOSS

THE  
ALIEN'S  
WOMAN

VIRGIN WARRIORS OF KAR'KAL

# THE ALIEN'S WOMAN

# VIRGIN WARRIORS OF KAR'KAL, BOOK 6

GEMMA VOSS

Copyright © 2023 by Gemma Voss

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

 Created with Vellum

# CONTENTS

[Content Notes](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Bonus Series Epilogue](#)

[MORI](#)

[Thank you for reading!](#)

[Also by Gemma Voss](#)

[About the Author](#)

## CONTENT NOTES

This is a romance novel intended for **adult audiences** that includes **explicit sexual content**. This book contains content that some audiences may find offensive and/or triggering, including:

- Use of explicit language
- Graphic descriptions of violence and injury
- References to sex work, slave trade, and sex-trafficking
- Main character healing from emotional trauma

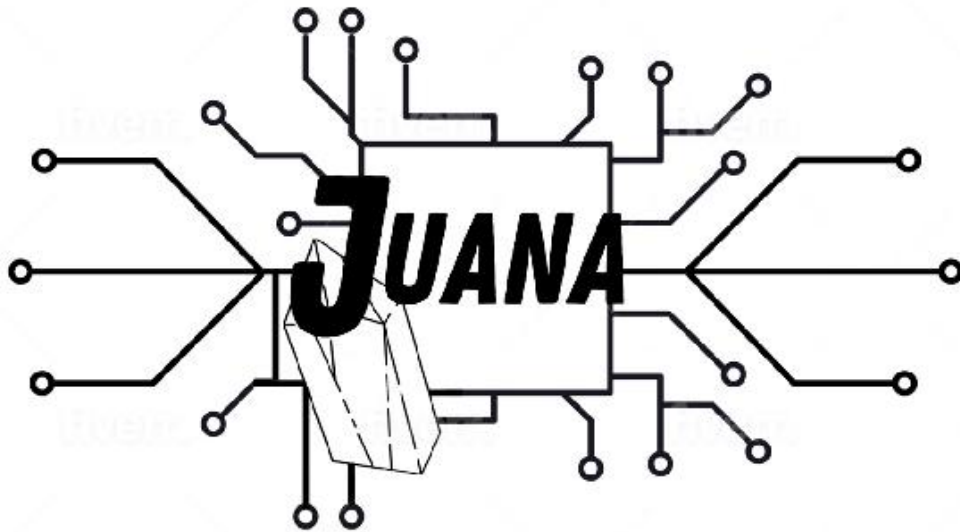
Rest assured our hero and heroine will find love and safety, but it is not without ugly bumps along the way. This series often features stressful tension, violent villains, and high stakes action.

A more detailed catalogue of all triggering content in this book can be found at my website.

Visit [gemmavoss.com](http://gemmavoss.com)

*HAPPY READING!*





*1*

THE ONLY SILVER lining to waking up every day on this worthless hunk of metal is that I'm waking up at all. I fought hard to be here, and if I have to serve alien hooch for the rest of my days, it would be a blessing.

“Human!” Granguu calls from the corner, waving his mug and wiggling his skeletal fingers. “I require a refill!”

I mutter curses to myself and drop the mopping bot that's been on the fritz for the past few days. I need the damn thing to start working so I don't have to clean the floor again.

“Coming!” I reply with false sweetness.

The Gak's preference for liquor is a milky substance called uunka that must be pumped out of a silver barrel. I grab a frozen glass and start pumping. Since working this job, my upper arms are stronger than ever. When the cup is full to the brim, I carry it over and slap it down. It might look like a pina colada, but it tastes like sock funk.

“You look more irritable than usual today,” he comments, taking a swig of the drink. “What's got your engine clogged?”

“The bot that mops the floor isn't working, and I don't know how to fix it.”

“I could do it,” he says with a grin.

I'm not holding my breath.

“For a price.”

I snort. And there it is. There's a price for everything on Ra'Vaga, and I can never afford it. This place is full of smugglers, exiles, and war deserters drinking themselves to death. You'd be hard-pressed to find a soul out here with a charitable bone in their body. For the most part, it's populated by the Gak, a species with lots of bones to spare and nothing to hide them.

“Unless you have a trade in mind that doesn't involve credits, I'm going to pass on that,” I say.

He harumphs, not pleased but not willing to give up on getting something out of me. Thankfully, no gross requests occur to him. I spent a short stretch of time in captivity, fearing for my body and whether the looming threats of abuse would become reality. The universe has been good to me because the Gak find no interest in my body. In fact, I swear one of them shuddered once when my zipper broke and revealed my cleavage to the whole bar.

“Got any good information?”

“About what?” I can count on one hand the number of ships that have stopped here. Hence why I've been stranded.

“The war? Wiruu's business?”

I wrack my brain, because I would sell any useless scrap of information for a chance to not be on my hands and knees tonight scrubbing. Either that, or I'll be fashioning a wringing mop out of rags. But my boss Wiruu tends to be clever enough to know when and when not to have private conversations. He runs this sorry excuse for a town and keeps an iron grip on his secrets. As for the war, no one who finds themselves on Ra'Vaga has up-to-date info. Ironically, the disillusioned soldiers from the front lines have the least information of all.

“I got nothing,” I tell him.

“The day's not over yet.” He bids me a friendly signal before I return to the bar.

This rock sits squarely in no-man's-land between the border of the Azza Empire and what was once the territory of Kar'Kal. But the planet of Kar'Kal was wiped of its inhabitants long before I left Earth. Now the Alliance is beating against the Azza's massive borderlands in an attempt to keep them from making progress with landing on the surface of Kar'Kal. If the Azza took control of Kar'Kal's planetary defense weaponry, there's no telling what they might do. Ra'Vaga's the closest thing to nearby civilization to them, and many of those that inhabit this outlaw town worry that we will become the first test target. The permanent denizens of Ra'Vaga have seen the borders shift many times as the security net that guards the entrance to the Azza Empire flexes further and further out. They say there was a time when they could see the drones and their glowing strands of sensors in the dark sky above.

I didn't know much about this conflict before I boarded a spaceship and left the Milky Way. I learned all the details since coming to Ra'Vaga. The 'Sector 5 Wars' had been background noise, something they talked about on the news that had very little to do with me. My father brought it up when I announced I was joining one of the first production crews to film in space. Maybe I should've listened to his concerns. I told him, "Oh, we won't be anywhere near there." The admins assured us there was nothing to worry about.

They were wrong.

Our ship was attacked by pirates, and unfortunately, I was among their spoils.

I was woken up from a deep sleep and crawled out of what I now know is a stasis pod. The bounty hunters that had me were arguing over what to do with me. Before I even understood what was happening, they had abandoned me on a floating fuel station in the Azza Empire. They took the stasis pod with them, determining it more valuable and less of a liability than I was.

I later learned that the Azza government had put out a call for human slaves. They were willing to pay big bucks, and every lowlife scrambled to fulfill the request... only to have

the call dropped without explanation weeks later. My mother used to say everything happens for a reason. I can't even pretend to believe that now.

Just when I think I'm going to have the peace and quiet I need to attack the mopping bot with a couple of engineering tools and sheer willpower, my boss waltzes through the back door and signals that he wants to speak with me.

He is a Gak of considerable size, rumored to be ferocious in battle by the many crew that serve him with dogged loyalty. Like many of the former soldiers around here, he wears a ceremonial throat covering that protects the 'gullet' all Gak consider their most vulnerable body part. I've learned that his yellow hair is a sign of his more advanced age. While most of these skeletal beings have white, peach, or silver hair that begins on the crown of their skulls and falls behind their ears, Wiruu's once snowy locks have turned the color of corn.

Wiruu is not just my boss, unfortunately. He's also my landlord, my meal ticket, and the reason I'm not still on that fuel station starving to death and clinging to the warm side of the generators to stave off the shivering. I wish I could say he saved me out of the goodness of his heart, but he doesn't have one. He did take pity on me, but he also charged me for the cost of my transport, the use of his med-bot, the clothes on my back, and all the other little things I needed to start a life.

He surmised that the aliens who picked me up were amateurs without the connections or funding to "sell me at the proper market". Humans were only worth transporting if you could get them to an auction where bipedal, sexually compatible species with deep pockets were looking for pleasure slaves.

I toss my tools and join him in the private hallway that acts as both a storeroom and access to the rest of Wiruu's massive fort.

"I have good news for you, meaty one." When Wiruu grins, it gives me the shivers. His teeth are particularly huge, and due to some weird cult he used to be a part of, they're filed to sharp points.

The last time he had good news for me, it was an opportunity to earn a handful of credits by wiggling into a tight, slimy wall cavity where someone had dropped their key fob.

“Okay...” I brace myself.

“You know I care for you and wish for you to thrive in this life.”

That statement is suspect, but I ignore it, waiting for the news.

“I believe your chance to leave Ra’Vaga is arriving here imminently. I know how you have hoped for an opportunity to re-enter Alliance territory.”

“Yes,” I confirm, holding my breath. The few times that a ship has arrived here for business with Wiruu, he has advised me to stay hidden in my room. I didn’t know what to do other than to take him at his word, even if I couldn’t trust the man as far as I could throw him. Greedy and scheming as he is, he seems to have some twisted sense of ethics. They say ‘out of the frying pan and into the fire’ for a reason. If I ignored his advice and threw myself on any ship that landed here, I feared I would find myself a much worse fate.

“I’ve been asked by a contact of mine for permission to land here and hold a clandestine meeting on our little piece of comm dead zone paradise,” he announces. “They’re meeting with a group that includes a diplomat that functions on the edge of Alliance territory. I don’t see why you couldn’t manage a deal with them to travel.”

My nails dig deep into my palms. Our lack of connection to the communications systems that the rest of modern civilization possesses is yet another reason why I haven’t made progress with leaving this place.

“You’re sure they would take me? And you think these people are trustworthy?”

He shrugs. “The Kar’Kali are an anti-slavery crowd. They’ve called the Azza enemies for centuries now. The only trouble is that I’ve had no notice. So if you want to leave,

you'll have to make good on your debts with me before you run along out of here."

As expected, the good news comes weighted with strings.

"When are they arriving here?"

"Tonight. I had the accountant draw up a human language translated bill for you."

He hands me a crisp sheet of paper, an alien kind that feels like laminated cardstock. A neat tally of my charges is listed in glowing text. In the top corner, he's even noted the different currencies that commonly circulate Ra'Vaga, a combination of real money and Wiruu's gambling chips and meal vouchers. The interest rate and the original cost of transporting me are the real kickers. I try not to think about how he never went out of his way to get me. In reality, transporting me cost him nothing.

"I won't squabble with you over change, so if you put up a round figure that comes close, I'll call us square."

I run the mental calculations and come to the conclusion that I'm absolutely fucked.

"How am I supposed to get all that in a day? Is it possible I could send it to you after I—"

"I wouldn't even consider it!" He gnashes his pointy teeth. "There are ways to make money around these parts. Either figure it out, or you'll be doing shifts for another few turns. Rule one of seeing your debts paid is not to let your debtor off your radar, my dear!"

The thought of spending more years in this forgotten hellhole sparks nausea in my belly. They call years 'turns' because that's the language translation that comes through the chip in my head. But we aren't turning at all. There's no sun and no moon on Ra'Vaga. Seasons don't exist here, and time slides away without any change.

"Isn't there anything around here you would pay me extra for?"

“Not my problem. Convince one of the others to give you some shifts.”

“Alright, I get it. My problem,” I sigh, preparing to take my leave. I’d better get a head start on begging people for even the shittiest of tasks.

“There’s another way, but I’m not sure you will like the idea.”

I whip around. “What?”

“My contact is a wealthy male, a king to his people, and the head of a flourishing pirate fleet. This king and his warriors... They are meaty like you. Muscly, hairy-headed things hiding their teeth all the time. And they have weird blinking lids on their eyes—”

“Get to the point,” I grumble.

“I assume they’ll find the squishy meat on your bones appealing,” he says with a shrug. “Sell your body for a night or two, and you could easily make up my debt plus extra.”

“Cool. Cool. Your advice is to prostitute myself? Great idea.”

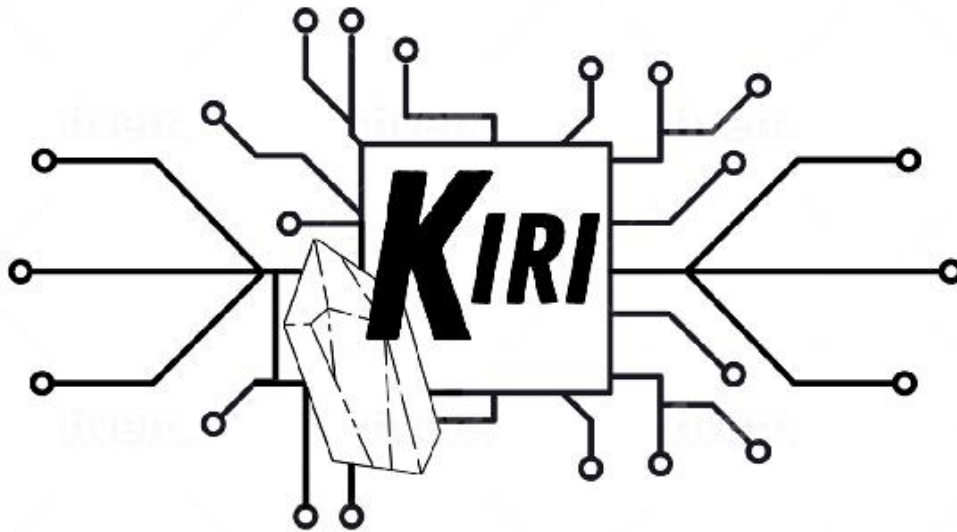
“Exactly,” he says proudly, missing my dismal tone entirely.

“Thanks a lot.” I stomp toward the door.

“My pleasure!” He shouts back. He’ll be no help at all. I’m bone-tired from the non-stop work I do here, but even more, I’m tired of my sarcasm being misunderstood. If I start earning money now, maybe I won’t have to put my ‘meat’ on the offering table.

But if it comes to that, I’ll do it.

If it gets me out of here, I’ll do anything.



NOT LONG AFTER the tragedy that befell my species, I was suffocating in silence at this embassy. It was one day of meditation and training after the other, devoid of any visitors. Keeping my presence here a secret had been paramount. For a brief period, I did not even risk venturing to the public markets for fear that Azza agents could reach me there and snuff me out like they had every one of my fellow warriors.

I remind myself of this when the current state of chaos starts to get to me. Now, I cannot even walk down a hall without encountering five different people. I had once worried I was the only Kar’Kali left alive. Now, I live among a hive of my own kind mixed with the loud human females and some of their children.

No, I will not complain about it. It is welcome compared to my time of unbearable loneliness.

But I do seek out a moment of solitude here and there so that my sanity does not slip away. I am lucky to have a large private residence set apart from the rest of the community.

However, chaos has come knocking at my door in the form of one Jen Marsden.

“Hi Kiri,” she says in a sweet voice that sounds nothing like her usual direct tone. This small human is not to be trusted



when she is pretending to be kind and innocent. She has her Kar’Kali hybrid infant draped over her shoulder.

“I am beginning to think that when you approach me with this expression, you want me to do something for you,” I say, pushing the door open to welcome her into my apartment.

“What expression?” She blinks her big green eyes at me.

“A smile.”

She snorts out laughter. “Are you telling me I don’t smile at you enough?”

“You must now reveal what ulterior motive you have for visiting me,” I tell her, folding my arms over my chest.

“I need a babysitter,” she sighs.

“Babysitter?” I repeat this odd phrase. “One can only assume this does not mean I sit on your baby.”

“Oh, Kiri...” She shakes a finger at me. “This is why you’re my favorite.”

I narrow my eyes at her. I have learned that she responds well to a cold glare. It is the equivalent of throwing your arms out to make yourself large while facing down a predator in the wilds of my home planet.

“I want you to stay with Danica for a few hours while I take a meeting,” she says.

“The baby?”

“Obviously!”

“Jen, I am not remotely qualified for such a thing,” I tell her. “There are countless other able and willing life-forms in this building, are there not?”

“Look, don’t you think I would have considered the options? Should I go down the list? Ella’s been prescribed bedrest. Hence Kila is not available because he’s enforcing said bedrest... Half the embassy is off the clock for whatever Vansk festival it is this week... Pakka has a meeting that was scheduled at the last minute—”

I hold up my hand. “Yes, yes, I realize I should have known you would have exhausted all the alternatives before asking me.”

“Okay, great, thanks!” She dumps the tiny bundle into my arms before I can even think to prepare myself. The child is fragile, almost weightless. Danica’s delicate head rests on the crook of my elbow awkwardly, and she gurgles in response to my inadequate hold.

“Support her head,” Jen directs me as I painstakingly adjust the child in my arms. “Gentle ... yeah, there you go.”

“I did not officially agree to this!” I protest, but I do not dare move. The child is squishing up its face as if considering whether to start screaming or not. I have heard her scream, and I would not like it to start just now. “Why are you taking meetings days after birthing? Should you not be in some state of domestic ... maternal ... ritual?”

“Shut up now before I decapitate you,” she replies with the same false sweetness she started off with. “Women do not cease all non-mommy pursuits just because they pushed a human out of their vaginal canal, okay? Jesus Christ, you can take the alien out of patriarchy, but ya can’t take the patriarchy out of the alien, huh?”

“I do not know what you are saying, but before you leave me stranded with the child, I beg you give me some instruction because I cannot guarantee her chances of survival if you do not make every detail of keeping her alive quite clear.”

She rolls her eyes up toward the ceiling and tosses her shoulder bag onto my lounge chair.

“If she cries, there are a few things you can do. Change her dirty diaper, feed her, entertain her, or rock her to sleep. Diapers and bottles are in the bag. I’m leaving my stroller in the hall if you want it. Have fun. Gotta go.” She turns to leave even as I’m sputtering with unsaid follow-up questions.

“Jen, wait!” I cry. “This is entirely inadvisable! Your directions are insufficient!”

“You’re a natural!” Jen calls over her shoulder. “You won’t even notice I’m gone.”

I consider the worst-case scenario. If I fail to sustain the life of his child, Pakka will surely end my life. I sincerely hope that Jen has a very quick meeting. I debate whether I should stay still as a statue for the entire time, or immediately make my way to a place in the building where I might encounter another person willing to assist me in this endeavor.

I glance down at her. She is surprisingly calm considering her life has been placed in the hands of an entirely unfit parental unit. My scores on the “training younglings” portion of the skills placement test were dismal. It used to be that I had never laid eyes on a youngling below the age of ten passings aside from pictures in biological study articles. Now that the Kar’Kali world is changing, I have met three infants. All three happened to be females, but when Ella has her birth, there will be a fourth, and it will be a male. The first was another hybrid born on Earth of a Kar’Kali-Human union. She is named Evelyn, the child of Kiva and his mate Maxine. Their newly formed familial unit has since moved to Station City to join Mori at his laboratory. The second was of full Kar’Kali blood, the child of Ara and Makko. They keep to themselves and have been advised to stay here under heavy guard. At this time, their child is the only future for Kar’Kal. After conducting some research with the help of Kiva’s encyclopedic knowledge of Archaic history, Ara and Makko chose to name their child Yennmara Bi’Makko. The traditions of our past paid tribute to parental units via the chosen surname, not unlike human traditions. The first name aptly translates to ‘singularity,’ which Ara termed to be mathematically poetic.

I have been asked by various colleagues how I feel about the possibility that any encounter with a human could mean that I, too, will gain myself a mate. I do not see the need to fret over it. The expectation for me from birth has always been that duty comes before self. At one time, that duty was to win a war, and that has not changed. But to have a mate in a world where our population dwindles means that my duty now includes procreation.

The delirious level of happiness that the mated couples possess is something that has always made me curious. Have I not also been relieved of the emotionally suppressant drug that was once pumped through me via the chip in my head? I have felt more internally in the last passing than I have for all the rest of my life. And yet I still cannot reach the dissatisfaction I feel inside, that is burning a hole in my stomach. Strive as I might to give myself a new purpose, I cannot banish that anxious weight.

Would a human female somehow chase it away?

The Alliance seems invested in the combination, perhaps because the humans are their subjects, and they think it will give them some sway with us. That greedy and bloated bureaucracy will always see their decisions as stepping stones to gather more power and resources. They have always wanted Kar'Kal to be a member of their conglomeration. It will never happen under mine or Pakka's watch.

“Do you realize your mere existence is a highly political matter?” I ask the child.

Danica gurgles at me.

“I imagine your life will not be easy,” I tell her. “But I must admit, I am glad for your existence.”

She does something with her face that comes very close to smiling, so I smile back at her. My insides flutter, the strangest sensation I've felt yet since the removal of my hormone suppressant. The Earth team discovered that our chips did not only house the technology meant to suppress *kali* spikes, but it also apparently held emotion-dulling drugs. As a result, my reactions to the world around me have changed. And this feeling of connection to an infant is likely just what the ruling generals meant to avoid.

Joy. Attachment. Wonder, at her tiny life in my hands. This feeling goes against everything I once represented as the ambassador of Vanskiikii. I once attended Vansk events with a sense of dread for how boring it would be because everyone on this planet likes to talk about children and dancing and

romantic entanglements. I used to cringe at all the gossip, the flirting, the doting over their fuzzy little cubs.

I look at Danica and think she is quite something to be proud of. She is a beautiful little thing with black hair like Pakka and green eyes like Jen. Kar’Kali don’t have green eyes, so it strikes me as strange to see them peering out from her pale silvery skin. My heart is filling with a cross between happiness and sadness.

Because I... desire a clone of my own? A tiny Kiri?

Shaking the strange yearning feeling, I take inventory of the equipment Jen has left for me.

“This will be interesting,” I tell Danica.

I place her gently in her carrier and tote her to my desk. I pass the day with her, curiously finding the time enriched by her interruptions. Every so often, I must stop to pay her attention. Aside from the hazardous struggle of changing her dirtied diaper, it is not so miserable at all. Now, I cannot imagine having to do this on an everyday cycle for passings at a time, but I surprise myself with my effectiveness at caring for her.

I am making slow headway dictating a memo verbally while I bounce Danica on my lap when her father finally arrives at my apartment.

“Sorry I did not hail you or knock. I was not sure whether she would be awake, and I would not dare to disturb her slumber,” he explains as he enters my private office.

“Understandable course of action,” I agree, offering her to him. Her chubby arms and legs flail in excitement at the sight of her progenitor.

Pakka takes his daughter from my arms and smiles at her, but it does not look natural. Something wears on his mind.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I received the response from our Deviant brethren.”

I nod. Danica looks more at ease in her father’s arms than she has all day with me.

“And?” I prompt him.

“They refuse to send their delegation here to Vanskiikii.”

I am not surprised. They have valid reasons to question their safety on a planet with such strong ties to Kar’Kal. And after what Vala told us about the ways our government has mistreated them in the recent past, they will not trust us anytime soon.

“Where do they propose we meet? If they look to make treaties or military plans, we cannot conduct the talks virtually. There is no way to guarantee absolutely secure connections.”

“I proposed Alliance territory. I proposed the Rathe System. They were not amenable to either, claiming that they do not trust the Alliance any more than the Vansk not to look the other way if we murder them. As for Rathe, they worry about Azza spies. They proposed other principalities that they have bonds with, but those smaller systems are hardly more secure than Rathe. Any other neutral location is too far to travel.”

The Rathe System is neutral in the war, and therefore all Azza citizens have easy access to their borders. There are a number of other neutral planets and various governments that remain unaffiliated with the Alliance

“I understand the concern,” I say, “but what is the alternative? They will not want to meet in mid-space either!”

“No.” Pakka rocks Danica gently, and she finally looks ready to sleep. “They want to meet on Ra’Vaga.”

A lawless rock.

“How are we to know we are not walking into a trap ourselves in that case?” I ask, knowing that the pirates and criminals that make their home on Ra’Vaga have no love in their heart for the Kar’Kali who have regularly tried to clear them out over the passings.

“We do not.”

“And you wish to take them up on this offer?”

“I am not certain we have a choice.”

“Who do they plan on sending as their representative then?”

“The Ka’lakka. Their king himself will meet us, along with his chosen guards.”

It is a positive sign that he is coming to represent himself. There are many instances in diplomacy where one might request a meeting with a head of state, get approved, and then find themselves speaking to their messenger or their second-in-command.

“And you are certain you want to pursue this alliance? We do not have to do this, you know. We can continue as we are now and look to new solutions when our population begins to grow.” Pakka and I have discussed this time and time again, combing through our intelligence papers and consulting with all living Kar’Kali warriors for their opinions.

“I am certain,” he says. I catch the glance down to Danica, as he soothes her in his arms. “Our planet is empty. The Alliance is blazing a hole in Sector 4. All strategists agree. The time to strike is now, and we cannot make a stand without the Deviant forces.”

“To Ra’Vaga we go,” I conclude.

“I want you to head the meeting. This is far too important a conversation for me to begin learning the ways of leadership.”

“What do you mean?” I ask. “You have been in leadership for a long while.”

“I have not been the representative of our entire race before,” he says with a sigh. “The mating call might have cooled its control over me, but it still responds to perceived threats and hypes my more violent tendencies. I am relying on you to keep me steady. Besides, this king might be young, but he has lived his entire life as king while I have been a soldier taking orders for the majority of mine. Diplomacy is your strong suit. We cannot appear weak in his eyes.”

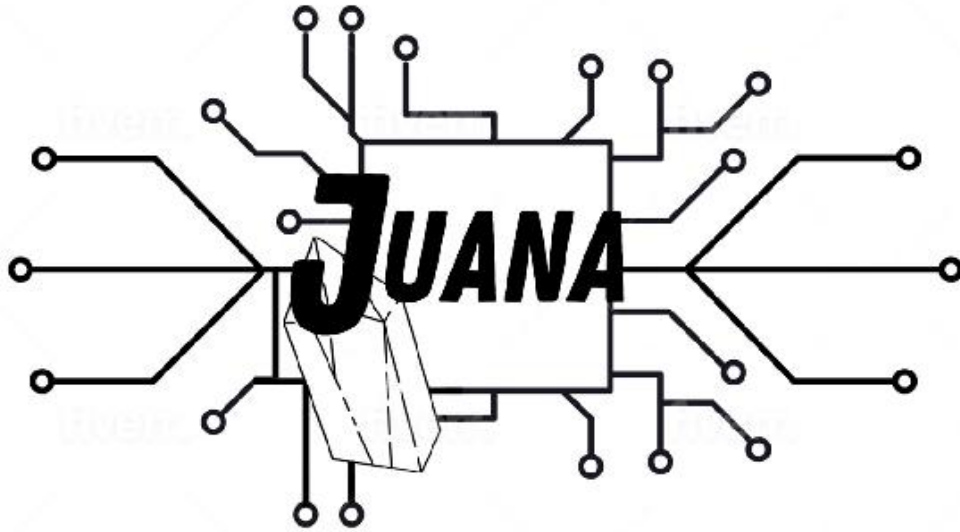
His regard for me is flattering, but I am not sure that my duties prior to the genocide qualify me for parlaying with a king. I was more likely to host military leaders at the embassy,

reinforce the image of Kar'Kali support at Vansk events, or act as a proponent of the Sector 5 wars when budget talks came around.

But I cannot fail him.

There might be no reason why I survived when other Kar'Kali did not, but I will make myself worthy of it, whether I feel worthy or not.





THE FIRST CREDITS I pick up are easy. After my morning shift is complete, I tell Granguu the big news about these Kar’Kali visitors and make him cough up cash for the gossip instead of fixing the mop bot. The floor can go a day or two without a mopping before Wiruu notices I’m slacking. And if I’m gone from here by then? Well, the mopping bot will not matter anymore at all. Granguu is thrilled because he seems to think that if he hangs around Wiruu in the meantime, he’ll get chosen to be on the greeting party crew. That would mean extra drinks and perhaps a bonus for him.

I squeeze an extra shift out of one of my coworkers for later this evening. Working will leave me clocking out just before the daytime lights around town are faded to night mode. By then, I’ll either have enough to pay Wiruu, or I’ll end up trying to charm one of these fellow ‘meatbags’ into paying for a night with me. I don’t even think about the prospect for now. I laser-focus on maximizing my earnings. Although I’ve never crunched the numbers, the days on Ra’Vaga (dictated by the light posts around town) are much longer than twenty-four Earth hours. It’s based on the Gak’s home planet, which means I usually take a siesta to nap. I learned the hard way that my body couldn’t handle following the Gak schedule on repeat.

There will be no breaks for me today, though. So I march straight down to the seedier side of town. Outside of the

complex that Wiruu has built for himself, most others live and run businesses out of tents and dirty pits. There's no road, and the light posts only go so far, leaving many in a perpetual darkness. I tend to avoid the area because Wiruu's protections over me as an employee that lives in his fort only mean so much to certain Ra'Vaga citizens.

My main purpose here is to liquidate the meal tickets I've earned. They might not be worth much, but I'll make out better bartering them for cash down at the tent city than I will by returning them directly to Wiruu.

While there, I swing by the den of a very creepy associate of Wiruu's. He's the kind of guy you avoid because his entire aura could give anyone goosebumps. But word on the street is that he'll pay for blood, hair, and nails.

*Ugh.* I promised myself I wouldn't resort to it unless I was completely desperate, but right now... I am.

He breathes heavily with excitement when I sit down in his lair to contribute my genetic material for a buck. It only takes a few minutes, and I score a handful of chips in exchange for some minor dizziness and a weird feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Once I have the energy to get up without sparkly lights behind my eyes, I head straight for the one place I know I can count on a free hot meal and some comforting conversation.

One of the few females on Ra'Vaga has become my only companion. Her name is Onduu, and she is the only person I can trust here. The other females are former soldiers, and they're just like all the men, hardened and wily. I temporarily made the mistake of thinking that female patrons of the bar might treat me better. But then one of them smashed my knuckles for accidentally shorting her change while I was still learning how to tell the difference between one-cred and ten-cred pieces. Onduu is not a soldier or a criminal, but she grew up here, an abandoned child half-raised by Wiruu and half by the streets. She had my job at the bar years ago, and she showed me how to bind my hand with a homemade salve to heal the painful breaks. She told me that she never trusted

species with their bones hidden away before me. She commands respect around here, partly because Wiruu favors her and partly because she's the only cook around worth buying food from. She started out selling lunches at the bar made from the scraps—bread made with the spelt of the home-brewed hooch and meat pies that I'd rather not ask about the contents of. Then she made enough money to pay Wiruu off for what he'd done for her and start her own storefront. She's a survivor through and through. I wish I was more like her. Then maybe I wouldn't be so screwed. If I had her talents... her grit... maybe then I wouldn't have to scramble.

Whenever I walk into her shop, she insists that I eat something, but I try not to take advantage of her charity too often because I know that every scrap of ingredients costs her. Today, I think I'll be licking the bowl clean.

Time is money, and she's on the other end of town, so I speed-walk, not willing to waste a moment.

“Sweet Starlight, you look all wet on your face! What's got you so worked up?” She rolls down the metal shutter that keeps her stall locked up at night and hangs a sign with a clock that indicates her return time.

“I've got a chance to get home,” I tell her when I've stopped panting. “Quick, has anyone come by today that might pay me for some minor work?”

Her eyeballs twitch, a creepy tick that I've learned is like blinking for her kind.

“Back to Airth?” She pulls a hot pie out of her oven and places it in front of me.

It's a steamy, dumpling-shaped bun made of pink dough and filled with her famous, well-spiced mixture of roots, meat, and thick gravy. Onduu knows I prefer her pink pies, the kind made without the funky flavor of Gak liquor spelt. My appetite makes me dig in immediately, regardless of the molten hot temperature.

“Well, maybe not all the way to Earth, but closer. If I get into the Alliance territory, I'm sure someone could help me get

the rest of the way. A... consulate or something!”

She chatters her teeth. “You’re going to pay Wiruu back, right? It won’t end well if you don’t.”

“I know. That’s what I need the money for. He thinks the Kar’Kali will take me for free.”

“Kar’Kali?”

“Oh, right,” I mutter, remembering she has no idea what I’m talking about. I’m so frantic I’ve forgotten I need to fill her in on the details. Between bites of the pie, I quickly rattle off a summary of what happened today and everything that Wiruu had to say about it.

“And what are your feelings on the part about selling your body?” she asks, concern building in her eyes.

“It doesn’t matter what it comes to. I’m getting out of here.”

“I’m grateful I never had to resort to it, and I had plenty of offers around here. But I know the temptation there. It seems like an easy way out, but I was always afraid of the unseen cost. There are prices for everything here, and some of them do not emerge until the deal is done.”

I know what price she refers to, but I can’t let that stand between me and freedom. I believe what she says about the offers. The way the males wag their jaws at her, you’d think they’d fly off the hinges. I’m not sure what the prerequisites are, but she’s apparently quite beautiful by their standards.

“I don’t have much choice. That’s even assuming he’s right about them wanting me.”

A nod. We understand each other. She’s the only thing I’ll miss when I get out of here.

She taps her sharp knuckles on the counter. “Go to the shack that belongs to Harkkit and his mate. He has been saying he’s exhausted. Offer to watch the children in exchange for powdered root milk.”

“Then what? I don’t have time to barter because Wiruu will laugh me out if I try to pay him with root milk.”

“I’ll pay you for it. I know you won’t take a handout from me.” She grins. “This way, we both get what we need.”

“Onduu,” I sigh. Rushing emotions threaten to bring tears to my eyes. “What would I do without you?”

“Don’t hug me now,” she says, squeezing my hand. My laugh helps to keep the crying at bay. The Gak don’t like physical touch from meatbags like me. It creeps them out just as much as their eye twitches creep me out. “Go and get what you need. I’ll still be here for a few intervals to prepare for tomorrow. I’ll need that powder soon.”

I rush out to do what she suggests. Harkkit isn’t a fan of mine, but he’s desperate for a break from his children. He tries to short me, but I press him for more of the powdered milk by pointing out that I’m doing it for Onduu’s benefit. I leave out the bit about her paying me.

Every time I lie and manipulate in this place, I feel a part of the real me slip away. Even the whitest lies take from you. I was taught to always carry myself with pride and not stoop to the levels of other people. That’s the Navarro family way. But here on Ra’Vaga, it’s not an option to always do the right thing. It makes me wonder... if I ever got back to Earth, would I even recognize myself? I grew up in Los Angeles. I used to think that if I didn’t get eaten alive there, I could make it anywhere. Now I’m not so sure. To go from a respected position at a major production company to this? Sometimes it feels like I’m trapped in a strange nightmare world.

I consider Onduu’s words as I make my way back to Wiruu’s complex with my earnings tucked safely in the band I tie around my chest for support. I know she’s right about what it takes to sell your body for money. I imagine going home and being safe in my mother’s embrace, but never willing to tell her what I did to make it happen. The consequences ultimately don’t matter. I would trade anything just to set foot on Earth again.

If I can make enough money serving drinks, I might avoid that fate. I’ll remember what it feels like to flirt and put on a nice smile for extra tips from the Kar’Kali that should be

arriving during my shift. I haven't done it since graduating college and getting my first full-time job, but serving drinks comes as second nature to me now. All my mental focus can be on charming some random aliens out of their extra coin. The rest is down to muscle memory.

I'm nearly jogging to make it back before my shift begins at the bar, but I slow down for a break, and to wipe the sweat pouring from my forehead. It's hotter near the center of town where the temperature control stations rattle away. If they weren't running, this place would be cold as ice.

I never appreciated the hot California sun enough. Now I look up and see nothing, just a scattering of distant stars. The warmth here never feels natural. The air is still, and I find myself yearning for the Santa Ana winds that I once cursed for decorating the front yard in trash and breaking my wind chimes. The Santa Anas make themselves a reputation for bad tempers and bad luck, but without a breeze to be found in Ra'Vaga, I think back on them fondly. I want to feel the battering of dusty wind one more time.

A voice calls my name.

"Hey, Navarro!" The patrons of the bar use surnames, so I know it's someone who only knows me as a server.

A Gak named Riu leans against the wall of the alleyway that leads to Wiruu's bar entrance. It's the only way to access it from outside of Wiruu's complex, so I get the creeping suspicion he's been waiting here for me. Riu's not someone I make a habit of chatting with. He's a gambler, and he's been on Wiruu's bad side more than once. I've seen him get kicked out of the bar while I was on shift, and I'd rather not associate with the guy.

"Heard you were looking for extra work," he says.

I hesitate.

"You got a job I could do?"

"Sure." He approaches me, and my instinct is to run, but I can't afford not to consider whatever he's going to offer up.

“Whatever it is will have to wait until my shift’s done,” I say.

“Come here,” he says softly, nodding at the streets. No one’s around, but that doesn’t mean no one’s listening. There are windows open and occasional passersby. “It’s not something I’d like to advertise.”

“Are you about to waste my time?” I snap, clenching my fist and not moving an inch in his direction.

He launches at me and pushes me so hard against the wall that my head slaps the metal.

“Ouch, what the—” There’s a gun pressed against my belly.

“Give me your cash, meatbag.”

“Fuck you!” I spit at his eyeball. “I don’t have anything.”

The chilling sound of him grinding his teeth together is all I hear because my head is spinning.

“I know you do,” he growls. “Give it, or I open up your insides.”

“I gave it to Wiruu! I give all my money to him, and you should know he’ll be pissed if I tell him you—”

He jerks his elbow against my neck, nearly crushing my windpipe.

“All you disgusting meatbags are the same. Your face gets all twitchy when you lie.”

“Can’t. Breathe,” I choke out.

He lifts his bones off me, and I immediately crumple to the floor of the alley, sucking in air. When I can breathe again, I whip my head up to find the shooting end of his gun inches from the tip of my nose. It could be lacking a charge for all I know, but I don’t want to run the risk of a calling his bluff.

“Your money, Navarro.”

Someone scurries by on their way to the bar. I don’t catch who it is, but I’m not surprised when they don’t spare a single

glance at the ongoing robbery. People here mind their own business.

I bite down on my tongue, the stubborn part of me still ready to refuse him.

“I know you haven’t seen Wiruu today. I’ve been watching. Give me the money.”

I can’t die here.

With shaking hands, I unzip the front of my jumpsuit to access the band padded with money. His eyes are lighting up with excitement. I hand over a few of Wiruu’s chips that act as the most reliable currency here.

“All of it.”

I pull out one more chip. He raises the weapon, as if to pistol whip me.

“That’s it! That’s all I have!” I shout, turning my cheek. “Leave me alone. *Please.*”

Still not satisfied, he shoves me to the ground and tries to dig his boot into my neck. Squirring out of the way, I guard my face with my forearms, catching a hard kick. I try to crawl away and get to my feet, but he fires a blaster shot into the dirt next to my head. I’m glad I didn’t decide to test his mettle.

“That was a warning. Next one hits you.”

Panting and on my hands and knees, I dig out the majority of my remaining money and toss it as far as I can. He runs for it, his desperation showing as he chases down every chip. He must be finally satisfied because he scurries off without any further insults or violence. I’m left with only a few of the chips I earned today.

*At least he didn’t search me himself, I think. It’s my one remaining shred of gratitude to the universe. At least I’m alive.*

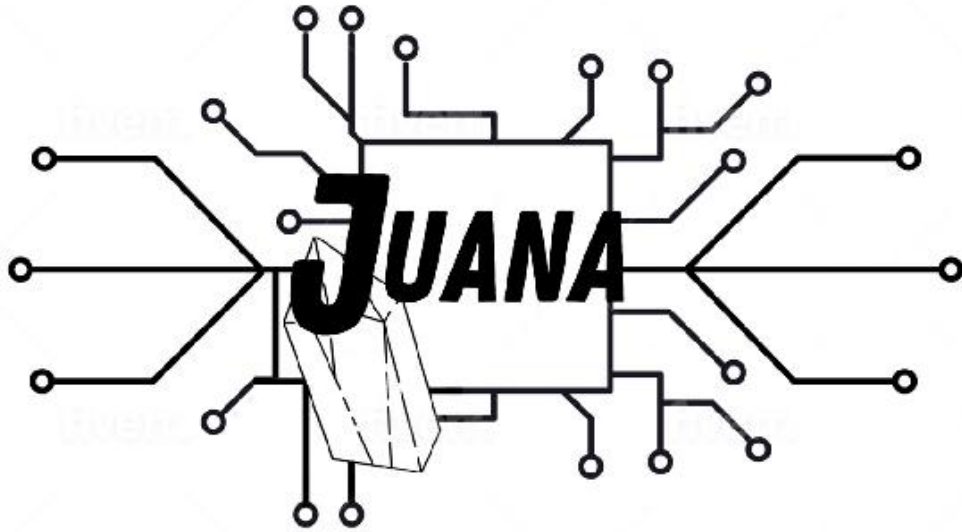
When Riu’s gone, I roll onto my back without a care for the extra coating of grime. I stare at the empty sky until my heart stops pounding from the adrenaline.



And I lay there, trying not to cry until someone from the bar comes out looking for me.

“Uh, Juana?” The big, strong Gak that works as a bouncer stops to stare down at me. “You know your shift started already.”

“Thanks,” I manage. “Help me up, will ya?”



ONDUU SHOWS up in the middle of my shift. I've been dissociating for a few hours to take the edge off getting choked out and robbed of everything I've been working towards. As soon as I see her approach the bar, emotions start bubbling up.

"I heard what happened!" she cries, pulling up a stool across from me.

I don't stop polishing the cup I'm holding.

"Oh? News spread that fast, huh?" I only told a few patrons and the bouncers about what happened. Gossip is this place's only form of entertainment.

"Riu won't show his face around here for cycles after that stunt." She's all riled up in anger for me. "I plan on personally rattling Wiruu's bones over the whole thing so he holds that toothless fool accountable!"

"Thanks," I sigh.

"Your wounds look awful." She shudders at the sight of my neck, which is turning red.

"So long as Riu pays his debt to Wiruu, he won't do anything about it," I say, slamming the cup onto the shelf with the others. "He knows any money Riu earns will go straight into his gambling den profits."

“He didn’t earn anything,” she scoffs. “But you might be right about that.”

“Think I can make enough money selling myself with this?” I ask, pointing at my neck. “It’ll only get worse. Might be purple soon.”

“Purple? That’s absolutely disgusting.” She taps the bar with the tips of her yellow nails. “I have some fabric. We could fashion you a neck covering. Do your kind have an aversion to wounds like this?”

“They might be meatbags, but they’re not my kind. So I don’t know for certain. But if they’re anything like humans, the injury won’t exactly help my desirability.”

Thankfully, Onduu doesn’t bring up her warnings about sex work again. She understands without discussing it that I’m going through with it now that I’ve lost the money I made.

“How much time do you have between this shift and the welcoming party?”

“I get off in time for the evening meal, and when Wiruu’s men are done eating, they’ll return here to receive these visitors. The plan is to hang around during the welcome party and find my John then, so I can meet them tonight after their big important meeting. Not much time, but I won’t be eating. Can’t afford to.” The closer it gets to the evening meal, the more crowded this bar will become. I’ll be exhausted before my night even begins.

“Don’t worry.” She gets up from her seat. “I’ll come back with everything we need to make you look irresistible.”

My shift wears on, and Onduu keeps her promise, arriving precisely at the start of the evening meal. The bar empties as Wiruu’s crew rushes for the best seats and the freshest plates of food at the cafeteria. I’m left to clean up on my own. I wince my way through it. It’s getting more difficult to ignore the pain throbbing in the places where Riu pummeled me. Onduu shows me some panels of decent fabric. There are signs of use, but it’s actually quite pretty. With her help, we fashion an outfit that will be more attractive than my jumpsuit. It’s

revealing, but Onduu twists and drapes the fabric over my body in such a way that disguises the places where bruises are forming.

I check my reflection in the two-way mirror wall panels through which Wiruu often spies on the happenings at the bar. Any Gak would shudder at the sight. I'm thinner than I've ever been, but some of my precious curves still remain. My midriff is bared, and my legs are displayed anytime I make the slightest movement. I try a seductive smile, but it looks stiff.

There's a lump in my throat at the realization that I hardly know who I'm looking at.

Onduu wishes me luck and disappears before the men arrive. The crew Wiruu has assembled for the greeting party begins filtering back in, including Granguu, who expresses his gratitude for my tipoff by bringing me a snack.

"I hope your meat display pays off for you, but it's making me nauseous," he comments with a leery glance at my belly button.

I slap his drink down in front of him.

"That's why meatbags have eyelids. So they can keep their eyeballs to themselves," I joke, earning a round of laughter from the gathered Gak.

A little eavesdropping reveals to me that the first visitors to arrive on Ra'Vaga were the Kar'Kali that the Gak call Deadheads. These are the emotionless soldiers who have stood between the Azza and the Alliance for centuries. Few of them remain in the galaxies, and Wiruu already told me they never pay for sex or even engage in the act.

"Freaks, the lot of them," he said when I expressed my confusion over that. "They don't even fuck each other! What's the point of living, then?"

Their ship landed far away from the marketplace and surrounding village. Wiruu runs the only landing pad; touching down there would have them surrounded by his crew. Instead, the Deadheads chose the highest ground on Ra'Vaga, the curved top of a wrecked ship. I've never seen anything

land on the massive hunk of metal. It had become a lump on the landscape, like a mountain that fades into the background of my life. They might have arrived first, but they haven't turned up at the bar yet.

We can hear the roaring sound of the next ship when it lands on Wiruu's deck. That will be the Deviant Kar'Kali, a divergence of the species that reportedly lives on the fringes of society, birthing their children on pirate ships for lack of their own planet. Wiruu was waiting to greet them personally, citing the fact that outlaws should stick together. In reality, Wiruu is sucking up to their king because, apparently, the man possesses a great deal of wealth and an armada he can assemble at the drop of a hat.

“Makiva thinks himself a king just because he's descended from one,” Granguu tells me, always ready to spill gossip. “But he's as royal as the bottom half of my spinal cord. He's a pirate king—every crown is made of stolen jewels.”

But as soon as the crowd of Deviant pirates are led into the bar by Wiruu and encouraged to drink at his expense, all the Gak's rude commentary about them goes silent. It's obvious why; these guys look intimidating as fuck.

Firstly, they are all huge. I've become used to being one of the smaller species around on Ra'Vaga, with the Gak usually falling in a six-foot to seven-foot range. But Gak are lean and willowy, like grim reapers. The shortest Kar'Kali pirate I see is about six feet tall, and the tallest is brushing his head against the eight-foot ceilings, no doubt collecting cobwebs. Their skin is silvery gray, with a hint of blue-toned iridescence catching in certain light. They are like humans with the saturation turned all the way down, gods made in stainless steel. My eyes are nearly shredded by the assault of exposed muscles, toned asses, and deliciously visible veins on corded arms. I hadn't thought about how long it's been since I kissed a man until precisely this moment.

They all strike me as surprisingly handsome men. Their hair colors range from a shiny blue-black, to charcoal, to silvery gray, and to teal blue. This pack of warriors is sporting guns, daggers, and armored air seals. They wear something of

a uniform, but they accessorize quite flamboyantly: braids with chains and ribbons, metallic woven jewelry, and all manner of straps, gloves, and buckles. I didn't have many expectations when Wiruu told me they were meatbags like me. I had hopes that if I was lucky, they would have two arms, two legs, and nothing weird going on with their dicks. I suppose that last part is still to be determined.

Strangely, while I'm ogling, at least half of the ten gathered men return my stare, which jolts me to attention. They notice me. Well, fuck. Obviously, they would... I'm the only thing in the room with flesh on my bones. I turn away, busying myself by pouring another drink. I should probably start working to room to find my target for the night, but I'm too intimidated.

I had plans to pull the old 'lie back and think of Hollywood' trick, but now I'm not so sure it'll be necessary.

There's no need to wonder which of them is the leader.

The king swaggers in with the look of royalty, despite Wiruu's disparaging comments. Teal blue braids are held back from his face with sparkling chains and an intricately metal woven breastplate that sets his armored air seal apart from the rest. This must be the famous Makiva.

"Drink, drink!" Wiruu encourages. "Those Deadheads will crawl out from their hiding place and turn up soon enough."

Granguu pokes my elbow. "You gonna seduce them or what?" he whispers. "Now's your chance."

I glance back at our alien visitors and find that one of them is headed straight for me. With the way a couple of his comrades are laughing, I wonder if they put him up to it.

"I'm not sure I have to do anything," I say, happy for the lack of required effort on my part. "They're coming for me."

The one approaching me now has an easy smile and shiny black hair pulled into a messy knot on his head.

"I would not expect to find such a pretty creature in such an ugly place," is the pirate's line when he marches up to me.

I mentally eviscerate my nerves and put on a smile.

“The Gak think I’m the ugly one,” I joke. I hold up my pitcher. “Would you like a drink?”

“Where did Wiruu find you?” he asks, pulling an empty mug from the table so that I can fill it.

“Dying from exposure on a fuel station.” When his drink is topped off, I leave my pitcher on the table and flick my hair over my shoulder.

“I’m glad you’re alright now,” he says, genuine concern passing over his expression. “I take it you don’t find many males that possess what it takes to please a female of your caliber around here.”

I lean closer to him. “Are you suggesting that you do? Because if you want to try me on, then you should know I charge for the honor of pleasing me.”

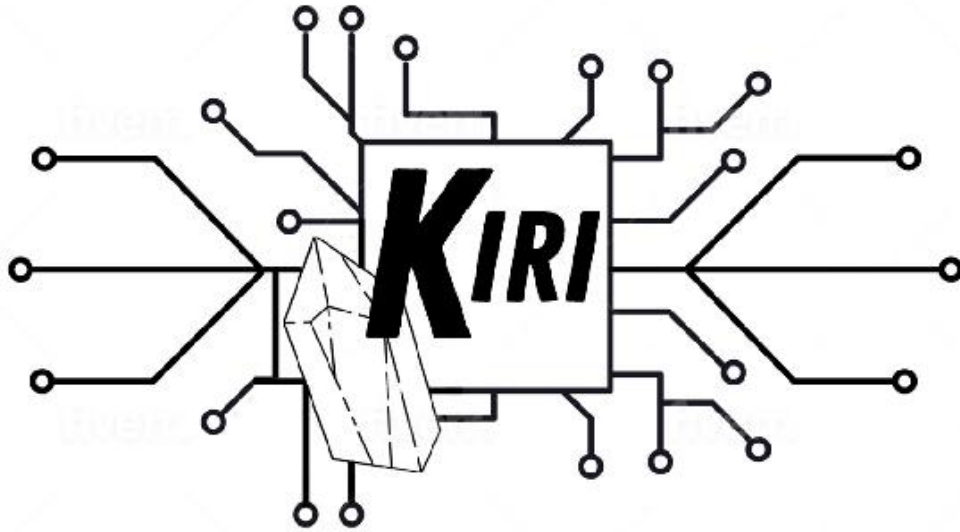
He grins. “While I feel I most certainly do, my friends and I had a certain plan in mind when we saw you. Care to consider it?”

“I hope you’re not insulted when I say I’m suspicious of what plans you and your friends thought up,” I drawl with sarcastic flatness.

He laughs.

“The name’s Viro,” he says. “And it’s nothing so unsavory. If you’re the kind of female that charges, then I think we’ll easily come to an understanding.”

“Juana,” I introduce myself. “You certainly have my curiosity. Should we talk it over someplace private?”



5

THE MISSION IS PROCEEDING ABOUT AS SMOOTHLY as we anticipated it would.

Which would mean that it is not proceeding smoothly at all.

While we were able to touch down on Ra’Vaga without issue, we arrived at the agreed-upon location to find that the king’s delegation was already drinking and carousing. There was a specified start time for our meeting, and we arrived early to account for any issue. But after taking a turn through the marketplace and stalling in the alleyway, we returned at the precise start time to find that none of the Deviant delegation had assembled.

Only the king awaited us in the private room. He greeted us promptly and with gracious manners, but then requested a delay to allow his warriors time to close their tabs at the bar and finish whatever nonsense they were getting up to.

“I would prefer to start promptly so that we can minimize our time spent here,” Pakka says.

“I won’t begin without my advisors,” the king says, so unconcerned by the late hour that he’s signaling for a drink from one of the servants assigned to attend our room. Just outside the door I can hear the laughter of his warriors, catch



snippets of their conversations. They do not sound like they are rushing to join us here.

“They are your warriors, are they not? Would you consider simply ordering them to attend to you now?” Pakka is trying to be diplomatic, but he is becoming irritated. I let him lead the conversation because I know the male perceives Pakka as our king.

The Deviant King gets a strange look on his face, something between laughter and anger. Trying to distinguish his emotions is as challenging now as it once was for me to read the emotions of the human females when they first arrived at the embassy. Pakka’s mate Jen exhibits a strange mixture of aggressive bluntness and saying the exact opposite of what she actually means.

“I could do that.” The male shrugs. Pakka seems momentarily relieved. “But I won’t.”

“Is this some ridiculous attempt to establish dominance by making us wait?” Pakka demands.

A chuckle of laughter in reply.

“Always assuming the worst of intentions,” he says. “No, I didn’t plan this. We had a trying campaign prior to this stop-off. They weren’t expecting to find any attractive species here, and I suppose they’re distracted by some beautiful serving girl that lives here.”

Situations like this bring to mind the conflicted feelings I have about our dead culture. At one time, I would have said with certainty that being distracted by sexual entanglements was the source of all Deviantkind’s problems. They left Kar’Kal because they could not give up their addiction to sex and the power struggles that go along with placing familial devotion above the state.

But things have changed so rapidly. Now I see Pakka’s family and the other warriors with their human mates every day. Now I have more detailed knowledge of what our government was doing to preserve what I now realize was a tenuous control over our population’s hormones and emotions.

I have a greater perspective on what it means to be a Deviant, and I still find it annoying to think a pack of warriors is immobilized by the sight of a pretty female.

“That female would probably prefer to be left alone,” Pakka points out.

This amuses the king. “So now that you have one Earth female for a mate, you think yourself an expert?”

“I have simply learned from Earth women that females do not like being propositioned romantically in the workplace.”

The Gak serving girl returns with his drink. She is all bones, the nest of thin hair on her skull the only feature resembling Kar’Kali appearances. The Gak have exposed teeth and eyeballs, and the chattering sound of their movements gives me the shivers. Even the hair is far too lacking to be considered normal by Kar’Kali or human standards. The whole species is frankly unsettling to look closely at, so I cannot imagine why his warriors are so interested in this other female.

“I don’t know what they are up to, but it can’t take overly long. I can assure you that all my warriors have honorable intentions.” He leans back in his seat and sips from the glass. “Relax if that’s possible for you. They’ll be here in a few moments.”

“I am curious to hear what campaigns you are involved with,” Pakka says. “Are you working with the Alliance?”

“The Alliance merely tolerates what chaos we create for their enemies. They attempt, like you are now, to make treaties and absorb us into their web, but I tend to avoid them.”

“I suppose you do not meet with them on Ra’Vaga,” I comment, glancing around and trying to imagine a stuffy bureaucrat arriving here.

“No,” the king provides, but does not add further information. He is choosing to keep many things a mystery to us, claiming it is due to the untrustworthiness of Deadheads like us.

A pregnant pause fills the room. I decide this awkward preamble cannot go on. We are one attempt at small talk away from unintentionally putting the target of our meeting in a bad mood.

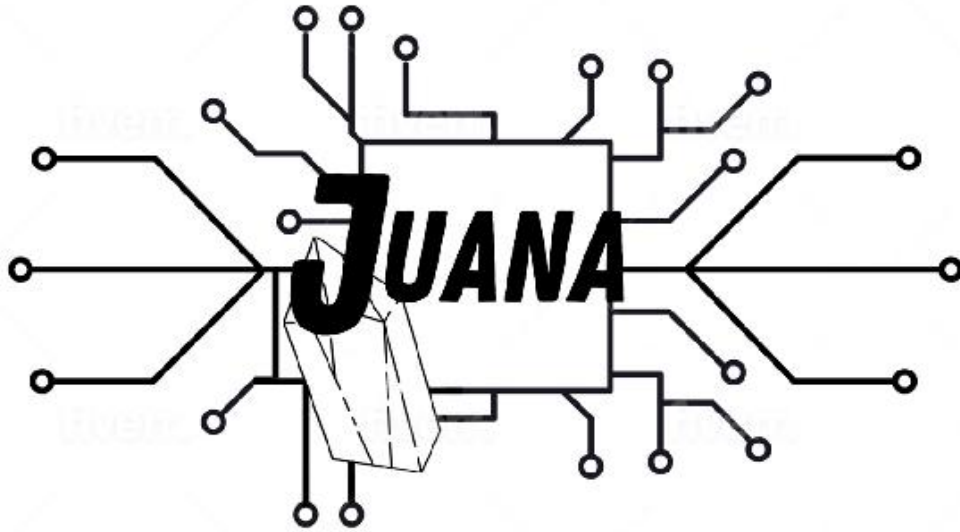
“Would you consider it an insult if I went to investigate what is keeping your soldiers so *entertained*?” I ask.

“Of course not,” he replies. “But you might prepare yourself for a little friendly joking from my males if you interrupt their fun. Go ahead, though. You might even learn something.”

*I know about friendly joking*, I think to myself irritably as I stand up. Human females love to play jokes. I have even learned how to make them laugh and banter with them.

“Now, you younglings play nice while I am busy,” I tell the two primary leaders of my entire race.

The king bursts into laughter as I leave them alone. I was flexing my abilities with comedy, but I truly hope I do not return to find them strangling each other to death.



6

I RUSTLE up confidence and boldly announce, “I don’t entertain groups.”

The Deviant Kar’Kali exchange amused glances but thankfully don’t laugh at me.

Viro assembled his buddies to meet me in the smoking room that Wiruu uses like a VIP booth. It’s equipped with comfortable seating and some hookah-like contraptions. Usually off-limits to the typical rabble that inhabits the bar, Wiruu has opened it up to impress the pirate king and his warriors. So I stand awkwardly in the center of the room and try to pretend like this isn’t my first time haggling over my prices.

“We’re not interested in hiring you for ourselves,” one of them pipes up. He’s the only one among them with cropped silver hair. His smile is a warm, charming one that suggests he never needed to hire a sex worker before. “We’re wondering if you’d perform a private dance for our captain and maybe even seduce him a bit.”

They all look at me expectantly.

Their captain. The one that I know is a king? But they don’t know that I know he’s a king.

I'm not sure I'm cut out for entertaining royalty, but I'm not going to let an opportunity pass me by.

"Certainly," I say, tossing my head in what I hope is a sultry way. "What does your captain like in a woman?"

"Dark-haired females. That's why you are perfect!"

A greedy thought occurs to me. I've been on Ra'Vaga for too long.

"If you want to reserve me for the whole night, you'll have to pay upon the assumption he will be having more than a dance," I claim, crossing my arms over my chest and letting the motions expose my cleavage.

The silver one that speaks on their behalf narrows his eyes. "We can pay you in full for the dance and then provide the rest when you leave his room in the morning. How about that?"

I shake my head. "No. I'm investing my time here, committing to staying in his room for the night. It cuts into time I might make my night's money in dances or other interested parties."

Little do they know there's not a soul on this rock who would touch me between the legs with a ten-foot pole.

"Give us a moment."

I nod, wearing my poker face of indifference.

They huddle by the door for a while, whispering to each other and counting their credits. I think I'm close to wearing them down. I can't overhear anything well enough to catch via the translator, only the subtle melodious sound of their language as they deliberate.

"We will agree to your terms. You should know that our captain is a gracious warrior and that if you please him, we're certain he'll tip you either in credits or jewels. The only request we have is to confirm that your blood is not red."

I laugh, but they don't change their own expressions.

"Go on," one of the dark-haired ones says. "Just a prick of blood will do."

“Is this an STD thing? Because I’m completely clean. Or are you just trying to mess with me?”

One by one, they start to look extremely confused.

“Human blood is always red,” I tell them. “I don’t know what it means to you, but I was born with red blood, and so is every other human.”

“I was told humans are compatible with Kar’Kali. There are Earth humans that mate-bonded to our kind.”

“I don’t know anything about that. I’ve been living here. I’d love to get back to Earth. But I have no idea what’s going on with my own planet right now.”

“But you aren’t mated to anyone, correct?” Viro asks.

“Obviously!”

“It isn’t obvious. Sex workers have relationships like anyone else.”

“Well, I don’t,” I sigh, suddenly feeling sheepish. This random alien soldier paying for sex is apparently on the moral high ground compared to me. “I swear it, okay? I swear if I had a mate, I wouldn’t be here right now.”

They exchange glances again. The way they silently communicate shows their intimacy with one another. They read each other like they’ve been together as a unit for years.

“We believe you. It’s a deal, then?”

Relief sweeps through me, but I know this won’t be over until I have the money in hand tomorrow morning for Wiruu.

Another Kar’Kali barges through the door, and he looks like he’s ready to raise hell. He takes one look at the scene and blows out an exasperated breath.

“Soldiers,” he addresses them sharply.

The males I’d been speaking with, previously so casual and friendly, straighten their backs and harden their eyes.

“I did not come here for leisure, and I don’t want to waste time.”

“He wouldn’t know leisure if it landed on his nose,” one of the others whispers, followed by a chuckle from his friends.

I get up on my toes to get a better look. The others are blocking me, but I can see it’s one of the ‘Deadheads’ by the way he’s dressed. He wears a form-fitting uniform that appears to have lightweight armor built in. Same species, but he couldn’t look more different from the swaggering crew of vagabonds. This man has an aura of seriousness. His hair is clean-cut and combed into place, nothing like Viro’s windswept look. Straight nose, harsh mouth, icy stare... I can see why these two cultures don’t get along.

“I’d like to get this discussion started, and your leader will not begin without you—”

“Yes, fine, we’ll be rutting done with this soon. Will you give us twenty taps?”

The man’s eyes finally land on me, making eye contact between the looming heads of the Deviants.

“Female, are you under duress?”

One of the pirates snorts. “She’s fine.”

The rigid soldier looks unconvinced.

“Um,” I murmur, “Are you gonna pay me or what?”

“Yes,” Viro says, “Look, we’ll give you half now and half after. Go up to Wiruu’s guest suite and w...”

He keeps on talking, but his voice fades to the back of my mind as I take notice of the Deadhead Kar’Kali. He’s taking his own notice of me. I’m captivated by the change coming over his face as he stares, eyes darting down to my partially exposed body. He’s flushing pink in an instant, a bead of sweat forming at the edge of his near hairline. His hands curl into fists, and his mouth falls open, forming an “o” of either horror or shock.

He pitches forward slightly to clutch his head and then growls low.

“Is that guy okay?” I cry, pointing out his sudden wave of illness. “He looks sick!”

“Rut me backwards.” One of them glances at me. “I think our deal’s going to be off, matebait.”

My heart stalls out. “What? But I thought—“

I had my chance to pay this debt torn from me yesterday, and I’m not ready to accept that defeat again.

“How dare you call her by that disrespectful moniker?” The Deadhead says. When he lifts his head, his eyes have turned black like a demon.

“You’ve done it now, Lanna.”

All at once, the Deviants back away from me. Like I’m about to burst into flames, they all put ample distance between us until they’re shouldering the walls of the tiny room.

“Can someone tell me what’s going on?”

“Watching a Deadhead turn red is messing with my mind,” one of the pirates comments.

Another starts to laugh as he says, “This meeting won’t start for intervals at this rate.”

“Look, I don’t know what’s going on, but if you’d just give me the down payment, I’ll go wait for your captain upstairs, and you can deal with... whatever this is.” I wave my hand at the soldier who’s growling low in his throat and handing out death glares to every alien in the room.

“You hired her for your *king*?” he snaps, addressing the closest Deviant to him. He looks like he’s ready to start swinging his fists.

“We’re not going to hire someone who’s mated. So if you’ll just relax, we’ll be on our way,” the one called Lanna speaks like he’s talking him off the edge of a bridge. “Stay with your mate for a moment, and we’ll let our liege and yours know about the new matebond.”

I’m too flabbergasted to come up with the right question. I need a million answers at once. They keep throwing around the word ‘mate’ in reference to me as if I personally know this soldier with the screws loose.



“Are you sure we should leave her in here with him?” one of them hisses. “The Deadhead can’t even handle a dose of *amma’ka*.”

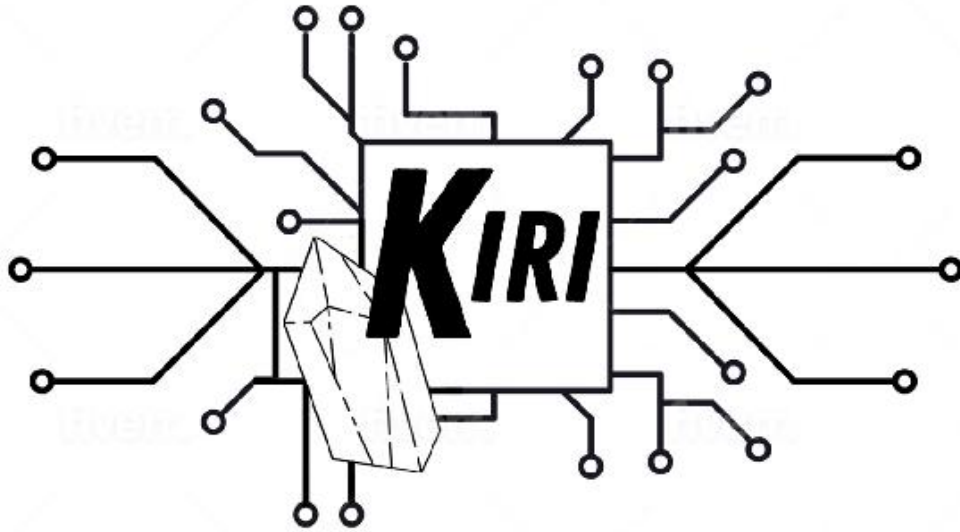
“They’ll be fine. Like it or not, it’s the same spirit guiding him that guides us.”

“It was nice meeting you,” Viro chirps with that easy smile as they file out the door.

“B-but... Hey!” I try to call after them, but as I move to pursue them, the alien I’ve been left with grabs my wrist.

I meet his dark gaze, those eyes completely black from one lash line to the next.

“I regret to inform you that you are bound to me now,” he says, phrasing the foreboding announcement as an apology. “Our fates are tied.”



THE HUMAN FEMALE that I now know as my mate stares at me with fury building in her eyes. She pulls her hand away from me at once.

“You just ruined my night,” she says sharply. “So unless you’re going to start paying me, I’m not staying here.”

My head is spinning. I was not expecting to see a human here, let alone walk right into the mating call in the middle of an important mission. I have heard about how it feels, but up until now, I have not been able to fully grasp how it could change a male so rapidly.

Her presence has me quaking. She is barely dressed. Thin fabric is twisted into a makeshift gown that bares her from just beneath her breasts to the widest part of her hips. Her belly button is on display. Her cleavage is on display. So much of her warm golden skin is revealed. I can hardly speak with the way her body has become the only thing on my mind.

“I will pay,” I promise her, wanting to be sure she will stay right where she is. If she would cover herself up and sit down, maybe I could get a hold of my senses and think of how to handle this situation.

“How much?” She immediately demands. “They were about to book me for the entire night! With half paid upfront!

And you just barge in here and expect to— to— What? Fuck me right now? I don't think so— ”

“Whatever they agreed to, I will pay,” I say quickly. “Relax. Please. I need to think.”

My willingness to pay her fees temporarily mollifies her, but her irritation with me remains blatant. I look around for a seat and throw myself down on the small couch in the corner. She watches me and then darts a look back at the door.

“You wanna do this here?” she asks.

“Do what?”

She blinks. “Uh, have sex? This is just a smoking room. Anyone could walk in. And there's no lock on the door.”

I shake my head. I am sure the others will be here soon to make sure I am not attacking her.

“No,” I reply. “Please do not tempt my hormones with that talk. Come sit and relax for a moment.”

I close my eyes and massage my temples. I feel her presence as she walks over to join me on the couch. Before she sits down, I feel her closeness like a pulse of unseen energy. Then her warmth is beside me, and a lovely scent is filling my nose and scrambling my thoughts.

“What's going on?” Her soft voice is so pretty. I open my eyes again to watch her lips move as she says, “I only understand half the things you've said. What did you say that made them leave like that?”

“We are the same species,” I tell her. “Those pirates and I... We do not know each other, but they understand what happened. They understand that I experienced the mating call for you.”

She stares at me. I finally allow myself to look closely at her features. I was resisting eye contact. It was an immature temptation; my instinct was to shy away from the power of this bond. She has long black hair that falls in thick waves over her shoulders. Her eyes are the darkest shade of brown, so close to black I can just barely make out where her pupils

begin. My eyes follow the curve of her cheek and the slope of her nose. Her lips purse as she watches me curiously, aware of my blatant attraction. There is a pronounced dip in the center of her upper lip that I would like to press my tongue against.

“You are very beautiful,” I whisper, trying to ignore my intrusive thoughts.

“What do you mean about a mating call?” she asks.

“My species is compatible with humans,” I explain.

“So the others said ... And they left because you and I—we’re compatible?” She flicks her finger between the two of us. I notice her hands show signs of hard work—callouses, short nails, a coating of grime from a long day’s labor.

“They would not want to offer a claimed female to their leader,” I say, gritting my teeth at the thought of that cocky king touching her.

“And you claimed me? How?” Her dark brows are drawn together in confusion.

“My spirit claimed you. It is a mating response. I know humans do not experience such things, but I cannot control it. This is why the others left so quickly. They know that a male in the heat of mating fever is very dangerous.”

She narrows her eyes. “You expect me to spend the night with you when you tell me you’re dangerous?”

“I am not a threat to you. I am a threat to myself and those that might covet you or stand between us.”

She pulls her knees up in front of her body and drapes her arms over them. A thoughtful expression settles on her face. It is obvious she is not sure what to say about it all. It is a wonder she has not yelled at me further or left me here. I think my promise to pay is the only reason she lingers beside me.

I decide to let her be for now, focusing on regulating my breathing and keeping the mating hormones from taking control of my choices.

Then she breaks the silence.

“Wiruu told me your kind doesn’t... *have* sex, let alone pay for it?”

I frown. “Did that criminal put you up to this?”

“It was his idea. But it was my choice,” she tells me.

“Choices are not choices when you have none,” I say.

“I have choices,” she argues, her delicate nose wrinkling up. “Don’t judge me. You’re the one who almost started a scrap with six guys for talking to *me*, someone you don’t know.”

Well, now I have insulted her.

“I am sorry for embarrassing you with my behavior. When I am not pumped full of hormones, I typically find more diplomatic solutions for situations like that. As to your previous question, Wiruu is correct but outdated. For the majority of my lifespan, initiating sexual relations or engaging in romantic entanglements was strictly forbidden on my planet. Recently, things have changed due to unforeseen circumstances.”

She tilts her head as she listens, observing me with that same curious expression.

“This has something to do with what happened to all the people from Kar’Kal.”

“That is correct,” I confirm. “But let us not speak of morbid things that cannot be changed. What I must determine now is how we can proceed without sending my mission into complete disarray.”

“You speak so formally,” she comments.

“Apologies. My training as a diplomat calls for constant adherence to polite conversat—”

“Don’t apologize,” she interrupts with a laugh.

Oh, her smile takes me off guard. It transforms her face entirely, lighting it up. I am glad she is not irritated anymore.

“Very well. I will not.”

Another silence passes, with both of us unsure how to proceed.

When she realizes I am not going to touch her in this smoking room, she clears her throat. “Did Wiruu discuss taking me with you on your ship when you leave?”

I shake my head, and that hint of happiness on her face fades away.

“We have not spoken to him aside from his greeting when we arrived,” I tell her. “Perhaps he would have brought it up later. Why? Did he tell you he would discuss this with us?”

She nods. “He said that you would probably agree to take me off Ra’Vaga. Is that true?”

“Yes,” I say. “I suppose you are not here by *choice*?”

“I’d rather be here than where Wiruu found me,” she says, looking away.

“You would not happen to have woken from a stasis pod that was off-loaded by the Azza Empire, would you?”

She drops her arms and swings her head back to stare at me in shock. “How do you know?”

“Several others were recovered and released from stasis at my embassy recently. They were civilians from a film crew.”

“I was from the same crew,” she blurts, scooting closer in her excitement and placing her feet back on the floor. Her shoes do not match the clingy fabric that is pretending to be a dress. They are well-worn boots caked in mud. The more I notice, the more concerned I become about her living conditions. She has dirty scrapes on her knees. A million questions come to mind. Has she had enough to eat? When did she last sleep or bathe? Does she have somewhere safe to stay at night?

“You would be welcomed on Vanskiikii. We will take you with us when we go. With no charge, of course,” I assure her.

“And you have enough to pay me tonight for my services?” She asks with such bright hope in her eyes, I fear

giving the wrong answer and extinguishing that happiness. “I can’t leave without settling my debts here.”

“I do not have cash on me,” I tell her. Before the wrinkle of disappointment on her lips can spread, I add, “But I can bring whatever you require in the morning. Can I ask what debts you refer to?”

“Wiruu owns everything here. And I had nothing when he found me. I owe him for rent, for transporting me out of the Azza Empire, for other things... It all accrues interest in his books. He gave me a final figure to settle things between us.”

I debate how much it would cost me to wipe that smug crime lord off this rock completely. He is blatantly taking advantage of my mate’s desperation. She is likely one of many here that supposedly owe him for existing in his little company town. Considering the state of Kar’Kali affairs, we do not *technically* have time to clean up the mess that is Ra’Vaga. But I am tempted to return here from Vanskiikii with a legion of troops to obliterate Wiruu’s hideout for the simple fact that he dared to manipulate my mate into his personal puppet. I would wager she owes him for the boots that are currently falling apart on her feet.

No, it would be easier to pay him off. One payment and I can take the female with me. It is always better to avoid unnecessary conflict, and I would do well to remember that rule of diplomatic success. Except my brain is on the fritz. The mating call has a penchant for violence.

“I will pay whatever price he holds over you,” I say. “I promise you. No matter the cost, you will be on our ship when it leaves Ra’Vaga.”

She is visibly thrilled.

“You have no idea what that means to me. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to scrape together the money, and even the price I worked out with the others wouldn’t quite cover it. I was counting on some tips that didn’t pan out. I will make this night worth it,” she pledges. “Whatever crazy fantasies you have, we’ll make it happen, okay? Consider it my thanks to you for getting me out of here.”

“We do not have to do anything,” I say. “I am not offering this in exchange for sex. I am offering it because you are in need of assistance.”

“I don’t want to owe you.” A crease appears between her brows. “I’m done being in debt. The last thing I want is to hand my debt off from Wiruu to you.”

“You will not owe me—”

“I will.” She moves to get up. “I don’t need charity. If those others will pay me to entertain their captain, king, whatever he is, then I’d rather earn the money and not fly out of here on a ship with a man who has some claim over me.”

I grab for her, catch her by the flimsy fabric that covers her. The momentum between us causes a piece to flutter down to the floor, revealing the full length of her thigh and half of her posterior. My eyes hungrily fix themselves on the juicy shape of her bottom, and my train of thought slips away.

“I-I—”

She pushes me back and dives for the scrap of fabric.

“Hey! You know what? I don’t work on promises. I’m not sure I trust you. So either cough up half of the price now, or I’m walking out of here, mating call be damned.”

I stand up to follow her.

“Please, don’t—”

This exact moment is when fate chooses to make me look even more like a fool because Pakka and the Deviant King walk into the room as she’s attempting to right her disheveled garment with one arm held out to repel me from her presence.

“Kiri?” Pakka rasps, staring at the scene in disbelief.

“This is the happy couple, then?” The king lets out a laugh. “Leave it to a Deadhead to have his female hiding herself from him on the day of his mating call.”

I take a step back from my female, and she quickly shoves the missing panel of her dress back into place on the red string that holds it together.



“A word, Kiri.” Pakka jerks his head toward the exit.

“You would have me leave her with him?” I demand, my eyes burning black holes into the king. He smirks at me, amused by my suffering and my open jealousy.

“He will do nothing,” Pakka says. “He worships the Archaic religion.”

He drags me out into the hall by the front of my shirt. I do not take my eyes off Juana until the door slams shut. My back slaps the wall as Pakka shoves me hard.

“I need you to gain control of your emotions,” he tells me. “You are in a uniquely difficult situation, and we must tread carefully.”

“You have been through this,” I argue. “You know what I am feeling. I can barely keep my thoughts straight!”

“Your mate believes she is selling her body to you for the night. It is imperative that you explain your intentions to her and then find out her situation so that we can safely transport her to Vanskiikii.”

The rightness of his words washes over me. I sat beside her, let her go on about receiving my payment for her time, without impressing upon her the full implications of the mating call. She still does not know that the bond between us will never go away. She does not realize that I have no intention of leaving her here. If Wiruu refused to release her, I would burn this complex to the ground. If she had no desire to leave this criminal weigh station, I would not hesitate to return her to safety without permission.

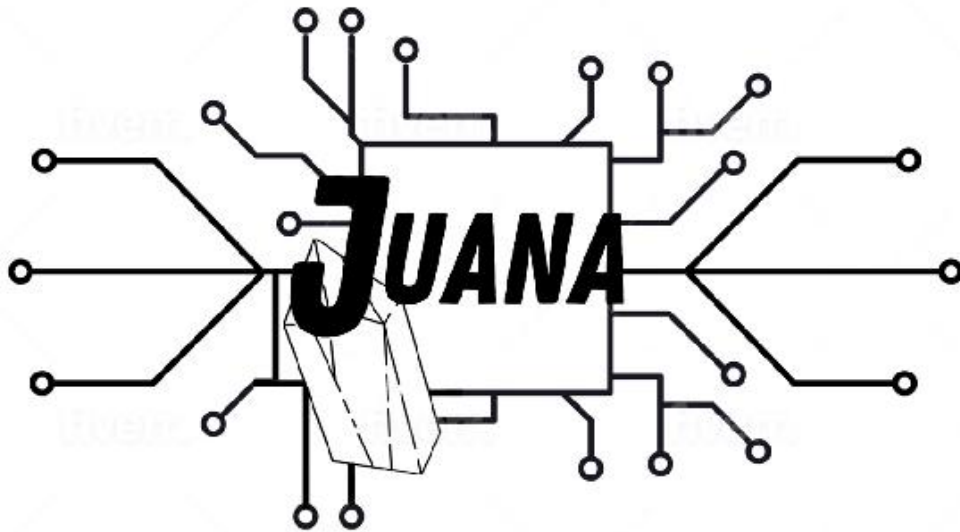
“Yes,” I breathe. “You are right. I apologize for my behavior, and I will make things right. She told me that she is one of the film crew that we partially recovered via Vala’s rescue. She is in debt to Wiruu, so I must—we must—find out his number and make the necessary payment for her.”

Pakka glares at me until he is satisfied and then releases me.

“Tell me everything you have learned up until now,” he says.

As I update him on what information I gleaned about Juana's situation, the back of my mind is prickling with another realization. Pakka needed me here with a cool head, and now I cannot think to save my life. Juana might be the most perfect female I have ever laid eyes on, but it seems her entry into my life could not come at a less convenient time. The mating call just might crush our chance to seal a historic alliance.

“Get the payment amount from Juana,” Pakka concludes. “We will hand it over to Wiruu tomorrow. Don't ask him because we don't want him discovering the leverage he has over us.”



THIS ENTIRE DAY has been a blur of emotional highs and lows, and I still haven't gotten paid. Every time I'm close to making the money I need; my hopes are suddenly torn from me. Now I'm staring at the man I was initially supposed to seduce. I'm all alone with him, and he clearly does not want to be seduced at the moment. He thinks I belong to the diplomat who looks like a sex god but talks like C-3PO.

"I'm guessing your guys told you about the surprise they were trying to plan," I say awkwardly. It feels a bit like small talk in an elevator.

"Yes," he says with a polite smile. "They have good intentions, but it won't be happening tonight. You've acquired yourself a mate."

"I don't have a mate," I insist. "If they're still willing to pay the cash, I'm still willing to spend the night with you."

He chuckles. "I don't have time to explain all the reasons why that will not be happening, human. You should adjust to the concept of being spoken for."

My jaw drops. "That is not something I agreed to, and only tonight's time is on the table."

I'm about to go to bed and call it all a failure. I'll be on Ra'Vaga until I die.

This so-called king observes my frustration with empathetic eyes.

“The Deadheads didn’t bring enough cash to pay you,” he states. “Is that the main issue at hand?”

“Basically. I told the guy that I can’t spend the night on the promise that he’ll pay Wiruu and take me with them. That’s not how it works around here.” My ability to trust in others is at a record low.

“I understand.” He reaches into his vest and pulls out a small booklet. It looks like a miniature passport. Before I can get a good look at it, he snatched a few credit pieces out and stowed it away again. “This should cover half your evening with the diplomat. Trust me when I say he’s good for the rest.”

I take it, hardly knowing how much he’s given me. I’ve only known Wiruu’s stupid poker chips for the past months of my life. But I pretend to count it before slipping it into my cleavage. I can check it against my accounting sheet later.

“Thank you.”

“If for some ridiculous Deadhead reason, those robots don’t fly you home with your new mate, find me or one of my warriors and we will take you out ourselves. You must be careful with those fools.” He grins at me. “They have been brainwashed since they crawled out of their test tubes.”

*Test tubes?* I guess that explains how a species that outlaws sex procreates. But I know he’s capable of the act. His erection was present from the moment we sat side-by-side on the couch.

“I appreciate your offer,” I say. “But I wanna know more about this mating ca—”

Before I can get any more information, Kiri and his colleague return to the smoking room. Kiri’s eyes burn into the king. It’s obvious that our proximity is upsetting him. I don’t understand why this well-mannered diplomat is acting like an animal over our apparent sexual connection. It must be pheromones or some other alien bullshit. I want to believe the promises he made to me, because he seems like a kind person.

But it might also be his dick talking for him. Either way, it seems like we'll be spending the night together. The deal has been struck.

"I apologize for derailing our attempts to conduct this meeting," Kiri states, composing himself in front of the king and bowing his head in deference. "Please do not let it reflect negatively on our relationship moving forward. Pakka and I are committed as ever to the possibility of an alliance."

"It's no trouble at all," the king replies. "Since you neglected to bring cash, I have taken care of your mate's financial issues. Shall we reconvene our meeting in the morning?"

Kiri's cheeks burn red, but he keeps his mouth clamped tight. My hand floats to my quivering lips. He's too adorable when he's embarrassed.

"That is very kind of you," Kiri's colleague says. "We will be sure to repay the cost—"

"Consider it a matebonding gift." The king waves away the offer. "I won't abide repayment. Enjoy your evening."

And with one last nod of his head to me, the man sweeps out of the room.

"He takes great pleasure in seeing us struggle," Kiri says when he's gone.

"You should be happy he's willing to pay your bill," I argue.

"Hello, Juana, is it?" Kiri's friend steps forward to shake my hand. It's interesting that they've both got a grasp on human greetings. "My name is Pakka. I want to confirm what Kiri has told you. We will see that you're on our ship back to safe territory. If you'd like to take your money and go home for the night, that offer will not change. Kiri is not himself at this time, and—"

"If Kiri wants to stay with me, he can," I say with a sigh. "It's what was paid for. I told him I don't want to owe anyone anything. Not anymore."

“Very well.” Pakka inclines his head. “I will return to our ship alone, then. Kiri, return at some point before we dawn a new day here so that you and I can prepare for the meeting.”

“Understood,” Kiri replies.

When Pakka has gone, Kiri and I are left to stare at each other.

He has almond eyes that are black as coal at the moment. I put together that it has something to do with the mating call because none of the others had eerily whiteless eyes. His well-groomed hair has become a mess from the way he gripped his head in pain earlier. The loose strands of black that fall over his brow give the effect of an angsty eighties Brat Pack heartthrob. He’s got an honest face, evoking the quiet appeal of John Cusack, sad-eyed and sweet.

Except, is he sweet at all? He said he’s dangerous.

“Follow me.” We slip through to the back door out of the bar, avoiding notice for the most part because the greeting party has become an opportunity for the Gak crew to become messy drunks.

We weave through the halls of Wiruu’s hideout. I find myself enjoying the way that Wiruu’s little henchmen startle when they see Kiri at my side. The first time it happened, I thought we just swung around the corner too quickly. But then it happened again, and again, until my lips were curling up in satisfaction. Usually, the men that populate these halls look at me as their personal servant, ready to toss a dirty towel in my direction so I’ll take it to the laundry room for them. When one of them slowed to gape at me in confusion, Kiri actually growled at him. His bones jumped, and he was on his way in a flash.

When we arrive at my tiny room, I’m chuckling.

“What is amusing you?” He asks as I unlock the door.

“Have your kind done something to the Gak that I don’t know about?”

Kiri looks thoughtful as he steps into my room. It’s closer to a closet, but I’ve done my best to make it cozy. There is one

window the size of my head that casts a single shaft of light onto the floor. It looks out onto Wiruu's courtyard where the lights are never turned off. I've gotten used to sleeping with that glow. I filled grain sacks with paper trash from the bar to make some pillows. They're stiff but better than nothing.

"I am sure most of the Gak that live here are former members of the mercenary group that was hired by the Azza Empire. I know that is Wiruu's history, and that his most loyal followers are from the same group. I do not believe they have any personal qualms with the Kar'Kali, but they know us as soldiers from the opposite side of the battlefield."

"They're scared of you." I turn to face him once I've hidden my cash away.

He cocks his head. "You like that they are scared of me?"

"Only a little. They're not so bad. All the guys that work for Wiruu... they might treat me like I'm useless, but they never bother me or hurt me. In fact, they mostly ignore me unless I'm behind the bar serving drinks."

He winces, opens his mouth, then shuts it again.

"We have to discuss something before this evening continues," he announces, nostrils flaring. The blacks of his eyes are flexing in and out like an angry, twisting cloud. He's fighting his emotions.

"Okay..."

"I need to make it clear that my reaction to you, which my species refers to as the mating call, is a permanent affliction."

My eyes flutter down to the massive bulge. "Your erection, you mean? You're attracted to me."

A nod.

"It is not normal—"

"It's completely normal for humans," I try to tell him. "I'm pretty close to naked right now. Most human girls I know wouldn't mind a guy who looks like *you* staring at them like that."

“The abnormal part is that my hormones are heightened to the point where I might lose all control over my actions.” He takes a step toward me. “I cannot think of anything other than taking advantage of your body until the both of us are spent and satisfied. And most importantly, this bond is unbreakable. I will only respond to you for all my time in this universe. I belong to you now.”

I watch his face for an ounce of pretension, any twitch or clue that he’s acting or delusional or completely insane. But he looks so earnest; he’s baring his heart to me. Some comments made by the pirate Deviants and their king start to click. I try to find a response, an emotional spark. Does it make me angry? Am I creeped out? Scared at what he’ll do to me now that we’re alone? Am I swept away by this romantic declaration? Ready to throw myself at him with my touch-starved body?

There was a time in my life when I would fly off the handle on a lover if they did me wrong and then quickly find a new flame to fill my heart with new hopes. I was young then, and I had cooled my heels long before I started with the production company. But still, I once would have described myself as an emotional person, a passionate woman who fights and loves hard.

I clutch my hand to my chest, but I feel nothing.

There’s nothing.

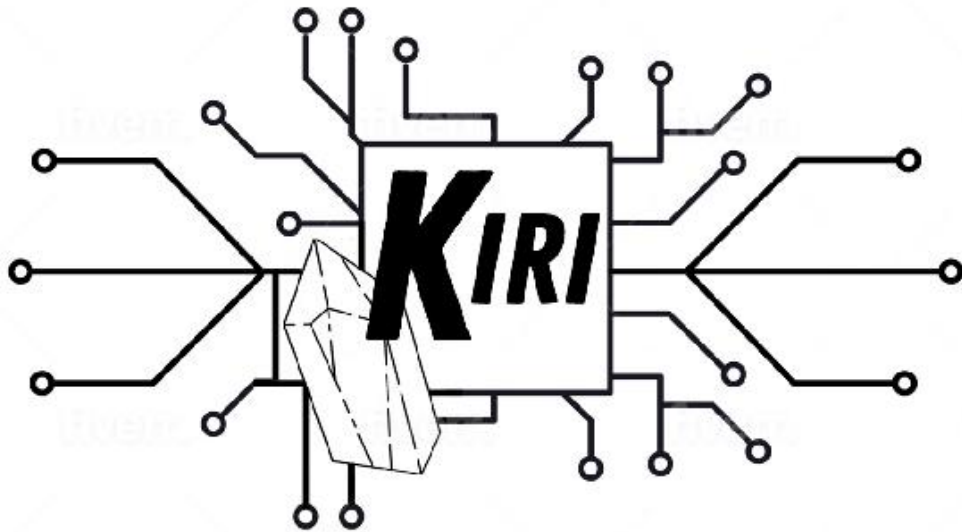
Could it be that my heart only beats for the stash of money in my lockbox?

I blink at him, stumbling for words to reply. What’s there to say?

*Sorry, this isn’t the best time for me to accept any love proposals. Try again later.*

“I don’t know what you want me to do about that,” I state. “You can stay here, and we can have some fun. That’s what was paid for. If that’s not what you want, then there’s the door.”





9

I DID NOT NECESSARILY HAVE expectations for Juana’s reaction to the mating call, but I did expect her to react.

Is she not understanding that we are bound together for the rest of our lives?

“Juana, I am telling you that my species imprints upon their mate and continues a monogamous connection to that chosen partner until death. And for me, that partner is you.”

“What am I supposed to do about this? It sounds like something that happened without my input,” she says.

“You don’t need to do anything,” I assure her. “I felt you should know all the information before we... should we decide... to engage in physical—”

“Sex?” She supplies.

I gulp. “Yes.”

“I appreciate the honesty. But I think I’m at emotional capacity for the day.”

“Life here must not be easy,” I say. “Is it something you would like to discuss? You can talk to me. Diplomats are excellent listeners.”

“Not important,” she mutters. “It was a shitty day. I worked hard, and things didn’t work out in my favor. Not until you promised me you would get me out of here. That felt amazing. I’m just afraid to accept that it’s real because there’s a chance it could fall apart.”

“I am not leaving you here,” I promise her. “Nothing could stop me from putting you on our ship.”

“You’re very sweet.” She reaches out to rest her hand on my sleeve. “But it’s hard to believe promises like that with a big fat chip on your shoulder.”

I quickly take inventory of each of her shoulders. She has a small frame, and they slope down gently, unmarred and perfect in every way. When she notices where my attention lies, she snorts with laughter. At the pretty sound of it, I wonder how I never noticed the way human females laugh with their whole body. Her shoulders shake, and I find myself yearning to pull away the neck of her dress to see the delicate skin there.

“Not literal chips on my shoulder,” she says. Her smile makes it impossible for me to ignore the shape of her lips. “An imaginary chip on my shoulder.”

“Ah yes... Humans and their imagery-based euphemisms.”

“Having a chip on your shoulder means that you’re a little jaded, or maybe you’re harboring some angry feelings about something,” she says. That smile fades away as quickly as it appeared. “It sounds way more pathetic when I explain it like that.”

“It’s only natural to be angry and jaded when you are in a difficult situation.”

Her nose wrinkles. “I’m not a damsel in distress.”

I can see this conversation is not leading in a productive direction, so I do not bother asking her what a *damsel* is. I will keep it to myself that I think she is most certainly ‘in distress.’

“But if you cannot tell me that starting an entanglement would please you, then how can I move forward?”

“How do you feel about it?” She asks.

“I confess that I am not sure. My blood is pumping. My mind is racing. It is difficult to assess where my true desires become my body’s desires.”

Her hand finds mine. She flexes her finger over my knuckles, sending a shiver up my spine.

“Neither of us knows what to think,” she says. “So we are on the same page.”

“To be on the same page means that our decisions are in sync, correct?”

That pretty smile spreads across her face. She tugs on my hand, so I follow her lead. I would follow her anywhere. I would foolishly misunderstand every single human phrase if only it amused her. She crouches down to crawl onto her pallet, which she has accessorized with pillows made from trash. I get to my knees with her, tucking my legs into a twist to leave her room. This is where she sleeps; everything here is made from Ra’Vaga’s castoff materials. I know one does not need much space or possessions to have a comfortable existence, but every detail I notice is being added on my list of reasons to turn Wiruu into scavenger food.

“We won’t need to worry about anything. I’m numb tonight. You can ask me about it again tomorrow. Preferably after we’ve already lifted off this planet and left it in the dust.”

“It is not a planet. It is technically a—”

“Kiri, just touch me.”

“I don’t want you to feel numb when I’m touching you,” I tell her. “Is it selfish to think that if I touch you, I want it to feel wonderful?”

“I’m only talking about my feelings,” she says. “It’s not like my skin turned off. If you touch me right, it will feel good. But that depends on you.”

“What depends?” I ask, suddenly worried that I am entirely unprepared for this. I thought my mating instincts were supposed to do the work for me.

“Depends how you touch me,” she explains. She leans forward to run her fingers up my thigh, skating over the fabric on my armored flightsuit. The light sensation shocks me straight to my balls. My cock is hard in an instant, having already been tingling with attention at the mere sight of her. “Some touches are gentle.”

Without warning, she digs her nails into my thigh, dangerously close to where my bulge is growing. My length is pressing itself into my pant leg for lack of space in the crotch region. I bite the tip of my tongue to keep from making a sound.

“Other touches are hard.”

“What kind of touch do you prefer?” I am taken back to the bottomless stomach feeling of being a youngling in training. Question after question pops into my mind as I study my way into becoming the male that can make Juana smile. Better yet, I would like to see her shiver, too— shiver and sigh with pleasure.

“One isn’t better than the other, but it can be good to build up slowly from delicate to hard. You have to choose the right moment to make the right touch. And if you mix it all up, a woman might end up getting turned off.”

I furrow my brows. “A woman? I would like to know about you specifically. You are the only woman I am interested in touching for pleasure.”

“Where would you like to touch me?” There is a sparkle in her eyes that tells me she is not as numb as she purports to be. I might be useless at being a mate, but I can sense her interest in me. I once studied body language for the purpose of diplomacy. I recognize the way she opens her body toward me, the way her eyes flicker between my eyes, my mouth, and then dip down to where we are still connected. Her small hand on my thigh is burning a hole through me.

“Anywhere,” I breathe.

“Let’s start with something very simple,” she says. “A kiss.”

“I would rather not kiss you tonight, if that is acceptable to you,” I reply, thinking of a thousand reasons why it would be inappropriate to transfer my aphrodisiac saliva to her.

The request throws her off. Her smiling lips twitch.

“Of course.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

“Then you can kiss me somewhere else,” she suggests.

I call to mind the couples that are living at the embassy with me. I see them on a daily basis, but try as I might, I cannot recall a time I saw them kiss in a way that was not lip-to-lip contact.

“Where else do mates kiss each other?” I ask, starkly aware of how naïve I sound.

She takes my hand and guides it to the place where her jaw curves toward her ear.

“Here,” she whispers before moving my hand again. This time, she touches my fingertips against the swell of her breast. “Here is good too.”

I am mesmerized, and my fingers are frozen.

“And the best place to be kissed?” Her voice is playful. I suck in a breath as she leads me in a caress between her breasts, past her belly button, and then stops at the place where her legs split. “The best place is right here.” She presses down until I am palming her there, my middle finger landing on the seam of her cunt. It is deliciously warm there, and when my fingers twitch at the sensation, she gasps. The fabric that covers her is so thin that I feel everything: the curl of dark hair that protects her, the shape of her sex, the hint of dampness.

“Juana, I want to touch you, but I do not know how to pleasure a female,” I say breathlessly.

“If you kiss me between my legs, you can’t go wrong,” she tells me. “And this night with you is already a thousand times better than I imagined it would be.”

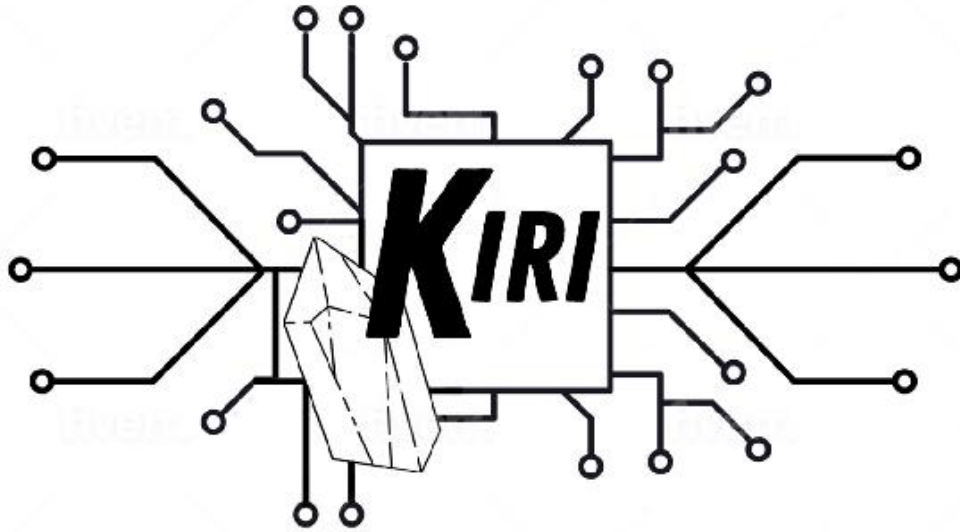
“I can agree that this trip is providing much more enrichment to my life than I bargained for when I volunteered.”

She snorts a laugh. “Because you weren’t planning on losing your virginity?”

“Because I was not expecting you,” I say, allowing my darker instincts to take hold. My hand cups her sex of its own volition, and her laughter cuts off. Her sudden intake of breath startles me until I realize I can smell her. The perfume of her cunt tells me everything I need to know. Her body feels this connection. It calls to me through whatever webs her mind has woven. The sudden dampness I feel beneath my fingers is proof enough that Juana is not numb to touch.

*The touch of a fool like me made this*, I think as I caress the thin, wet fabric that covers her slit.

“If I can make you feel anything,” I promise her, “let it be only pleasure and release.”



JUANA SITUATES herself to receive my attention, propping her pillows at her back and reclining in the corner of her sleeping pallet. Her adjustment leaves enough space for me to sprawl in front of her like the supplicant I am. My words have her smiling again, a serene little quirk at the edge of her lips. Every smile is different, and I want to learn them all.

The red string that held the panels of her dress together appears to be attached to her undergarment, a hastily sewn triangle to cover her intimate places. I run my fingers over it, realizing that she made this from scraps. She had nothing when she came here, after all. A small detail that I would like to rectify by buying her boxes upon boxes of luxury garments.

Juana pulls at the string, and the fabric slides up to pool on her belly. The homemade undergarment falls away, exposing her cunt. I have never seen between a female's legs, but the primal thump of blood in my veins tells me to press my face right between her thighs. The scent of her arousal fills me with dark thoughts. I breathe her in and kiss her as she requested. My lips press gingerly against the seam of her, causing my nose to tickle her thicket of dark curls.

She releases a contented sigh, which I take as an indication that I should continue.

Her thighs relax open, and I crawl between them, looping my arms under her knees so we are snug together. My fingers dance over her abdomen, exploring the golden-brown skin and pushing the fabric away.

“Will you tell me what I should do?” I ask her softly.

She reaches down to caress me from temple to chin, lingering at the hollow of my cheek.

“Start out slow and gentle,” she suggests. “Then go faster and faster, and you don’t stop...”

I lean against her inner thigh, feel the softest skin against the side of my face, and bask in the growing scent of her arousal.

“I require more detail.”

A quiet laugh. “No, you don’t.”

“Please,” I say, grasping her flanks and sinking my fingers into her flesh. I have the strange feeling of wanting to be so close to her that I am under her skin, but not knowing how to start. She releases a little sound, an erotic “*mph!*” of approval at the way I grabbed her.

“Open me up,” she says.

I tentatively run my two forefingers through her wet seam again and then part them like two pages of a book. Her glistening pink inside is revealed, making me drool from the fresh dose of her scent. I am not sure why my mouth is watering so intensely until her next command.

“Lick me.”

I press my lips between my parted fingers to give her pink cunt a chaste kiss before stroking my tongue over her. The result of that one lick is a full-body shudder.

“Yes, Kiri,” she encourages me. “Like that.”

Juana has been a very patient teacher to me, and it is time I made myself useful. I remember what she told me about touches as I use my tongue instead of my fingers. I start very slowly and delicately, dragging the tip of my tongue over



every part of the pretty cunt I am acquainting myself with. It does not matter that I have no prior experience with a female's anatomy. It is my intention to dedicate myself only to her parts. Each pink petal belongs to me. This will be the only cunt that matters. I dip inside the well of her as she becomes wetter. I lick gently at every part, even venturing to lick the sweat from the place where her thigh begins. When I hear her whimper, I continue licking and sucking at that delicate hidden spot until she gasps with surprise.

Then I return to her sex, heaping my desire onto her. I keep the motions of my tongue slow and soft as she suggested. I trace the shape of her slit, taste the fragrant dew of arousal. I grip her, tilting her pelvis to meet my lips and hoping I am not hurting her.

She directs me to her clitoris by tilting my head with the press of her thigh against my cheek. I had noticed it there and was aware of its existence and function, but I will confess I was nervous to touch it. After all, if it is so sensitive, I worried that I would ruin all her pleasure by touching it or licking it the wrong way. But she has been so encouraging, whispering sweet things like, "Yes, you're doing so well" and "Keep going, Kiri, it feels so good..." It is strange how the polite words and honeyed tone of her voice can fill me with such a passion to please her further. A word from her about my abilities, and I am feeling taller than a mountain.

The flavor of her juices riles my hunger for her to a boiling point until I am suckling at her like one would suck the juices from a ripe Vansk melon.

"Ahhnh!" She cries out when my lips release her with a wet *pop!* Then she's quickly grinding her cunt against my face for more. So I repeat the action until she's moaning my name in a mixture of shock and fervor.

Her fingers thread desperately through my hair until she is twisting a fistful of my hair in her grasp. I welcome the sweet stab of pain in my scalp. Her passion thrills me, driving me to work my tongue until my jaw is cramping. The dark desire to own a piece of her is hammering along with my heart. If I

make her feel this way, I can somehow steal her away, taking her worries first and then slowly taking *her* for myself.

She has lost the ability to speak, it seems. She is a mess of delicious sounds: huffing, moaning, and nearing screams as my assault on her sensitive clit leads closer to a climax. Her cries fuel the fire behind my efforts. Her whole pelvis writhes aggressively against my chin like she cannot get enough. I am so focused on the frantic dance that I do not even see her face when it happens, I only hear her faint squeal. Her thighs clench around my head, holding me fast to her as her body goes rigid for a moment and then slack all at once.

I pause to look up. Her chest is heaving. Her cheeks are glistening. Nothing could be more beautiful than her repose as she catches her breath.

“Have I done well, then?” I ask.

“I have a mind to question whether you’re really a virgin,” she pants.

“I am not a liar,” I tell her, stalling the lazy circles I am thumbing on her thigh. “Being that my position as diplomat exposes me to more of other cultures than most Kar’Kali soldiers, I was exposed to quite serious warnings about the danger of promiscuous species that drive weak warriors to defect. I believe they had a problem with keeping ambassadors from breaking our conditioning. At first, I was confused, but then I was propositioned a few times by females and males alike at various events. They might have considered it a healthy challenge to conquer a Kar’Kali in the bedroom. We have a reputation for frigidity.”

“How did you react when that happened?” She asks with a laugh.

“At the time, I was repulsed. I did not know what it felt like to possess this desire that cannot be stopped. Even when I learned that my colleagues were falling victim to this mating call and that it was perfectly safe, I still could not imagine wanting someone like I want you.”

“And how do you want me?” She purrs the question with a glint in her eyes that spells danger for me.

“It feels like I am choking on it,” I confess, wanting nothing more than to bare my soul to her. “This desire is suffocating.”

“We’re not done here yet.” She brushes her fingers over my lips, then drops them to the neck of my flight suit. My tongue tingles from a build-up of my aphrodisiac; burning me with a need to kiss her mouth, to give it to her and make her wild with the same suffocating need for me. I think she wants me too. She tugs at the zipper pull and slips her hand inside to run curious fingers over my collarbone, my shoulder, and my chest.

I want us naked together, so I pose no resistance to her exploration. I sneak my hand toward her breasts, wanting to be rid of the top half of her garment at last. When I try to pull it away, it twists tighter at her neck, so I hesitate.

“I’ll need help with that,” she tells me, chuckling. “Someone put it on for me.”

Not wanting to dirty her bed with my boots, I carefully shimmy back to my knees then squat on my haunches.

“Come into the light.”

When she sits up, the shaft of light from the small window strikes her. The orange glow suits her warm skin and black hair, illuminating her in the shades of a Vansk sunset. Wetness still glistens between her thighs from the climax I gave her. The beauty of her shape seems unreal, as if I reached out to hold her, she would turn to smoke. Before I can take in every inch, she turns her back on me.

“Undo the knot,” she says, glancing my way over her shoulder.

Sure enough, there is a knot in the middle of her back that I had not noticed despite my eyeballs dancing over all the rest of her. I am shy with my touches again. There is nothing I want more than to see her entirely exposed. Even more, the thought of removing my own suit and lying together skin on

skin makes my hands shaky. I should feel more confident now, having brought her pleasure. She seems so much smaller than I realized as I tower over her from behind, fiddling with the piece of fabric like a fool. I find myself staring at the shape of her ass.

When I have finally removed the knot, she tugs at the neckline and pulls away the last of her makeshift dress. Then she turns to face me again.

Her nakedness stuns me. I study her curves, eyes drawn to her chest. The swell of her breasts entices me, softly shaped like they were made for the palm of my hand. Her nipples are brown haloed by pink, tightened and begging me to lick them.

I am almost too dazzled by her beauty to notice something that makes my heart stop.

But as I inch closer, I focus on the discoloration at her neck. I brush my fingers over her shoulder, pushing the dark waves out of the way.

I had noticed other scratches and little bruises on her legs. I did not think much of it, knowing how difficult it is to survive in places like Ra'Vaga. It could be from work, from slipping in the street, from a million things that fall under the umbrella of accidental injury.

I trace my thumb over her throat and know with certainty that this is no accident.

With renewed purpose, I observe the rest of her. She was watching my reaction curiously, but she starts to fret at something she sees in my expression.

“What?” she murmurs, pleasure fading from her lips.

I take her by the arm and bend it so I can see the forearm. Bruises and a nasty cut that has yet to heal. None of these injuries have been treated. Unbandaged, still dirty. Does she realize that such things can kill her without proper care in filthy places like this? She pulls back, indignant now.

“Hey!”

“What happened to you?” I demand, the question coming out more gruffly than I meant it.

“Nothing,” she says too quickly. “Took a tumble on the way to work.”

“Who did this to you?” I am not accepting that ridiculous answer.

She grabs the threadbare blanket from the pallet and covers herself.

“I got jumped earlier. It’s nothing. I haven’t really had a chance to get cleaned up today—”

“Who did it? Does this happen regularly?” The details matter to me, because it might determine whether I grind up their bones or shatter them, whether I bury them alive or remove their eyeballs—

I am very far from sane at the moment.

“No, of course not. It was this loser who owes money, and he heard I had some. It only looks bad because I’ve gotten so pale. I’m sorry if it gives you the creeps...” With a swift turn of her head, she’s avoiding my eye contact. I have a feeling that my eyes are turning as black as burning coal. Why will she not look at me?

“Do not apologize for the disgusting actions of others,” I tell her. “Whoever did this is no more than scum. If you tell me who it was, I will deal with them.”

“Forget about it. Let’s just get back to where we left off,” she says with a wobbling voice. “I was about to return the favor you paid me...”

She is not giving me a name, but I can ask around. Her hand caresses my thigh, but I cannot bear the thought of taking pleasure in her body when she must be in pain. How many times did my efforts to make her come cause her discomfort? How could I continue with my selfish desires when what she needs is a long, hot bath and a topical salve for her injuries?

“I wish I knew that you were hiding this from me before I used you for mating pleasure,” I sigh, brushing a lock of hair

behind her ear.

She swats my hand away. “It was none of your business. Anyways, this is who I am. If you have a problem with that, then maybe you shouldn’t be my mate.”

“The mating call does not care for should and should not,” I explain. Why does she feel her bruises define her? A warrior might take pride in scars because they signify survival. I do not wish to insult her, so I say nothing of it. I need to learn more about her, and I do not want to push her away.

“You really don’t wanna get off just because I got beat up?” She is incredulous.

“Precisely. Get some sleep and be ready to leave Ra’Vaga tomorrow,” I tell her, zipping my jumpsuit back up to my chin.

“You’re leaving?” The line between her brows reappears.

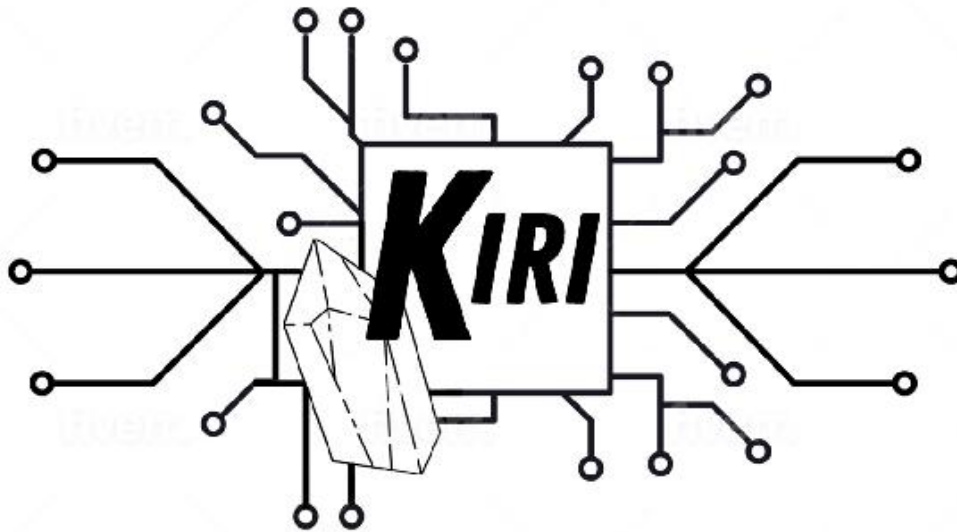
It might be pleasurable to stay by her side for the entire night, whispering more confessions and soaking in more of her arousal on my tongue. But my selfish need for her attention takes a backseat to my desire for vengeance. I will make this petty criminal suffer.

“Do not doubt me when I say I will return for you,” I tell her.

She draws the sheet up to her chin.

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

To leave her now is bittersweet. Despite my attempts to show her my dedication, she is no closer to trusting me at my word. I do not care about this chip on her shoulder. I will prove myself to her in due time.



SHE DID NOT GIVE me a name, but it is not difficult to find out which desperate gambler has been on a petty theft rampage. At the first gambling den I step into, I get the information I seek about the one responsible. He owes a great deal of money to various people downtown. It turns out that Juana was not the only person he attacked today. The locals are interested in chatting me up for their own nosy purposes. I am more than happy to offer updates about the world outside Ra'Vaga in exchange for what I want. A few errant hands try to pickpocket me for money that I do not have. I ignore it, having no time to waste.

Riu is the name I am given. I have a rough description. He was last seen paying off his liquor tab while bragging about being out of Wiruu's pocket at last. Recouping Juana's earnings might be a lost cause due to the way this male seems to spend.

The crooked alleyways give way to a tent city once I am farther from Wiruu's fort. It is a pain to navigate without reference, but I manage. The location I pursue is more of a dirty pit than an official gambling den. In the space between a few tent homes, a hole has been torn into the surface of the false planet. Down below, there are Gak wrestling each other to a small drunken crowd. More onlookers are gathered at the edge of the hole to view the fight from above. I draw some

attention because I am Kar’Kali, but the population of these darkened outskirts are more diverse than Wiruu’s place. It is still majority Gak but mingled with other species.

A Gak female is the bookie, and she quickly hunts me down to try to talk me into placing a bet.

“Interested in either of ‘em?” she asks me with a grin.

“I have no interest in the scrap, but rather an interest in the gamblers. I am looking for a Gak named Riu.”

She chatters her teeth. “I don’t have the time for him—”

I catch her by her collar. “You will have less time if you waste mine.”

“Get your meaty mitts off me!” Others turn around to gawk curiously at the commotion I am causing.

“Tell me if you have seen him.” My grip does not budge.

“He already bought his ticket. He’s over there.”

With a glance at the crowd and the other bookies, I decide I would rather not start a fight over whatever Riu spent on his ticket. After all, the money is not a problem because I will be paying Juana’s debt myself. I let go of the irritated bookie and look where she is pointing.

Over in the shadows of another tent, the male is sipping from a vial of liquor and fanning himself with his ticket while he chats up another Gak female. His companion sees me coming before he does. Something about the look on my face must clue her in to my intentions, and she slips away before Riu is aware of it.

“Riu?” I snarl at him.

“Who’s asking?” he grumbles.

“Are you Riu, or are you not?”

“I am. Luckiest man on Ra’Vaga tonight.”

“Unluckiest,” I correct him.

That is when his eyes sharpen, and he reaches for his stinger. I catch his arm before his fumbling fingers can even



graze the trigger. I disarm him and chuck the weapon over my shoulder.

“What the—” He scrambles to evade my hold. “What do you want from me, Kar’Kali?”

“Did you or did you not attack and steal from a human female named Juana near Wiruu’s bar earlier tonight?”

“Last I checked, this town didn’t contain a law enforcement office,” he says.

With a firm grip on his shoulders, I knee him in the gut.

“Did you?”

“Fine, fine,” he wheezes. “I did, but I didn’t hurt her or nothing! It was not even a big take.”

No one in the vicinity seems to care at all, and I imagine the same was true when he held my mate down and robbed her. I knew that the mating beast was in control when I made my way here to find him. But until now, I did not realize how furious I was. How could he take my delicate, perfect mate and come near to choking her to death? I will tear him apart.

“Wrong,” I whisper. “Your mistake was touching her at all.”



After I am satisfied with my retribution, I return to Juana’s room to find her fast asleep. I kneel beside her, brushing a knuckle over her splayed hair. It might frighten her to wake and see me, so I pull up the cover. Considering the display I made in the center of Wiruu’s courtyard, I feel confident that no harm will come to her.

Now that my senses have partially returned to me, I head straight to the ship’s comm room to research my mate. While I cannot link to my system in this dead zone, I can access publicly available information. It is only as up to date as of the moment we crossed out of the Alliance bubble. I type in her name.

*Juana Navarro*. Only a few articles crop up, all coverage of the pirate raid that tore her away from safety. She is one name on a list of many, accompanied by images to encourage Alliance citizens to keep their eyes out for the victims. I see the picture of her, smiling with a stack of papers clutched to her chest and some sort of headset on her ears. *Juana Navarro, Production Assistant*, it says, along with her height and age. I can imagine that my special access system would list her as a missing Alliance citizen. As of when we left for this mission, the percentage of recovered victims from the same race was sadly low. When our pilot Vala returned from behind enemy lines with a mate and a handful of stasis pods, we were able to give some helpful information to the authorities, but the search has been a mess.

When time is sliding by too quickly, I close out the search system. It is not as if I can do anything with the information until I have Juana safely on the ship and headed back through the Vansk border. My mind will not quit working on her, building itself around her even if I have nothing but the scant time we spent together to do so.

I assumed Pakka would be asleep, so I am startled when he emerges from his room to find me in the hall at the door to my quarters.

“Is everything alright with your mate, then?” he asks.

I do not know how to answer that question, so I simply reply, “It will be when we leave this place.”

He nods, satisfied enough to turn back toward his door but hesitates when he catches sight of something on my person.

“What have you been up to?”

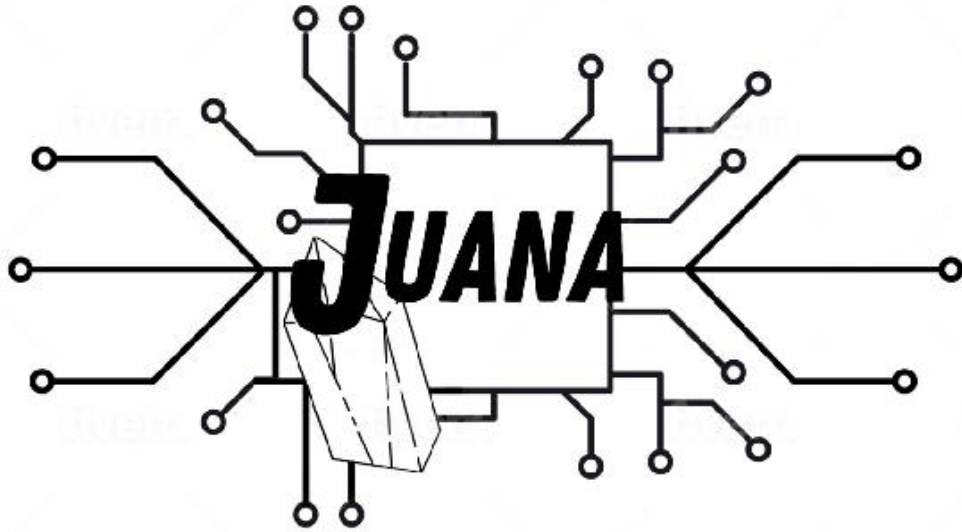
I glance down to find that one of that Gak Riu’s claws is embedded in my shoulder and a tiny bead of red blood has trickled down my arm.

“I was handling an unexpected threat to Juana’s safety,” I confess, unsure of how Pakka will react. “She was robbed earlier, and I—”

Pakka thrusts his palm up to stop me, and I prepare myself for a verbal thrashing.

“Say no more. I understand. Get whatever rest you can manage in this state.” The door shuts behind him, leaving me alone in the hall once again.

At least I know that my temporary insanity is not something that I am alone in. Pakka has gone through the same, and so have his other team members. It is good to feel supported, even as I sink hopelessly into obsession. The snatches of sleep I manage to get are filled with dreams of her: dark waves, pretty smiles, and the most addicting scent.



I WAKE up to thoughts of Kiri.

He has a stilted way of talking, painfully formal and yet somehow poetic. Certain things he said are stuck in my brain. They say that trauma messes with your memories and sends your brain into survival mode. I look back on last night and I can't put into words what I was feeling. I know it's because every cell in my body is working towards my escape. It's close enough to taste, if Kiri's promises can be believed.

I hope he got back to his ship safely last night.

I hope he doesn't regret giving me the best head of my life.

His expression when he saw my body is emblazoned on my mind. At first repulsed and then entirely blank. It's unkind of me to mentally refer to him in robotic terms because he's not *truly* a robot. He has deep feelings and seemingly a good heart. But I still can't help but think of his reaction as an error loading screen. His eyes seemed to say, *Please hold, processing ...*

One look. It only took one look to send him packing.

My mind isn't mushy enough to numb the hurt I felt when he left me there. It was all the proof I needed that I'm not the Juana I once was—it's inside me and outside me. I have a layer of Ra'Vaga dust caked in every pore. Kiri wouldn't even

kiss me on the lips. I couldn't help but wonder if that was some kind of reverse Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* rule he pulled on me because I was being paid for. For all his talking of desiring me and me alone, of being mated to me... that small intimacy was too much for him.

His tongue, though. His tender licking and the way he listened to my every word and every moan... The thought of it has a new fire starting in my center. My body is both satisfied and still yearning for what we didn't get to. I had dreaded the act, but once Kiri showed me his attentiveness and sucked my soaking wet pussy clean, I was starting to look forward to playing with his cock. I wanted that full feeling I have missed for so long without sex. Most surprising of all, I wanted Kiri specifically. I wanted to see his first orgasm, wanted to teach him how to fuck me, because I knew he would do it well.

But it seems that regardless of this 'matebond' he spoke of, Kiri didn't want *me* in return.

I sit up and look around, wondering what I have here to take with me. I pack up a satchel with my lockbox of cash, my remaining rations to eat for the day, and the few gifts that Onduu has given me: a bracelet with a carved charm and her handwritten recipe for sweetened grain cakes.

There's nothing else to take. I dress in my usual jumpsuit and carefully fold the fabric I wore last night. I'll arrange for someone to return it to Onduu so she can make use of it for something else. I choose a younger member of Wiruu's crew that I catch in the hall. I know for a fact he has puppy dog eyes for Onduu. He won't sell it off, because he's thrilled at having an excuse to chat her up and gain her favor. She's the only thing I'll miss from this era of my life. The rest of it I'd like to delete forever.

I spend the rest of the morning trying to sell off the contents of my room. Surprisingly, a few of Wiruu's guys are enamored with my makeshift pillows, and I end up with a tidy profit for them. I get pocket change for everything else. Most of it was cast off to me in the first place, but I'll be damned if I don't squeeze every cent out of my belongings. I find a private corner to count my total earnings.

I have seventy-five percent of what I need to pay off Wiruu, so I march down to his office to settle up with him and announce that I'm leaving with the Kar'Kali.

"Ah, meaty one! I was just thinking of you, Juana," he greets me more cheerily than normal.

"Were you? Well, I have good news. I've got a major payment toward my debt here, and you should be paid up, with interest, before the midday meal." I place my down payment on the table, which is scattered with other parcels of money and gadgets that scan for counterfeit coinage. "The Kar'Kali owe me, so I'll have them pay you directly and then be on my way with them."

He nods along, but he's got a grin on his face that fills me with dread.

"I knew you would rise to the occasion. You're a hard-working little female. Never give anyone trouble. I've always liked that about you."

It's never a good sign when Wiruu's giving out free flattery.

I clutch the strap of my satchel. "Thank you?"

"That's why I know you will not do anything reckless when I tell you that I upped your interest rate," he says evenly.

"What?" I snap, slamming my palms on the table so hard that the cash slides around. One of his cronies twitches as if to do something about my behavior, but Wiruu waves him off.

"Relax. You'll still be on your ship out of here. I promise you that. I promised you before, and Wiruu always keeps his debts and promises."

"You can't do this." I grit the words out through my teeth. "All you do is go on about honoring your word, and then you pull this stunt? You don't even need me here! You don't even like me! So why are you doing this?"

"Money. It's very simple. Once you've done some deep breathing exercises and *removed your filthy hands from my table*—" He utters that warning sharply. "— you'll realize I'm

being entirely reasonable. I have mouths to feed in this complex. I protect our community, and these Kar'Kali have more money than they need to throw around."

I begrudgingly shove my fists in my front pockets.

"Are you trying to trap me here forever? Is that what this is? Free labor for your bar?"

"Don't be dramatic. No! And you don't need to fret or even lift a finger. Take the afternoon off for all I care. I told the Deadheads how much I expect them to pay, and they will bring it here when they retrieve you after their business meeting is complete."

I'm catching flies because I have no idea what to say. The way he plays around with my future like it's one of his gambling den parlor games makes my blood boil. I'm having visions of launching myself across the table and plucking out those ugly, bulging eyeballs. He's either oblivious to my rage or doesn't care because he's busy looking me up and down.

"What happened to the revealing outfit you wore last night? I think you should put it back on before they come back to get you. Wouldn't want your mate changing his mind, huh?"

"How much?" I ignore his stupid questions.

"I only added one digit to the total," he says. "I should have asked for more, but I am a fair male."

"They're not going to pay it." I'm fuming. I'm practically growling at him like a she-wolf. "To them, I'm a cheap whore in an outlaw town. And when your ridiculous hubris comes between me and my freedom, I'm going to make you regret it! You'll be stuck with me, and whether it's today or the next or the day after that, I will make you pay for it."

He laughs at me in that chattering Gak way. My veins freeze over. I've known all this time that my livelihood means nothing to him, but the way he throws it in my face makes me sick.

"Laugh it up. You won't be laughing when the Kar'Kali don't give you a dime. And after that? I'm done."

“They’ll pay me. I can say that with certainty. So consider yourself lucky that I’m chalking your threats up to temporary meatbag insanity.”

I stalk out of the room, unable to look at him for fear that I’ll do something I’ll regret. His laughter follows me out into the hallway. He’s useless. An idiot. He’s hedging his bets, and it’s my ass on the line. I’ve never been one to hold a grudge. My line of work involves a fair amount of personality juggling between producers, directors, actors, and vendors. In the past, I’ve always let bygones be bygones because it’s easier to go to work every morning with a clean slate. But this is my new life, my Ra’Vaga life. I’m a new Juana Navarro, the kind of Juana Navarro who will find a way to burn Wiruu’s empire to the ground if he stops me from going home.

Kiri’s promise to pay the remainder of what I couldn’t earn is one thing. Considering the way that king was throwing me cash, I’m guessing it’s nothing to them. But to add a digit is no small thing, and worse, Wiruu didn’t mention what the digit was or where he put it. I hate that I don’t have a clear enough grasp on the space economy to even know what that amounts to for a man like Kiri.

Granguu catches up to me, waving his arms in greeting.

“Hello, Juana.”

“What do you want?” I have no time for his nosy questions right now.

“I’ve been assigned to make sure you don’t leave the complex.”

I explode with a combination flood of Spanish and English curses. From Granguu’s expression, I can tell it’s translating into nonsense on his end.

“So I’m a prisoner?”

He shrugs. “Wiruu tells me you’re leaving Ra’Vaga this afternoon. He doesn’t want you to get up to anything suspicious in the meantime. You’re worth a bit more than you were yesterday to him.”



“Of course, he doesn’t.” I roll my eyes. “He honestly believes the Kar’Kali will pay big bucks to take me out of here. As if I’m worth anything to them.”

If I’m going to be trapped here for the day, I decide to get a hot meal out of Wiruu’s pocket. I can have it charged to my accounts with him, and if I manage to make it out of here, the nominal cost of a stew or meat pie will be lost in the shuffle. I don’t usually bother with the daily hot meals because it’s so much cheaper for dry rations.

“The gossip in town is that you became mated to one of them last night. Clever move on your part. Didn’t you do it for that reason?”

How the hell the people in this town found that out in a matter of hours is dizzying to me.

Granguu follows. Food is served on the rooftop. It allows the men on duty to signal up to those on their meal breaks in case of emergencies. We make our way up the spiral metal staircase.

“What reason?”

“To ensure they won’t leave without you,” he says. “Kar’Kali matebonds trigger insanity. That’s why they put chips in their heads. Because if their mate is endangered, they become violent psychos... You know this, right?”

I frown, recalling Kiri’s explanation of the ‘mating call.’ He said it was important for me to know that the two of us were bonded together. It’s love at first sight, as far as I understand it. He wanted my body, told me he belonged to me. But I think one good look at me in the light was the wake-up call he needed. He saw me for what I really am on Ra’Vaga; a dirty, bruised-up street rat. I wanted to cry for a second there when he looked at me and immediately headed for the door. I might’ve if my emotions weren’t on the fritz.

“When you deal in gossip, you get paid in gossip,” I tell Granguu flatly. “I wouldn’t be surprised if the Kar’Kali forgot about me completely after their big important meeting.”

When we reach the top of the stairs, I'm surprised to find that there isn't much of a line. It's mid-morning, usually a popular time to grab food. The longer the day wears on, the less appetizing the offerings become. I start to approach the serving station for the stew pot but hesitate when Granguu wanders in the other direction.

"What are you doing?"

I'm the one following him now as he joins a clump of men that are gathered at the edge of the roof. They're looking down into the courtyard where all the comings and goings take place around here. Everyone's gesticulating wildly, and I hear some laughter as well.

"Just seeing what the fuss is about," Granguu replies, ever the nosy one.

"Well, what is it? I can't see from here."

Granguu clasps my arm and drags me through a looser part of the crowd until we're able to find a patch of railing to observe the courtyard. He starts cackling right away while I'm still elbowing myself a space.

"I think you've got the Kar'Kali all wrong," he says.

I follow his gaze to the center of the courtyard, which is something of a stockade. Wiruu strings up his enemies there, whether they're dealt a death sentence or a few days of public humiliation. It's grotesquely medieval, so I typically avoid the platform. The Gak tie their own kind up by their ankles, perhaps snapping a bone here or there. But the Gak body I see on the platform now is in pieces, or rather, a puddle. The Gak consider fragmentation to be the gravest form of disrespect. After all, they are skeletal life-forms. Their bones are held together by sinew that regenerates, so they *can* be taken apart without dying. But it's a line they don't cross in feuds with one another.

"Look at that." Granguu whistles between his teeth. "It's unnatural, but he had this coming a long time the way he's been tempting fate."

The pile of bones and offal on the stockade is Riu. Or what *was* Riu. His chattering skeleton has fabric stuffed in the teeth, but he seems to be trying his best to scream out in pain or in anger.

“Didn’t I hear that Riu robbed you?” He points at my neck, which has become uglier by the second. “Stamped your meat in few places?”

Kiri’s expression comes back to me. That blankness. The way he stared at my bruises, stock still and haunted.

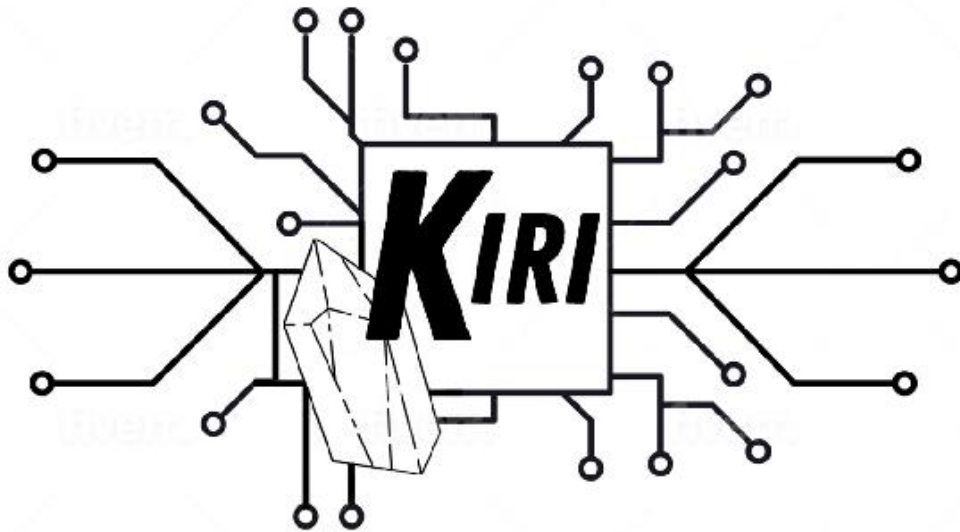
There’s a marquee above the stockade where Wiruu lists the crime committed by the offender being punished. But today, the alien message looks much longer.

“Granguu, what does it say up there?” I ask.

*“This is what happens when you touch the human female.”*

My jaw drops.

“Bit gruesome,” Granguu continues babbling. “But I like his style.”



“BEFORE WE COME to any decisions on how we can move forward, we are going to need some more information. You’ll forgive our complete lack of knowledge, but none of the surviving Kar’Kali have any experience interacting with your kind.”

We are finally gathered for the preliminary alliance meeting. I managed to present my introduction as planned and give the floor over to Pakka, but as soon as I have completed my memorized delivery, my mind is on other things. Namely, Juana. Where is she? Is she well? Excited to leave? I should be focused on keeping a peaceful tone between Pakka and Makiva, but I would rather be elsewhere. Namely, between my mate’s legs once again: smelling her, tasting her, pleasuring her...

Makiva shrugs. “What is it you wish to know?”

“How many of your kind are there? Is it mostly warriors or are there families? Where do your people keep themselves?”

The male’s lips quirk up into a sardonic smile.

“You ask the same questions that your dead intelligence agents have been trying to ascertain answers to for centuries,” he replies, leaning back in his seat.

Pakka shifts, but his expression does not budge.

“Do you intend on continuing as though nothing has changed?” he asks.

“Why don’t you tell me what has changed?” the king fires back. “From my perspective, the only change is the Deadhead I’m speaking to today’s face. Passings prior, there was another that tried to broker peace. And for my father’s time, there was another. What has changed?”

“Our former government has collapsed. We have no army. None of our warriors continue to use a suppressor chip. Many many things have changed,” Pakka states. “Do not pretend to not have noticed.”

“I notice no change at all when I see you,” the king says, flicking a hand toward the assembled warriors. “Stiff back, calculating gaze, no discernible difference between you ... You come to me hoping I’ll bow to you and offer my warriors, my population, my ships. Has that changed?”

Pakka hesitates. He looks thoughtful, not quite intimidated, but he seems to realize how important the next bit of conversation will be.

*A chip on your shoulder.*

Juana told me this phrase, and I think it applies quite well to the king of the Deviants. He sees nothing but the past. There is no denying that the Kar’Kal I was born from committed terrible acts against him and his people. To him, we are the same. He came all this way to see for himself what the survivors without suppressors were like. It annoys me a little to realize it. Maybe he even read it in the news outlets: Look at these Kar’Kali with emotions! Kar’Kali with mates! It must be seen to be believed!

“Do you have a mate, Ka’lakka?” I ask him.

Something close to a flinch. The slightest twitch in his eye.

“I’m not yet blessed,” he replies.

“Let me know when the day comes, and perhaps I will assess you for changes,” I say.

Pakka sharply turns his head my way with widened eyes.

It was a risk being so offensive to a king, but I have learned to trust my instincts over the years. I have met with many such leaders. Their personalities and appearances are intimidating, but underneath, they might crave a cheeky challenge. They come on strong, hoping to reveal their opponent's true colors. We should not let him walk away from this table thinking we are spineless.

The smile that did not meet his eyes starts to widen. His eyes twinkle. He bursts out laughing.

“Will you?” he asks. “Well said, Diplomat.”

“You are seeking a difference in us that we will not bring to this table,” I say. Pakka takes a breath, shaking his head in relief. “Do you want honesty? Losing our suppressors was not easy for anyone seated here. We would like to talk about winning the planet—the future and not the past.”

“Honesty,” the king muses. “Then let's be honest. I won't enter into any bargain with your kind unless I can be absolutely certain that I won't be stabbed in the back once we touch ground on Kar'Kal.”

“What would put your mind at ease?” Pakka asks. “How can we possibly provide that certainty?”

“I want planetary defense access.”

Silence falls for a beat.

“We do not have the codes. It's lost knowle—”

“Do not lie.”

Pakka and the Ka'lakka engage in a furious stare for an uncomfortable amount of time.

“I know that there is a survivor who holds this knowledge, and he answers to you.”

He's talking about Mori, an engineer from Pakka's original research team. I am not sure what information the king has or how he acquired it, but Mori does not know the codes. Mori simply knows the system well enough by memory that he could theoretically begin a manual restart and bring it back online. Last we spoke with the unsavory male; he told us it

could take a Kar’Kali cycle’s worth of round-the-clock work. If we could get him on Kar’Kal, we would have to hold the planet against Azza attacks until his reset was complete.

“We face the same risk of betrayal that you do,” Pakka says. “You could take control of the planet and exterminate us.”

“Yes. I could.”

“You never even told us the strength of your army. You want us to trade planetary defense codes for the mere suggestion of your personal forces?”

“I want the bomb-maker that lives on Station City to come under my care and agree to train my people on the planetary defense systems.”

Pakka snorts. I am not sure whether he is thinking of Mori the “bomb-maker” and how completely uncooperative he is, or whether he finds the king’s statement to be absurd. It could be both.

“If we are able to land on the planet with your help, my team will re-engage the planetary defense systems ourselves. Then, if all goes well with the integration of my kind and yours, we will train your chosen warriors on how the—”

“No.”

Pakka frowns. “Be reasonable. You want my small force of males to join with your army unprotected and hand over our only bargaining chip without any leverage to ensure our own survival?”

“Yes.”

Usually implacable during meetings like this, Pakka grits his teeth. “What you ask is impossible. And unreasonable.”

“You repeat yourself. You want reasonable... Hah! I’m being unreasonable according to some of my closest advisors by even appearing here in the flesh when assassination attempts made by your own government did not cease until the day they died.”

“It would not serve us to kill you,” I cut in evenly to discourage Pakka from becoming frustrated. “None that survive ranked high enough to be privy to that past. While we regret that is the nature of your relationship with our people, it is the past now. We cannot return to our old ways because we have already embraced the end of hormone suppression.”

“My parents lost their lives at the hands of Deadheads—”

“Let us not resort to this.”

“In living memory, your so-called warriors killed our people, including civilians, and took countless child captives to become soldiers. So don’t tell me I’m unreasonable. I infuriated many by accepting your invitation and speaking with you at a table in a civilized manner. So, yes, if you want to put that bloody past behind us, I expect you to walk willingly into our midst unarmed, without leverage or backup, and put yourselves at my mercy.”

We are getting nowhere.

Pakka opens his mouth, but I raise my hand.

“I think a break for private consideration is in order,” I state. “We are close to an impasse, but I propose we reconvene again after a night’s sleep. Is your team comfortable staying here on Ra’Vaga?”

“Yes.” The king leans back and glances over at his guard. “I think we will end the evening with a trip to Wiruu’s bar for refreshment before we retire. Please consider joining us. I have no trouble sharing liquor with those I disagree with.”

“Thank you for the invitation,” I say. “Perhaps we will see you there.”

The king’s smile is surprisingly genuine as he stands to leave, signaling his warriors to follow suit. It seems that the subject of our discussions has no bearing on his mood. When all the Deviants have filed out, my face falls, and I heave a sigh. Pakka blows out his breath in agreement.

“This is not going well,” he whispers.



“I recommend we attend the bar and make polite conversation with him and his warriors,” I propose. “Their cultural norms are not unlike humans, so bonding while imbibing liquor is an extremely common way of forming friendships. You have already acquainted yourself with such customs since matebonding with Jen.”

“Except I know from experience that imbibing liquor can go terribly wrong, too,” Pakka says. “What if it turns out badly? Would avoiding it be a more neutral choice?”

“The more we learn of Makiva, the more I feel he is testing us.” I tell Pakka what I’ve been ruminating on since we met the male. “I do not believe he wants to see neutral choices from us. He is trying to ascertain whether we have changed since the end of the suppressor chip era.”

“I fear he wants to absorb us into his existing power, not unlike the Alliance wants to absorb us into their net.”

“That might be true, but we do not need to allow that. Let us focus on charming him.” Each time Pakka and I discuss our strategies, I am reminded that any move we make could doom our species. Providing advisements was much easier to bear when I was one of millions, a cog in our military machine. My opinions had little bearing on the future of Kar’Kal. Now, with our leadership numbering fewer than the fingers on my hands, each choice moves us like tectonic plates. If I sway Pakka and it goes poorly, I must carry that failure on my back.

I swallow the anxieties as Pakka nods. What he feels now that he has become our de facto leader must be tenfold my own burden.

“I will retrieve Juana as we discussed and meet you back here. It may take longer if she tells me she would like to immediately board the ship. I am sure she would benefit from a visit to our med-bot.”

“I will be fine on my own,” Pakka says. “Do not concern yourself with returning if you cannot. Focus on your mate’s needs.”

“Thank you. You do not know what it means to have your support through this.”

“I know how challenging it can be when the bond ignites. Go,” he encourages me.

We exit the room together, parting when he heads for the group of warriors gathered at the bar, and I head for the alleyway. I make my way around the walls of Wiruu’s fort until I am back at the courtyard entrance. The daylight lamps do not improve the view. I glance at the place where I left Riu and find that someone has carried him off and cleared my message from the board.

I make it only a few strides before I am met by a pair of Gak in uniform holding massive stingers.

“State your business, Kar’Kali,” one of them demands.

“I need to resolve a financial matter with Wiruu,” I say. “Will you take me to his offices?”

They agree and lead me off with such little resistance that I know they must have been warned to expect my arrival. I have wandered the halls of this complex twice now. It has a straightforward layout that feels familiar because it was designed by Kar’Kali. Ra’Vaga was once a garrison for launching attacks on Azza territory, but an ugly battle left the place littered with ship wreckage. The border shifted over this place countless times. Its comm connections were destroyed. Outlaws took up residence here, and for a long time, this place was much worse than what Wiruu has made of it. Neither side cared to clear it, and the more time passed, the more impossible it seemed to evict the residents and return it to usefulness. The tent city that I can see stretching on into the dark out the windows was once a field for landing an armada.

The guards drop me at the entrance to Wiruu’s office and linger at the door when I go through. The old Gak has been waiting for me. He leans back in his chair with a pleased expression on his faded skull. His figure is framed by a massive window that overlooks the courtyard and the main gate of the fort.

“I assume you know why I am here.”

“I am. And I saw the little mess you left in my courtyard. I should charge you for that,” he drawls.

“Perhaps I should deduct fifty creds for every scratch I find on her.”

He pushes a tablet toward me. “This is what she owes me.”

One glance at the screen and I note a huge discrepancy between this number and the one that Juana told me yesterday.

“Juana was under the impression that you required a much smaller payment from her,” I say calmly, not willing to give him the satisfaction of an overreaction on my part. “Did you lie to her?”

“Humans,” he snorts, waving a skeletal hand. “They aren’t the best with calculations, clearly. She was not factoring in the proper interest rate.”

“This interest rate is higher than those found in Zaledian real estate prices.”

“Do you think that acquiring resources on Ra’Vaga comes easily?” Wiruu shows me every one of his pointy teeth when he smiles.

“Do you think that my position as a Vansk ambassador would make it difficult for me to begin a campaign to eradicate this rock of yours and all your associates?” I ask, mimicking his tone.

“Are you going to pay it or not?” he snaps, growing impatient with my tone and veiled threats. “I’m under no obligation to release her to you. With or without this debt repayment.”

“I will pay what she agreed to pay you, not because you deserve it, but because that is what she asked of me.”

The exposed muscles in his jowls are twitching with irritation.

“If not for me, she would have starved to death on a fuel station or worse, have been picked up by slavers with the

ability to move her for the money she's worth in some circles. You should be grateful, Kar'Kali, otherwise you would not have a female to be mated to!"

"Where is she right now?" I growl the question, sensing that something could be terribly wrong with his intentions. Juana made it seem like she was perfectly safe living within Wiruu's walls. But what if the male's greed has gone to his head?

"Cool it, Deadhead. She is waiting in my den, flapping her lips." He turns his security monitor to show me a view of Juana sitting beside a female Gak. They are embracing, and Juana speaks to her with tears in her eyes.

"Why are her eyes leaking?" I demand. "It is a sign of distress for humans."

"She befriended my former ward, who came to bid her goodbye. This one is like a daughter to me, and you see they have a bond, perfect proof of how well I have treated the little meatbag! So if you'll dispense with the threats and pay me, we can walk away in equitable satisfaction."

"You may have convinced Juana that rescuing her was a financial burden for you, but I for one, did not grow up on a primitive planet with no understanding of the universe. As the humans say, I was not *born yesterday*. Do not dress up a minor investment on your part as a heroic deed. You saw a desperate human and determined that you would profit with minimal risk." As I continue, Wiruu's false smile fades and fades. "You knew that the civilized universe has been looking for her and the others that were taken. I know for a fact that an Alliance representative visited here seeking lost humans, and you did nothing, presumably because they did not offer a cash reward at the time because cash rewards are only offered to registered privateers, not to scavengers and criminals. Seeing as this territory was formerly Kar'Kali territory, it is my responsibility to monitor the activity here with the help of Vansk military tech, so I also know that at least four ships have landed here since Juana's arrival. But I suppose none of them were willing to pay you for her, were they? You have been waiting for an opportunity to cash in on her, meanwhile you

indenture her into servitude at your bar while charging her for the blessing of sleeping in a closet.”

His claws are clenched.

“What part of my assessment was incorrect?” I ask. “Oh, I almost forgot... When you put her up to the act of seducing the Deviant warriors, were you banking on the possibility that one of them would imprint on her? Or were you hoping that *they* were one of the many anti-slavery privateers that regularly pay out for escaped Azza captives? Or... perhaps... were you hoping they would steal her away so that you could leverage the king of the Deviants to owe you a favor? I cannot quite decide what your game was there, but I know you had ulterior motives.”

I pause while the crime lord considers his options. He will try to weasel his way out of this without losing a single credit on his ‘investment’ in Juana.

“If you are so familiar with why I make my choices,” he says, “then you understand that I will not budge on the price. I don’t care what you did to Riu or how prestigious your precious position is. You will pay, or my crew will hide your little mate away on my order until you—”

I reach across the table swiftly enough that I have ahold him before his guard has even twitched to attention. While Wiruu is gasping for air, I slip the stinger out of his belt and stun the male behind his desk chair. Another behind me gets close to grabbing me, but I turn to slam his boss’s bones against him. Skull against skull, I use the strength of Gak bones against them.

The third guard is on me now, going in for a headbutt. I drop a sputtering Wiruu to deal with him. Elbow to the ribs, swooping kick the ankles, and then I slip my grip around his clavicles and introduce him to the hard metal floor. I stun him before he has a chance to take a breath of recovery.

Having heard the commotion, three more guards attempt to enter, but I drop them on the threshold until Wiruu is surrounded by the unconscious bodies of his crew members.

“You have lost your edge,” I sneer at him as I approach the aging Gak soldier on his back. “Your files suggest you were once a worthy opponent in battle. Has ruling over Ra’Vaga made you soft?”

“What do you plan to do?” He wheezes. “You cannot stun every warrior in my complex.”

I do not reply as I grab him by his shiny ceremonial gullet protector and drag him to the window that overlooks his courtyard. He wrestles against my grip while I tug on the window vent handle. I shove his skull through the opening and then slam it shut on the bone, easing the handle until he’s properly wedged into immobility.

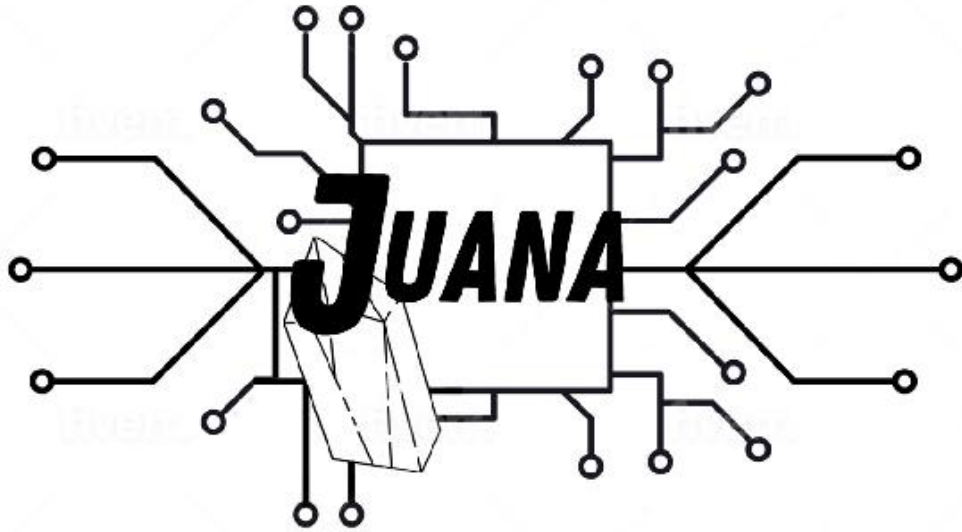
“Tell me where she is right now, and do not dare put out an order to your crew,” I say. “Because I can end your life right now and find her myself. Do you think that three Kar’Kali warriors with a fighter jet cannot wipe this fort from existence?”

“It is up for debate, *bot*.”

My kind have been called lifeless, heartless robots for as long as I can remember. It will not faze me now.

“There is scum like you lining the hull of every ship, station, and planet in this universe, and there is one thing I have learned about your particular brand of self-serving rodent. You will put your neck above all else. So I will ask you one more time where she is. Tell me the truth, and I will leave you alive. Any other reply will mean your death.”

“I’ve never heard such an elegant death threat,” he mocks me. “Can’t tell if you’re inviting me to dinn—” I shove my thumb into his eye socket, and he starts to scream.



“WE SHOULD MAKE you look presentable for this male,” Onduu says with her eyeballs all a flutter with excitement.

Gak females have seriously fucked up ideas about what’s romantic, because ever since she saw the show that Kiri put on in the courtyard, she has been hearing wedding bells on my behalf. She told me without a hint of irony that the most meaningful display of affection from a man is proof that he will rain terror upon anyone that would hurt you.

She pulls out a soft towel from her pocket to wipe away the tears that came flooding out when she arrived to say goodbye to me while I waited in one of Wiruu’s rooms for the Kar’Kali debt payment to come through. Everything I own in this life is on my person, my heart cracking with hopes that I’m moments from leaving here.

I won’t pretend that Kiri’s violent retribution didn’t fill me with some level of sheer vengeance-fueled bliss. It was a relief to realize that he didn’t abandon me last night due to disgust, but rather a need to punish Riu. The man clearly has a slice of psychotic behavior in his DNA, and while it’s kind of sexy in this particular instance, it’s also a little concerning.

“After all,” she continues as she pats the last of the dampness from my cheeks, “he has the money to pay your

debt, the strength to avenge you, and the humility to satisfy you sexually and ask nothing in return.”

“Are those the qualities you seek in a partner?” I ask her, laughing. I’m going to miss her. I tried to convince her to come, but she told me that Ra’Vaga was her home.

“Absolutely—”

Both of us freeze at the sound of breaking glass. Our heads swivel in unison to catch the blur of a figure catapulted out of a window at the central hub of Wiruu’s office.

“Kiri!” I suck in a breath, my mind quickly summoning an image of him beaten to a pulp by Wiruu’s men.

We rush to the portal view into the courtyard to discover the cause of the commotion. Sure enough, the window of Wiruu’s office has been destroyed. A crowd of Gak soldiers has gathered around the fallen body, and the courtyard has a frenetic energy at the break in typical schedule.

“Who is it?” I grip the ledge of the portal. Whipping my gaze back to the jagged hole in the window, I try to determine what happened. For some reason, I fear that if I’m the cause of Kiri’s early demise, my fragile grip on my emotions will be shattered.

I move to run for the door, but Onduu grabs my wrist.

“I can’t tell,” she whispers. “Let’s stay right here. There’s no telling what’s about to happen.”

As men below start barking orders and arguing amongst themselves, we turn our attention back to the scene in the courtyard. Finally, the crowd has broken up and a few Gak are carrying the body that was so recently chucked from the upper floors. Wiruu is in their arms, recognizable by the yellow hair and shiny throat covering.

“... Kiri did that?” I hiss out.

“Sweet starlight!” Onduu exclaims, fanning herself. “He certainly has a flair for the dramatic. I thought Kar’Kali were meant to be boring.”



Neither of us can decide what to do, frozen in rapt attention at the unfolding chaos. The fort is about to go on high alert. The warriors below are readying for a fight. In the midst of their preparations, the ship parked atop the wreck on the horizon line roars to life and lifts off. The deafening sound of the launch draws the attention of every Gak below, causing a momentary pause.

The door opens, and Kiri barges through. His eyes are blazing, fully black. When his intense stare lands on me, I feel liable to burst into flames under the attention.

“Juana, we must leave. Now.” His tone brooks no argument.

I toss my bag over my shoulder, knowing that we don’t have much time to escape this fort before Wiruu’s men come for Kiri. With one last look at Onduu, she nods in understanding.

“Goodbye! Good luck!” She cries as I run to join Kiri, taking his outstretched hand.

“Your debt is paid,” he says, before pulling me out the door.

We run through the halls, with Kiri leading the way. He keeps a slow and steady pace for my shorter legs and stalls at each turn to check for unforeseen encounters with crew. His grip on my hand is firm, but he’s careful not to yank on me. I’m so distracted by the dire situation that it takes me longer than it should to realize we’re headed toward the bar instead of to the closest exit.

“Wait,” I hiss as he slides to a stop at the last turn before we reach the back hallway and employee bar entrance. “Why are we going this way? There are soldiers in the bar! And the bouncer!”

“I must pick up Pakka and warn the Deviants of how my actions might reflect on them.”

“How do we possibly have time for that?”

He puts a finger to his lips and then points at the closet door behind me. Understanding him at once, I haul open the

closet. Before I can step inside, he lifts from under my ass and carries me straight over the threshold on his hip like I weigh nothing more than a sleepy toddler. It's dark inside, but I'm intimately familiar with this particular closet that houses the broken mop bot that I hope to never see again.

We wait in silence as a group of Gak stomps by us in the hallway. They don't say much as they go, but my guess is that they were called from their break time and came straight from the bar. While my heart is racing and my mind calculates how long we have before escape becomes impossible, I feel a gentle squeeze on my ass.

I glance back at Kiri, and we're nose to nose; his heated gaze rendered even more demonic by the shadows. It becomes very hard to ignore how my body is plastered to his. It's even harder to ignore where his palm is supporting me, gripping the curve of my ass. In fact, my jumpsuit is thinnest there, worn down by the friction of my thighs. Even the slightest twitch of his fingers is noticeable. I pretend it's not happening, but my pussy's attention is piqued. It's like one night of excitement after a months-long desert has her primed at the slightest touch.

When the Gak in the hallway have passed after a minute or so, I start to wonder what we're waiting for.

"Kiri," I whisper. "We don't have time to go the bar if—"

"I can smell your cunt," he sighs with a clenched jaw, like it's painful for him. It's news to me that he has that ability. Somehow that statement alone takes me from a flutter of interest in my core to a wave of damp need. "I need a moment or I... Or I will assault you here and now in this closet."

"Oh." My body hums with interest. I squeeze my eyes shut.

*Juana, this is so not the time for this. This is just an adrenaline-fueled reacti—*

"Does danger arouse you, *ti kori*?" He asks with a surprising hint of humor. He called me his "mate." My eyes flash open to find his nose nearly brushing mine.

“W-well, your hand is on m-my crotch!” I find myself stuttering, and when I squirm in his arms, he stiffens.

“Move like that again, and I will start rubbing you between your legs until you climax again,” he tells me in a register so low that it makes the back of my head tingle. “The scent is driving me mad.”

“Then put me down,” I choke out, because I’m starting to have insane visions of provoking him until he does what he promised. I start to reach my feet toward the floor, and he lets me go. My eyes have adjusted well enough that I know where I’m landing when I hop the foot or so down from his hold. “We’ve got more important things—”

As I tug the latch on the pocket-style door and open it an inch, I hear more Gak running down the hall. Holding my breath, I latch it shut again. I’ve got my back to Kiri’s front now, and there isn’t enough space for me to stand any farther from him. The result is that my ass is brushing his thighs, and his crotch is brushing the middle of my back. The thing is... I don’t think his lithely muscled body would clear the space my protruding ass creates between us if he didn’t have a protrusion of his own.

My chest heaves with the mounting pressure of keeping silent as the Gak outside stop to argue not far from our location.

“Do not make a sound,” Kiri’s whisper sends chills down my spine. “If you want me to stop, just bite me.”

And with that, his massive gray hand clamps down on my mouth and the weight of him presses against me. What I first only hypothesized about becomes undeniable. His hard cock is pinned against my back. At five foot six, I’m not particularly small, but his frame engulfs me as he leans over me from behind. I frantically wonder what the virgin man is up to, because I can hardly imagine him fucking me from the back in a dark room, but the thought alone fills me with the filthiest desires. Does he realize he can’t easily relieve me of this jumpsuit?

All I know is that the only thing I'm biting is my own tongue because I want to see where this goes.

I like the feeling of weightlessness created by being wedged between a metal door and near-metal muscles. Kiri slips his free hand between our bodies and feels his way around my front. Down, down, he caresses until he finds the closure at the crotch. It's a unisex garment, so the opening is only intended to allow male parts to poke out for the bathroom. Somehow, he shoves his big hand inside to stroke against my pussy, sliding his fingers between my lips without warning.

I cease breathing.

"Juana, you are so wet, one would think I have been licking you all day."

God help me, but this alien's hand between my legs could make the rest of the world disappear. Our surroundings seem to both contribute to my heightened horniness and yet not matter at all. If I was on display in front of a crowd right now, it would not make a difference because my focus has whittled down to Kiri and his fingers. He strokes me, using the wetness from my slit to glide over my clit. That delicate touch alone could break me.

"Is this how much you want me?" His breath on my ear makes me shiver with need. "Tell me. Is this for me?"

I release a muffle "Mmhnm" of confirmation.

The sounds of the arguing Gak start to float further down the hall, but Kiri shows no signs of removing his hand. I don't want him to. I need to feel release from this gentle teasing; I need it at any cost.

I rock my hips against him, chasing the sweet pressure. When he senses my impatience, he dutifully massages me faster. He's clumsy at first, but he settles into a rhythm. It's clear he was paying attention last night from the way he handles me so delicately, swirling around my center like he did with his tongue. I lose all sense of myself, my legs melting out from under me. He holds me fast against the door, supporting

my weight as I dissolve into a moaning mess. The sounds that come out of me are muffled breaths and choked cries that I weakly try to suppress.

“Quiet now, *ti kori...*” His reminder comes as he curiously dips his finger inside me, proving himself a hypocrite by letting out a subtle male groan of appreciation.

I grind shamelessly against that penetration, wanting so much more from him, wondering what the weighty length against my back feels like. He thrusts deeper, massaging my clit with the heel of his palm.

“Juanaaa,” he whispers my name with such reverence that I come close to climax at the sound of it. “This is the last thing we should be doing. But I cannot resist you.”

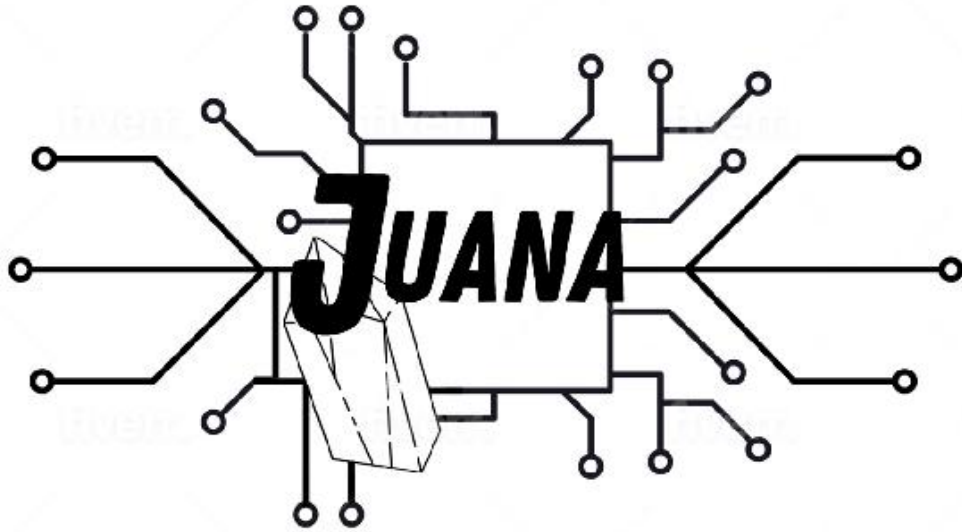
As his own excitement seems to ratchet up, he grinds against my back. I welcome the press of his body as he dry-humps me into the cool metal surface. His fingers go wild on me, and I reach for him. I want to return this pleasure. My hand catches hold of his thigh. I clench onto it, digging into that solid muscle. What I wouldn't give right now to straddle that body, see it in all its naked glory.

“Give me your sweet release,” he growls, pushing me to the edge. “I want to feel it.”

If he weren't clothed, I'd be scratching claw marks into his skin. With one last muffled cry, I soar into climax. My pussy clenches his thrusting finger, and I cling to him through a shuddering release. I'm barely aware of the words of admiration and pleasure that he spills against my ear. The feeling lingers as he gingerly removes his hand and cradles my weight. I collapse against him, still mewling at the tingle of the afterglow.

Being with Kiri feels like the whole world could disappear, and I would never notice.

He makes me remember the sweet simplicity of living without impending doom, like the anvil suspended above my head has taken a holiday. If I could live in this orgasmic high forever, I would.



MY HEAD SPINS. My body hums. I've been dead set on escaping Ra'Vaga, and I just put a pin in that to get off in a dirty storage room.

"Are you well?" Kiri asks, fretting over my mouth and chin where he had been gripping me.

"Never better," I sigh as reality comes down on me like a hammer. "We should... probably leave this closet."

I watch the black in his eyes shrink away until he's returned to his normal state. He's still holding me like a baby, gently tucking hairs into place and wiping sweat from my cheeks. I can smell my cum on his hand as he touches my face.

"But we could quickly help you out," I suggest, reaching between us with every intention of caressing his cock.

He catches me. "No, you are right. We do not have time, and you need not worry about me."

"You said that before," I pout, reminded of how hurt I was when he abandoned me after licking me senseless.

He clears his throat and places me on my feet. "I should mention that our pilot is circling above to prepare for our exit."

"Right..."

We busy ourselves with a frantic moment of putting clothing right and easing the tension. I turn away to give him the privacy he might need to deal with his lengthy *problem*. I zip the opening in my jumpsuit while I catch my breath. When I whip around, Kiri is pulling a glove from one of the many zippers on his flight suit. He slips it on his right hand, binding it tight over his wrist.

“What’s that for?” I ask, fumbling for the door latch with my shaky hands.

“We are about to encounter the others,” he says, frowning. “I’d like to keep the scent of you to myself.”

My cheeks burn.

“If you could smell it earlier, I think that’s a losing battle now,” I tell him, hauling the door open. I proceed on shaky legs, feeling more akin to a baby doe than a human woman ready to run for her life.

Kiri notices it as he follows me.

“I would be happy to carry you,” he offers as we round the corner and head down the short length of the remaining hall lined with shelves that leads to the bar entrance.

“I’m alright,” I insist.

I open the back door, hoping it’s the last time I see the place. All the Kar’Kali are gathered at the bar. Half of them are still sipping drinks as if nothing has happened. There are plenty of Gak laughing over their cups as well, ones that don’t work for Wiruu and weren’t called to duty in the courtyard. I guess one nice thing about living in an outlaw town is that no one bats an eye when chaos unfolds. They just go on minding their own business.

“Great *Ka*,” Kiri’s friend Pakka says at the sight of us. “I am relieved to see you. Care to explain what is going on?”

“We are leaving,” Kiri announces.

Every Deviant Kar’Kali pauses to look up. The king walks over.

“I take that to mean our continued meeting is canceled?” he inquires.

“Postponed,” Kiri corrects. “If that would be amenable to you?”

The king looks at me, then back to Kiri, then back to me. He seems perplexed at first, and then he starts to smile.

“I suppose I have no choice. But then, I don’t want to hold you back from a quick escape,” the king quips.

“Thank you for understanding.” Pakka swallows, glancing nervously at his short-distance communicator. The radio-based tech is not the most secure, but it works for dead comm zones.

“Vala is signaling me that he is ready to come down for a pickup. There is no room for landing, so he will be dropping a mini deck.”

We don’t bother bidding goodbyes to the Deviant Kar’Kali warriors, but they are watching curiously as Pakka gets on his alien walkie-talkie to page the one called Vala piloting the ship. They speak in code that I cannot suss out with the added layer of the translator chip. I follow at the two soldiers’ heels as they storm toward the exit that leads into the alleyway. Shots are being fired from the fort, shaking the bar. The gathered Gak release a ‘woaaah!’ of shock and amusement, following the blasting sounds up with jokes.

“I am going to carry you now,” Kiri announces. “Our pilot is under fire, and we need to be quick.”

I’m not arguing with the man. He sweeps me up without ceremony. He chooses a bridal carry, perhaps leery of having me straddling his body again because of where it led last time.

“Is he going to be okay?” I ask. I have no idea what kind of firepower Wiruu has equipped on this fort.

Pakka snorts. “He is having the time of his life.”

He peeks out into the alley, and Kiri keeps close to him.

“There are crew stationed at the end of the alley,” Pakka informs us. “I will provide you cover to get Juana up first.”



There is no time for hesitation as he launches himself out the door. Kiri jumps into action after him.

The so-called 'deck' that is supposed to take us up to the ship is no more than a metal plank dangling from a wire no thicker than my wrist. With Pakka already firing on the Gak at the end of the alleyway, Kiri leaps toward our escape route.

We start to rise as soon as his boots clang onto the surface. With a satisfying snap, the plank secures his feet with brackets. It feels like dangling from a Ferris wheel, if the Ferris wheel cart had no sides, and someone was shaking it vigorously. As soon as we're moving, the ship above is dancing to avoid attacks from the fort. Zaps of light are whizzing by.

"Shit," I mutter, as my stomach lurches.

"Under no circumstances should you let go of me," he says.

"I wasn't planning on it!" I am clinging to him like the damsel in distress I recall claiming I wasn't.

We fly up, up, up through the darkness on this death trap elevator. I look up to find us barreling toward the belly of the ship and squeeze my eyes shut.

When I open them, we're slamming to a rapid stop inside the open hatch of their ship. The blur of colors has me near to barfing, and I'm certain that the hardware on the front of Kiri's flight suit is imprinted on my cheek from the way I was burying my face in his chest.

Kiri shouts into his walkie-talkie that we're on board and the brackets pop off. The pilot must be controlling them. Kiri jumps off and finally sets me on my feet. I'm wobbly, head spinning, and I keep a hold on Kiri's arms as I come to a steady position. The deck we rode up on is already gone, descending once again for Pakka. I hope he's okay, but he seemed so fierce that I'm hardly in doubt. If Kiri can throw Wiruu out a window and waltz through the fort to come get me without a scratch on him, then I'd imagine his boss is just fine.

“I hope you are not becoming excited again because this is hardly the time or place.”

“That was an isolated incident,” I say. I’m more nauseous than horny.

“Let’s get to a more secure area,” he says, taking my hand to lead me up a tight staircase.

“What about your boss?” I ask.

“Who, Pakka?” He chuckles. “He certainly will not need our help. Do not worry. It is time you relax, because Wiruu does not have the guts or the resources to pose us many problems.”

We emerge in a cabin area with inset bunk spaces.

“You *did* pay him, didn’t you?” My nerves are getting the best of me, and I’m not ready to feel safe yet.

“Yes.”

“Was this before or after you threw him out a window?”

“After.”

“How much?”

“What you asked me to pay.”

“But he increased it,” I say, stress stroking my hair as the ship swerves back and forth. “What if he—”

“Juana.” He takes me firmly by the shoulders, helping to steady me as we surf on the wobbly floor. “He cannot reach you anymore. No one on Ra’Vaga can come close to you now.”

Before I can ask for more information, he pulls me into an embrace. It’s a bit mechanical as far as hugs go, but I melt into him. The way I fit into his arms, the way his chest envelops me... Like a yappy dog in a thunder jacket, I am calm. My shaky hands start to relax. I’m only half-aware of the goings on as Pakka runs through the room and shouts more orders.

“You are safe,” Kiri whispers reassurances with his chin resting on the crown of my head. “I promise you.”

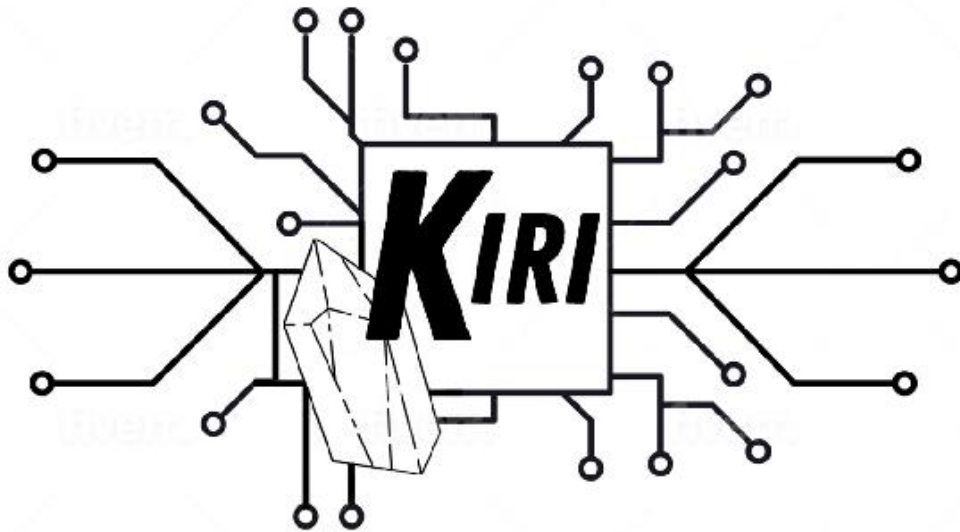
He leads me toward the window, not commenting on my sudden muteness.

“Look,” he says. “We are about to lift off.”

The fort that was my temporary home and the surrounding village have become tiny as our pilot takes us up to the edges of the false atmosphere that keeps Ra’Vaga livable. We put on a burst of speed that has me grabbing for the counter-sized ledge that frames the bottom of the window. Kiri’s hand lands on the small of my back, a warm reminder of his solid presence.

As I watch Ra’Vaga blip away, stripped from view in a millisecond because of our rapid speed, I wait for the relief to come. I wait for that hopeful feeling to evaporate my worst fears about never going home. But even after a patient moment staring at the blurred starlight whizzing by the window, I feel nothing. I expect a streak of joy, maybe a bout of grateful tears.

Like the moment when Kiri told me that he was bound to me forever, I struggle to name my own emotions. Despite the exciting change in the trajectory of my fate, my heart is not changing its tune along with it.



THE SHIP we chose for this mission was not made for civilian travel. It is a Kar’Kali design, streamlined for military use. As much as I would like to find private moments with Juana, there is little room for it. The sleeping quarters consist of four small bunks that are carved out of the wall. Juana joked that it feels like a coffin, in which humans are buried once they die. At first, I worried that she was uncomfortable, but she seems content enough considering the circumstances. She jumped right inside it and slept for quite a while after her medical check went well. The med-bot dispensed her a shot for a couple of parasites that living on Ra’Vaga must have caused, but she was otherwise healthy. I was relieved to find no signs of malnutrition, but the rations that Juana described eating sounded military grade. They were probably goods stolen from supply lines.

We begin the flightpath with one person shifts on the bridge that allow more time for others to sleep and eat. Not one of us got a full night of sleep while on Ra’Vaga. Once we leave the communication dead zone and stave off the exhaustion, we return to two-man bridge shifts for the remainder of the flight.

When Pakka and Vala take the bridge for a shift together, I am finally left a moment alone with Juana to have a much-needed private conversation. I approach her while she sits at

the small window ledge that acts as a bar-height surface. I have noticed she likes to watch the streaks of starlight fly by us. That is all she is doing when I sit beside her.

“May I join you?” I ask.

“Sure,” she says, startled from her reverie.

“We have much to discuss,” I say, my palms beginning to sweat. No matter how much I mentally prepare to speak with her, I never fail to choke on my words. I have delivered countless speeches and presentations, but Juana still leaves me feeling like a foolish trainee. “How have you been feeling?”

Her lips tremble momentarily, on the verge of laughter. She shakes her head.

“That’s the thing. I don’t know. I can’t bring myself to feel anything. Isn’t that strange?”

“No,” I reply. She seems surprised by my answer. “It makes perfect sense to me. You have been in a state of survival for quite a while.”

“Never saw myself as much of a survival girl. I’m more like a suburban girl. But something kicks in and the claws came out.”

“Naturally,” I say. I try not to think back on my military service very often, but it creeps up sometimes. What she terms as claws—I know the feeling. You turn from a thinking male to an animal clinging to life at any cost. Survival is always ugly, always dark. To survive for no reason, as I did, is an even stranger feeling.

“Why didn’t you tell me what you planned to do to Riu?” she asks.

After my hot-blooded assault on Wiruu, I had nearly forgotten the gambler that I disassembled in a fit of mating rage.

“I wanted you to rest easily,” I tell her. “And seeing as we had only just met, I did not want to show you how strong a grip the mating call had on my mind. I wanted to avoid frightening you with my anger.”

“Oh.”

“Are you unhappy with my choice to punish him on your behalf?”

Her fingers fidget. “That’s not why I asked. But next time you’re thinking about rearranging someone’s limbs for my benefit, I’d appreciate it if we could talk it over first.”

“Yes,” I agree. “But I would prefer operating under the assumption that nothing like that will be necessary in the future.”

She laughs. “I’d love that too.”

“If you have no sympathy for Riu’s fate, then why did you ask?”

Her face twists up for a moment, and she forces an unnatural laugh. “It might be stupid.”

“May I judge that for myself?”

“When you left me that night, I honestly thought it was because I disgusted you,” she tells me, pressing her face against her open palms. “Because you didn’t want a dirty Ra’Vaga street rat.”

Shock stiffens me for a frozen moment, and then heat rushes to my cheeks.

“There is not one hint of truth in that assumption,” I say quickly. “I was filled with rage and nearing what I feel right now at the realization that you could believe such a thing.”

“I’ve been busy with familiarizing myself with the worst-case scenario at all times,” she says, lightening her tone as if she wishes to brush all this off.

That is not going to happen.

“Come here,” I say, with more roughness than I mean to. I take her hands from her face and place them firmly in her lap. “If it was not clear before, I will make it clear now. You have become the center of my universe. Nothing could change my desire for you.”

“You wouldn’t even kiss me,” she says with such a small voice.

“I kissed you very thoroughly—” I argue, my cock twitching at the memory of my tongue stroking her until she was writhing against me.

“On the mouth,” she adds quickly. I do not miss the way her cheeks flush slightly. Is she thinking of my tongue on her too?

“Ah, that...” The cabin feels too warm now, even though there has been no change in temperature. “I have a reason for that which I will admit I do not know how to explain.”

“How could it possibly be harder than telling me you’re ‘mated’ to me?”

“When Kar’Kali males become fertile, they begin producing a compound in their saliva that encourages breeding. Were you to ingest this substance, it would have caused a heightened state of arousal so intense that you would immediately demand I satisfy you sexually.”

There is a drawn-out pause as she digests the information.

“Is that what makes your tongue... *tingle*?” She whispers the question like anyone could hear us right now.

“Yes.”

Her tongue darts out to wet her lips. “Kiri, we’re alone now. Why don’t we let off some steam? You can kiss me with your dangerous tongue, and I can repay you for all the good deeds you’ve done for me.”

“We have not even had the discussion about important things I brought up.”

“What else is there to discuss?”

“What we have shared between us was intimate,” I begin, unsure how to express myself. “I have strong emotions toward you, which I feel I have made obvious. I also explained the matebond, which is something I cannot control, and I understand that human women do not reciprocate the... underlying biological attachment. But I would like to initiate a

relationship with you. If you feel something for me too, I request that you consider staying at the embassy with me for a while.”

I have overdone it. She stares as if seeing nothing, then her mouth falls open to work on words that do not come out.

“I do want to stay at this embassy for a while if that’s an option,” she finally says. “But I don’t have an answer for you right now. I don’t know how I feel about anything, let alone starting a relationship. I agree that there’s chemistry between us, but I don’t want to lead you on when I can’t even get excited about going home.”

“I understand,” I say automatically, even when my heart is dropping into my stomach. “You are welcome on Vanskiikii for as long as you desire. My residence has plenty of space for you.”

“I meant what I said about repaying you—”

“There is no debt,” I say firmly, wanting to make it very clear that she will not have to concern herself with owing anything to anyone.

“You got me off twice with nothing in return. I enjoyed every second. I might not know how I feel, but I know I want to make love to you. And it would be wonderful,” she tells me.

Nothing could be more tempting. A shot of hormones straight to the brain could make me claim her here and now without a thought for whether Pakka or Vala might walk through the door.

“Not here,” I say. Remembering that she made some disturbing assumptions about me leaving her the other night, I quickly add, “Because I would like our intimacy to be special. And comfortable.”

She smirks. “Is that why you fingered me in a storage closet?”

My whole body goes hot and cold at once like a bucket of ice on my head. I flash back to the feeling of her juices coating my fingers, her cunt squeezing as she came for me, the way she was wedged in place by my body because she was so



overcome with pleasure that she would have melted to the floor without my support.

“That was a unique situation,” I rasp.

“I’ll say.” She is giggling now, enjoying ‘pushing my buttons’ as the humans call it.

“We must be careful with such things,” I say.

“How do you mean?”

“I do not feel it would not be right for me to take advantage of you when you cannot tell me your feelings. I know this because there was a time in my life when I could not name my own emotions easily. I would spend an entire day parsing through what I was feeling inside. I was lost. If you are lost now, I know from experience that it would be wrong to burden you with more complications.”

“What were you feeling? Did you figure it out?”

I nod. “Yes. I was in mourning for my people. I was angry about what was done to them. And I was depressed because I survived them and could do nothing to save them. Every day I woke up and felt my existence was futile.”

“Oh, Kiri,” she whispers, pity burning in her eyes. How could she feel empathetic towards me when she was suffering much worse on Ra’Vaga? “I’m sorry you felt that way. Do you still feel that way?”

“No. But sometimes, the feeling drops by to remind me it once took residence in my heart. It is improving because I am seeking purpose. This mission, for example. It is very important for the future of Kar’Kal.”

“Your life is important without the purpose too,” she says. “You know that, right?”

My brow furrows. “The word important requires the existence of purpose. That is the meaning.”

“Forget definitions,” she tells me. “Your importance doesn’t rely on what you do for the world.”

I consider that, but I am not sure I agree.

“You are changing the subject. I tell you of my struggle because I do not want you to give your body to me when you do not know your own mind.”

Her troubled expression makes me feel futile all over again because I cannot think of a way to make it disappear.

“How can I know my own mind when I don’t know myself anymore?”

I might not have an answer for her, but I know she will find it for herself when she has the time to relax.

“Take all the time you need to reset yourself,” I say. “In the meantime, I will take care of everything else. Do not fret over a single meal or the place you rest your head. I will ensure that you have everything you need.”

---

Juana spends much of our travel time either sleeping or staring out the window. Her minor injuries are healing, but the shots she must take from the med-bot have exhausted her immune system. She reacts to them poorly, citing unnatural fatigue and a brief fever that leaves me a wreck. I try to make sure she gets enough nutrients each day, assuring her that once we arrive on Vanskiikii, she will have no trouble finding her appetite. The Vansk have excellent cuisine, and a thriving host of native fruits and vegetables. The first thing I will do when we touch down is request daily hot meal deliveries to my apartments. I had never bothered with the service, preferring to grab quick pre-mades in the employee cafeteria.

When we have alone time, we sit and talk for long stretches. She tells me about her job working on the human entertainment called ‘movies,’ and I tell her about my life as a diplomat. After being in close contact with deserters on Ra’Vaga, she has many questions about the war. I try to answer them, but I confess to her that I am biased toward the Kar’Kali perspective on certain matters. Worse still, certain lies perpetuated by my government have come out since our regime has ceased to exist. Juana has a way of speaking her

mind without hesitation, and I love hearing her perspective when I am so tied up in Kar’Kali issues that I lose objectivity.

I explain so much to her, including the ongoing case that Pakka’s mate Jen Marsden has filed against the Alliance for attempting to ground him and his team on Earth. Her Public Relations campaign has garnered the ‘Kar’Kali refugees’ a certain reputation across the civilized galaxies. This fascinates Juana, but I am personally grateful that our matebond came *after* the publication of the feature on Kar’Kali-Human relationships. I do not wish to be featured anywhere, and I would selfishly like to keep Juana’s beautiful image out of widely distributed articles (for barbaric reasons I’d rather not interrogate).

By the time we’re approaching Vanskiikii security checkpoints, her fever has cleared up, but she’s still tired. She’s passed out when we land, so cozy in her bunk that the sounds and jostling motion of touchdown do not even stir her. When Pakka comes to announce our arrival, I signal him for silence and carefully cradle my mate in my arms. I do my best to carry her without waking her. It is not until the cool evening breeze starts tickling her face that she opens her eyes and murmurs, “Are we there?”

Vasser, the Vansk ambassador to Kar’Kal, has come to greet us on the landing pad, but I uncharacteristically ignore him completely. My mind is set on making Juana comfortable as soon as possible. I overhear Pakka explaining what happened as I head straight into the transport booth that will take us to the entrance of my private residence.

I tuck her into my own bed, glad to find either bots or servants have been to my apartments for laundering and freshening. She sighs peacefully against the pillow, but I immediately wonder whether she will need the fluffier kind that humans seem to prefer. All she has is the flat and firm head support that mimics the regulation kind that outfit all Kar’Kali bunks. I frown. Everything must be changed to suit her, I decide. Anything she desires, I would find it for her.

I wish I could climb in beside her, but arriving home means I have a long list of responsibilities to catch up on. I

press my lips against Juana's brow, wondering whether I would be any good at kissing her mouth. With one last greedy inhalation of her scent, I leave her, regretting every step.

When I emerge from my apartment alone, Vasser is waiting at the security checkpoint. He must have followed me. As usual, he is joking around with the Vansk soldiers with a jovial smile on his face.

"Kiri!" His voice booms across the marble room when he sees me. "I suppose congratulations are in order! Another Human-Kar'Kali matebond. Fascinating, fascinating..."

He rubs his paws together.

"Thank you," I say. "I will introduce Juana to you at a later time. She is still recovering from her ordeal."

"Of course." He nods. "But there is the matter of her re-entry to the civilized galaxies to attend to. You recall the paperwork we were drowning in when the stasis pods were delivered here?"

I also recall how incredibly traumatized the human females we released from the stasis pods were.

Vasser pulls a tablet from under his arm and hands it to me. "You will need to fill out the form now that she has arrived. I would not make such a fuss except... Well, I got quite a thrashing for letting things go unfiled for too long last time."

We are often treading on shaky ground at this embassy. Hiding Pakka while his criminal status was unclear, receiving and boarding kidnapped females without releasing them through the proper channels, functioning as the headquarters of a nation that lacks a planet.

"I understand." We exchange a few more pleasantries before I head to my office. There is no time for rest. Between contacting the Deviant King, the reports I must submit about our encounter on Ra'Vaga, and the matter of Juana's paperwork, I have much to attend to. Not to mention the influx of messages I have left unanswered while traveling in a dead zone.

Once I am alone in my office, I release a great breath of frustration. Juana is my priority, so I turn to resolve her situation first.

I stare at the form. There is a box that asks about my mate's citizenship status. When Juana was stolen from her ship, she was an Alliance Colony citizen. With that comes many perks and protections, but to be beholden to the Alliance and yet publicly known as a mate to a Kar'Kali survivor? It is dangerous, mostly because the Alliance is unhappy with our refusal to be absorbed by their power. If she were to venture back to Earth without me and without any formal connection to me, the Alliance could make a point of not allowing her to leave. They could make a point of not allowing me access to her.

Furthermore, every single female that left Vanskiikii bound home to Earth after their rescue from captivity was submitted to questioning by Alliance investigators as soon as they left Vansk territory. Pakka's mate fought hard to try to stop it, but she had no control over the situation. I understand that they want to find out where the other missing humans are, but I do not want to put Juana through that.

I am not a warrior who possesses any particular strengths. I am well aware that I was chosen for my current position because I was young and naïve at the time of my placement here.

I may not be the mate that Juana needs in this world, but I want more than anything to be her mate, the one she can rely on. But she has not chosen that yet. If she chooses to reject the mating bond, I could learn to accept it and let her live her life separate from me. If that were what she wanted, I would find a way to choke on my goodbye so long as she was smiling. But despite my faults, there is one rare thing I possess that could benefit my mate for the rest of her life.

Diplomatic immunity.

I personally cannot be jailed, stopped at a border, or questioned by a government official. And if I were to possess

a mate, my immunity would be extended to that mate automatically.

My mind is made up. Juana will have the one protection I can offer, even when I am not with her.

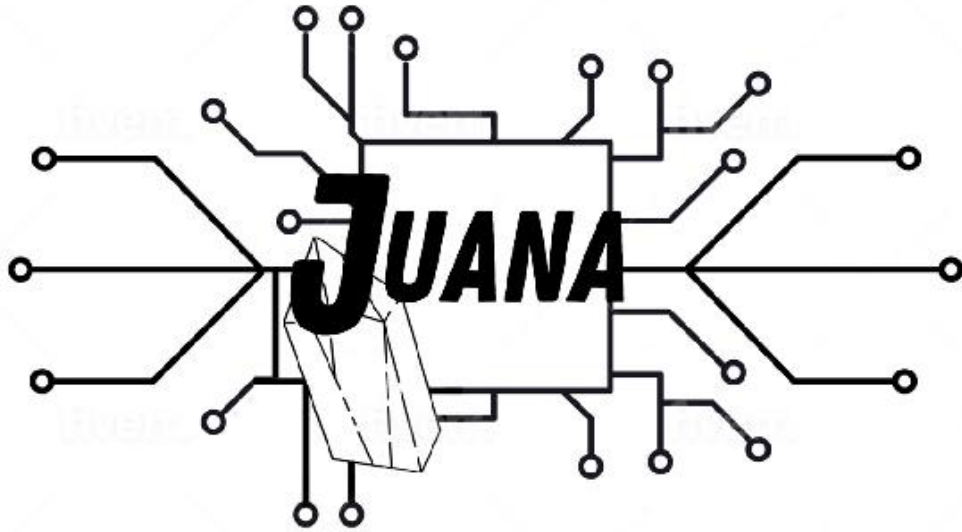
I scroll through the registry of options until I find it.

*Kar'Kali citizen.*

It requires a citizen identification code. I enter my own. It follows up my designation with one more question: "How does Juana Navarro relate to referenced Kar'Kali citizen?"

I select the box that says, "Officially mated (NOTE: Kar'Kali matings cannot be dissolved)."

My heart pounds even though I have done nothing more than fill out a form. It feels right to make her mine and give her access to everything that belongs to me. I know she has lingering worries about her safety even after we have left Ra'Vaga behind us. If I cannot banish them, I will cushion them with my support, my status, my salary. The small slice of power I have in this universe will now be hers to use. She will never feel like a 'dirty street rat' again.



I WAKE UP IN A PARADISE. Crisp silken sheets, beams of real sunlight warming my cheeks, it feels like Ra’Vaga was an unpleasant dream when I open my eyes. Kiri carried me here and tucked me into bed like a child. His sweet whispers as I drifted off to sleep made it the most peaceful slumber I’ve had in months. I slept so much on the ship here, but I was plagued by fever dreams and discomforted by the dark, coffin-like bunks. It smells like Kiri here, and I inhale the familiar scent deeply.

This is his bed. I sprawl out with the delirious smile of a woman that has evil plans to seduce him. It’s sweet that he’s worried about my feelings and wants our intimacy to be special. But I’m worried about his cock and the fact that I haven’t been given the chance to see it, let alone touch it.

I have half a mind to lay in bed and think about him until I’m horny and start touching myself. He said he could smell it, after all. I want him to smell it right here when he lays his head on the pillow.

But I’m too eager to be on a planet again to give in to that temptation, so I launch myself out of bed.

I head straight for the window, wanting nothing more than to appreciate a view that isn’t muddy alleys and ramshackle huts. It’s open already, treating me to a cool breeze when I

poke my head out. There's a jungle out there, and in the distance, the skyline of a modern city.

For the rest of the morning, I wander the luxurious building I find myself in. There is a droid or two in the hallway conducting various mundane tasks like carting laundry and delivering packages. It feels a bit lonely around here, but the quiet is a nice change. I look for clues about Kiri's life, but he doesn't keep many interesting belongings in the living space. It's oddly clinical, which I suppose is how his people tend to live. There are empty shelves, empty closets, and empty walls that cry out for creature comforts. Not wanting to invade his privacy, I don't open closed doors and stay to the main hall, a straight passage that leads me to a garden courtyard. I stand in that courtyard for an eternity, soaking in the vibrant colors and the scent of the blooms.

Vanskiikii is lush and green. To experience an atmosphere similar to Earth's after so long on Ra'Vaga feels like heaven. I want to gulp down all the air. It's humid, nothing like home, but it feels real. I want to cry out with joy, but I'm afraid to be happy. I'm shifting between bouts of bone-shaking relief and intense paranoia that the rug is going to be pulled out from under me.

“Miss...?”

I jolt to attention.

“Miss, are you lost?” A cat-person has stopped to address me. They have eyes the color of limes and a mane of rust-colored hair.

“Maybe,” I reply, my eyes drawn to their fuzzy flicking tail. “This might sound crazy, but I don't actually know where I am, aside from this being the Vanskiikii planet.”

A fanged smile splits their face. “That's not crazy. This is the Kar'Kali embassy, and it's been absolute chaos around here for quite a while. I'm not sure why you weren't set up in the guest wing, but I can show you the way there. That's where the other humans were staying.”



“Am I not supposed to be here?” I point at the hallway where I came from.

“That’s the ambassador’s private residence,” they explain. “Diplomat Kiri lives there.”

“Right, and where’s Kiri now?” I ask.

“In his office, of course! He’s been very busy all morning. I’m his secretary’s assistant, Bellam. Feminine descriptions, if you please.” She thrusts her paw at me. “This is how humans greet, correct? And don’t worry, I put my claws away.”

I take her paw and shake it gently.

“Wow, soft fur,” I say. Kiri’s *secretary* has an *assistant*? “I’m Juana.”

Bellam preens. “Oh, you humans are too flattering. I was sent to drop off some materials that Kiri wants to go over after office hours, then I can walk you down to the guest area.” She shows me a silver folio with a keypad lock on the outside.

“He’s really busy, you said? What’s he up to?” I follow alongside her as she heads the way I came from. She immediately starts chattering, talking faster than I can follow.

“I haven’t even seen him! Isn’t that crazy? Meetings, meetings, meetings. I’m not sure he’s slept since he stepped off the ship. I assume you’re the human they rescued while they were away. I heard we had a new arrival. I mean, you might as well start calling this Earth with all the humans we’ve been piling up, not that they’re piled up. They’re absolutely treasured guests here. It isn’t every century you witness the evolution of an entire species, is it? To think Kiri’s kind were on the brink of extinction! And now we’re nurturing human hybrid babies! We Vansk take it *so* seriously that we are protecting the future of Kar’Kal. Human-Kar’Kali relations are at the forefront of our mind here.”

I barely know what she’s going on about, even though Kiri filled me in on some of the recent embassy happenings.

She opens one of the many doors in the middle of the long hallway and marches in. I peek inside to find what I assume is an office. It’s very modern, with a great big comm call screen

and a desk with inset tablets that are currently scrolling alien text alerts. Bellam carefully places the folio in the center of the desk and then turns back to join me.

“Done!” she announces. “Such a tough job I have.”

I chuckle, warming up to her. “Is Kiri a good boss? Do you find he’s... fair? Not harsh, I hope?”

“Of course! He’s so polite. He’s honorable and very honest. Maybe *too* honest for some Vansk’s preferences, but I don’t mind at all. He’d probably apologize to *you* if he bumped into you wandering his private residence, so if that’s what you’re worried about, I wouldn’t even think of it! I meant to ask how you got all the way down here. There’s an entire security checkpoint between here and the public areas.”

We pass through the garden courtyard again before she leads me down a glass-encased breezeway. At the end, there appears to be an elevator.

“That’s where Kiri brought me.” I don’t know if it’s appropriate to explain our strange relationship. “I was asleep when we landed.”

Bellam considers that with an uncharacteristic pause.

“Kiri is an absolute pillar of integrity,” she tells me. “So don’t read it as anything untoward. I hope you weren’t too disoriented by waking up in a strange bed.”

Ah, she’s worried I’m creeped out. I guess I shouldn’t tell her that the *pillar of integrity* paid to lick a prostitute’s pussy, dismembered a petty thief, and defenestrated a crime lord.

The elevator we board doesn’t simply move up and down, but in every possible direction. At first, the feeling freaks me out, but it moves so smoothly that I quickly realize I have nothing to be worried about. It spits us out at the security checkpoint Bellam mentioned where a couple of armed guards lean against the wall. Both of them smile and greet Bellam on our way past.

“This checkpoint guards more than just Kiri’s apartments,” she’s explaining to me. “There are guest rooms for VIP visitors like heads of state that might need more serious

security. There's a small armory, an emergency bunker... Oh, and the spirits cellars."

"The spirits?"

"We Vansk take liquor very seriously."

We encounter many more people, mostly Vansk cat-aliens like Bellam, as we enter the public area of the building. Bellam's mouth moves a mile a minute, so much so that my translator can hardly keep up. She points out views from the window, random pieces of art hanging on the walls, and introduces me to a few of the embassy housekeeping staff. We stop in a huge lobby space, which is apparently a hub where many paths meet.

"The other humans are sprinkled throughout the other guest areas. There are rooms upstairs for temporary stays and then there are some long-term living apartments that are being occupied by the families in residence— Oh, Togo!"

She flags down another worker mid-sentence, yanking him by the elbow until he stops to talk with us.

"My new friend here just arrived, and we're looking to get her set up with a guest area where she can be comfortable. You wouldn't have her paperwork in your system yet, would ya?"

Togo nods at me in greeting and takes out the tablet tucked under his arm. After some fiddling and many thoughtful "hmm" noises, he flips the screen around to show Bellam.

"Juana Navarro. Earth human. Kar'Kali citizen. She's been assigned to the Diplomat quarters. Her bag was delivered there, along with a welcome basket prepared by Jen Marsden. Was it... not received? I can confirm with the couriers."

"Kar'Kali citizen?" Bellam inquires, stealing the question from my lips.

Togo taps the screen with the tip of his outstretched claw. "Status was altered this morning. Congratulations are in order. She recently completed Kar'Kali mating rites with our very own Diplomat Kiri."

"What?" I hiss.

Bellam and Togo both stare at me. Bellam looked ready to scream with joy and embrace me before she caught sight of my expression. I don't know what to say.

"You weren't aware of this status change?" Bellam asks slowly.

"I wasn't aware I missed my own wedding," I choke out.

"Don't you worry," she quickly assures me. "As I said, Kiri is a pillar of integrity, and I'm sure we can work this out when the working day has ended. I'd be happy to—"

"Where is he?" I ask.

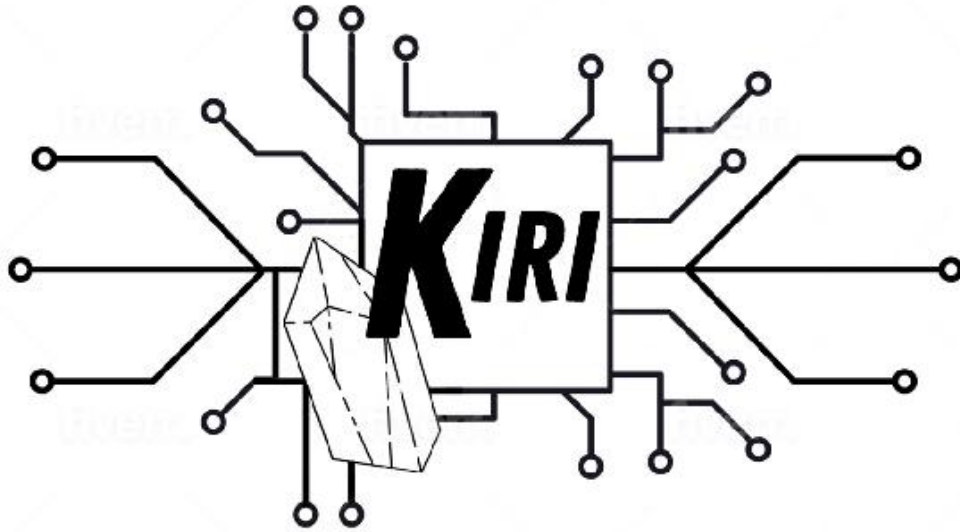
"As I said it's an absolute monsoon of meetings—"

"Where. Is. He?" I grit my teeth, trying to remain calm and not take my irritation out on sweet Bellam.

My alien crush, my savior with his magic tongue. My black-eyed avenging angel. The one who whispers sweet words in my dreams.

Asshole.

I'll kill him.



“FOR DECADES, it would be standard passings between conversations exchanged with Deadheads,” the Ka’lakka Makiva muses, lounging in a nondescript comm room. “Now it seems as though I cannot make it a cycle without seeing you.”

He connected to me from an undisclosed location, looking as unconcerned as ever. The distance between his person and my mate makes it much easier for me to not act like a lunatic over the fact that he almost received a seductive dance and a night of pleasure with my Juana. I remind myself that it does not matter, but the mating beast still grumbles in the back of my mind.

“We agreed to pick up where we left off, and I hope you will agree that there is no time to waste when it comes to the fate of our shared home planet.” I try to show no signs of my anxious energy.

“Is it shared?” He asks, raising one *kali* blue eyebrow. “I think that’s the main trouble we have in forming an alliance. Will we be sharing rights to the planet if we manage to take control of it? I certainly won’t budge on the matter of settling my people there and ruling them in the ways of our ancestors.”

“As Pakka tried to explain, we are accepting of this, but we would not like to be forced to fall under your rulership. We

will need to find a way to establish our own leadership for what little remains of our forces.”

“So that you may someday rise up against me and bring us back to what once was? I ask this question because it’s what every one of my citizens will ask me. If you are allowed to live side by side with us, how are we expected to sleep at night? Promises do not make trauma disappear.”

“If you are serious about this, then we will make a plan. But the details cannot be resolved over a comm line, regardless of security measures.” Round and round goes the life of a diplomat. Round and round, I chase the same arguments, trying to heal the same old wound. “After our last meeting, have we proven our trustworthiness well enough to convince you to attend a new session at a secure location on Vanskiikii?”

Makiva considers, while raking a hand through his mass of blue waves.

“The embassy?” he asks.

I frown. “Must you be so obvious via comm?”

“It is hardly a secret that your leader resides there now. It will be at the embassy. I will be comforted by the proximity of Pakka’s mate and child. I hope he would not slaughter me there and risk the possibility of a very tragic backfire.”

He is morbid, but I cannot fault his cautiousness.

“Very well,” I mutter.

The door opens abruptly, surprising me mid-sentence. There should be a message outside showing that a private comm line is ongoing. Such a rude interruption has never happened to me while in a session like this before.

“We need to talk.” It is Juana, stomping over the threshold with fury in her eyes. “Now.”

I glance back at the comm screen. The king of Deviants has witnessed my shocked expression and overheard my mate’s angry demand. He looks liable to break into a fit of laughter.

“Should we reschedule?” he asks. “Again?”

I give him the Kar’Kali hand signal for ‘give me a moment’ and mute the call.

“Juana,” I say, still not believing that she barged in on such an important meeting without any embassy staff intercepting her. “What is the meaning of this?”

“I should ask you the same question,” she fires back. “This morning, I found out I’m married. I must have missed the part where you included me in that decision?”

It feels like all the air inside my chest has been sucked out. I search for words but find nothing. Great *Ka*, she is so angry I can feel the heat coming off her. I am half devastated, and half aroused at the way her body is shaking, ready to pounce on me and start pummeling.

“Let me end this call, and we can discuss this.”

I return to the comm operator. Makiva has a tablet out and has begun reading while he waits for me. I try to think of a more mortifying comm call and come up empty. I turn on the sound and clear my throat. He looks up and grins.

“In trouble with your mate?” he inquires.

“We will have to continue this conversation at another time.”

“What else is there to say? I have agreed to your invitation. We will arrive on Vanskiikii when it suits us to land. If I scent even a hint of subterfuge, I will never accept a comm request or peace offering from your current leadership again. Do not ask me when. Simply be prepared.”

This is why our kind eschewed royalty for so long. This male is as irritatingly domineering as they come.

“Fine,” I agree, darting a glance at Juana.

“My advice? Beg,” he says.

“Excuse me?”

“Beg. On your knees.” He hand signals his goodbye and drops off the connection.

I stand, unsure how I feel about receiving mating advice from him. What would he know? He has no mate. When I turn to receive Juana's glare, I know that I will beg for her. If that is what it would take to see her smile again, I will beg for intervals.

"Please," I say to her, already begging. "Let us not speak about this until we are in private. We can return to my quarters."

She sourly agrees to this, and we silently walk through the embassy. The energy between us must be repelling because not a soul approaches us as we pass by the constant activity of the public areas. Here I thought I would find her relaxing in my quarters when the working day was done. She deserves a day to reset herself, if not a full cycle of time spent with nothing but hot baths, long sleeps, and walks in the gardens.

We pass through the security checkpoint, and as soon as the transport booth doors seal shut, Juana unleashes her fury upon me.

"How dare you? How *fucking* dare you, Kiri? And before you try to act like you had no idea what you were up to, there's no excuse when you personally know more than a few human women. You know perfectly well that getting married on Earth is not something people take lightly."

"On the contrary, I have heard that humans in your region of the planet routinely enter into marriage pacts after knowing one another for a single day's time. Or they might meet on the day of their mating ceremony." Jen Marsden even described to me a place called Vegas where humans can arrive without notice while imbibing mind-altering liquors and leave matebonded in less than an interval's time.

"Don't tell me about humans," she snaps. "Did you or did you not register me as your *wife* while I was *sleeping* without discussing it with me first?"

"I did."

"Why?" She throws her arms out wide. "Why did you think that was okay?"



My heart hammers hard, and I try my best to keep my black mating beast eyes from appearing. I can imagine it would only upset her more if I did not stay in control of my emotions during this important conversation.

“I planned on explaining my decision to you as soon as I returned here. I did not expect you to find out from someone else.” I suppose there is no point asking how she found out.

*“Explaining your decision?”* Her nostrils flare.

I have learned that when Earth women repeat your own words back to you, you have said something extremely insulting. The transport spits us out in the garden atrium that acts as my reception area. I step out, and she follows me, waving her arms to express her irritation more creatively.

“That’s the thing,” she continues. “This was not your decision to make.”

“I apologize for not thinking this through. If I had realized how much this would distress you, I would not have done this. But if I could explain myself—”

“Go ahead. I’d love to hear what was going through your head!”

I cannot tell if that was sarcasm. I am too panicked to suss it out.

“Our relationship with the Alliance is not stable at the moment,” I start as I take a seat on the bench near the edge of the garden. “That is why we are carrying out our leadership decisions from here on Vanskiikii where our allies protect our independence. The Alliance has a proven record of taking advantage of familial connections to force others to do their bidding. They might call someone a ward when they are little more than a hostage. It does not happen as often anymore, but these are dangerous times. Pakka and his team was very close to becoming prisoners of their own laboratory that they occupied on Earth—”

“Bring it back to the point.”

“I do not trust the Alliance. As a resident of one of their colonies, you are considered an Alliance citizen. Or you were

before I registered you as my official mate. Not only are you no longer a subject of the Alliance's empire, but as my mate in particular, you are extended the perks of diplomatic immunity."

"That might be very handy for me if I were a criminal," she says. "But I'm not, so I don't see why I need diplomatic immunity."

"If you ever returned to Earth, they could question you. They could take you into custody to manipulate my decisions. They could do whatever they wish, because the Alliance will always find a path to get their way."

She lets out a sigh. "What was stopping you from telling me all this before you signed the paperwork?"

"You were so exhausted. You needed to rest, and I was put on the spot. This documentation was for border crossing, so it was time sensitive. I did not want to risk you being questioned \_\_\_"

"But we're here with your allies, as you just said! Couldn't it have waited? Couldn't you have woken me up? Look, I know you, and I knew you would have some honorable reason for doing this, but the fact that you did it behind my back without my permission makes me very much *not* want to be married to you!"

That last statement feels like a direct strike from a stinger.

"I am sorry for that. I will admit that some part of me chose not to ask you because I did not want to be told no."

"And there it is. So deep down, you knew that I might have a problem with what you were planning to do, huh? And you did it anyway."

I fear I have committed a grave betrayal. The icy realization that our tentative intimate relationship might never be repaired after this begins to wash over me from the tip of my head to the pit of my stomach. Prior to the Azza attack and the loss of my suppressor chip, I never felt things like this. It feels like a creature gnawing on me from the inside out. It feels like a miniature death. I would worship at her feet to

make the pain of hurting her and bearing her hateful stares go away.

“Please,” I rasp, searching for what response will heal this wound between us. “Please forgive me for this, Juana. I swear to you that the only desire in my heart when I did this was to protect you. I knew when I submitted the document that it did not mean you would stay with me. In fact, I did it knowing that you might choose to return to Earth and continue your life without me. I would never want your connection to me to interrupt your happiness...”

She is listening, for whatever that is worth. She takes my words in with tight lips and shaky hands.

“Worst of all,” I go on, hoping I am not plunging myself into the ashes with every additional word, “I had hoped you would be at peace today and rest up. Clearly, I have ruined that for you. I want you to feel comfortable here and heal your injuries, to not want for anything after the struggle you have gone through.”

“I think I’d like to be at peace too,” she replies with an unsteady voice, turning to look for somewhere to sit. “But I know what I’m about to say to you is going to hurt your feelings.”

There is a Vansk-style lounge chair in the corner that I never sit in. She throws herself down and tucks up her knees. I have noticed how often she sits like this when she is thinking or emotional, like she is curling up into herself.

“Do not worry yourself about my feelings when I am the one that has done you wrong,” I say.

“Do you know how this feels to me? It feels like I have switched one cage for another. I wasn’t even free of my debt to Wiruu for a week before you made me your wife. First, I was stolen and kept in a tube. Then Wiruu found me and told me I owed him for everything that kept me alive. And now? Now there’s a piece of paper that says I belong to you.”

She was correct in her assumption. It hurts. To realize that my matebond is a cage to her, no different from the weight of

Wiruu's debt? It hurts my heart. Worst of all, I feel the mating hunger spark in my chest as the sound of that phrase *I belong to you*. Because the terrible mating beast that haunts my thoughts rumbles its approval. *She does belong to you*, it whispers. *You have done right because she should belong to you always*.

I rush to her side, getting to my knees on the floor beside the lounge.

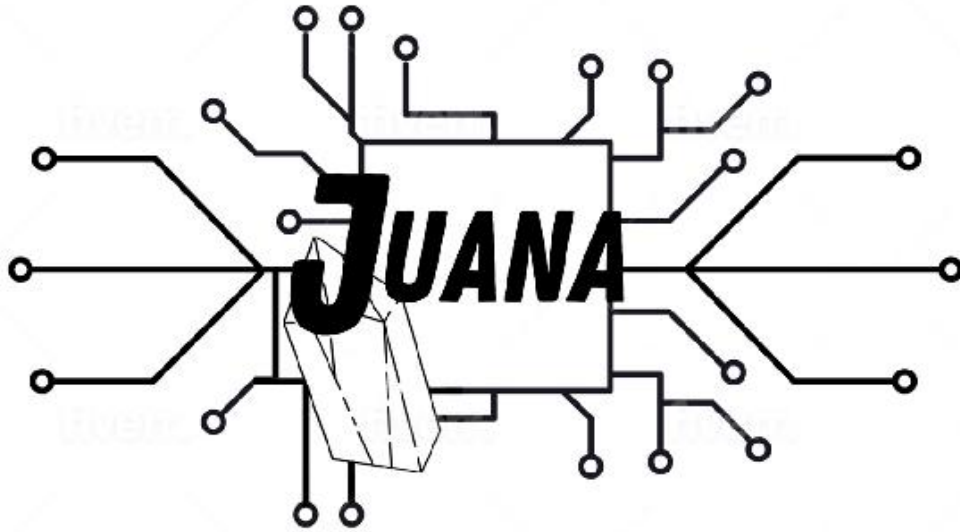
"I am sorry, Juana. I confess I never considered your past when I made this choice, and that was wrong of me. I had a singular mind about it, and that was selfish of me. I promise I will never stop you from doing what you wish in this world, even if you seek to exile me from your life. Whatever you want, I will support you in getting it."

"Then you can start proving that now," she tells me, fingers digging hard into her own skin. "Because we need to get a divorce as soon as possible. We'll end this mistake, and we can start over. It would help clear the air between us."

My eyes fall on her bare feet, her ankles, and the tightly clasped hands that cage her folded legs. I want nothing more than to reach out and touch her. Better yet, I would like to wrap my body around her and hold her until she forgives me. But for the first time since the mating call began, I feel a wall between us. She does not want my touch. And because of what I must tell her, I fear it will only get worse from here.

"There is no Kar'Kali divorce. Our matebond cannot be dissolved."

I do not tell her that I am grateful for this fact. It is a relief that regardless of what comes of this mistake I have made; I have a permanent little string tied to her heart. No matter where she goes, a piece of me will follow her, linking us together forever.



19

“THAT’S IMPOSSIBLE.”

It’s difficult to keep yelling at Kiri when he looks up at me like a puppy I just kicked into the alleyway and left for dead. He’s on his knees, digging his fingers so hard into the furniture that I worry he’ll leave a permanent impression. It bursts the bubble of fury that had me barging into his office in the first place.

I throw my legs over the edge of the fluffy papasan and push his hands away. I stand, needing to put distance between us. I pace in a small circle, and when I turn around, I realize he has not moved. He’s still on his knees, now looking up at me. His silver skin catches the sunlight, subtly shimmering with that strange iridescent sheen. He would look like a god to a human with no knowledge of alien species.

“Isn’t this supposed to be the future?” I demand. “You’re telling me we’re in a modern civilization that has been using space travel technology, talking to each other in different languages with translator chips, using time-space continuum bending ships to cross a galaxy in a day, and I can’t get a freakin’ divorce?”

“Time and the progress of intelligent life-forms does not move on a ladder towards utopia,” Kiri says with a frown.

“Even now, we are fighting a war against conquerors that sought to enslave us before they chose extermination instead.”

I stare at him, hating the reminder that my *husband* is a soldier and an honorable man who has spent his entire life working against the expansion of the evil empire that almost stole my life from me. It’s enough to make me forget why I was angry at him.

“You know what? Speaking of time and space... I need some.” I need to think and perhaps crack open some articles on intergalactic marriage laws.

He blinks. “I understand. But I hope this is not the end to our conversation. We have not reached a solution.”

“I know. I appreciate that you apologized and acknowledged that you did wrong. But now I need to process for a while and think about this without you here... in front of me.”

He looks away, cheeks turning pink. He doesn’t know what he’s doing to me—he has no idea. How dare he be so cute when I’m mad at him?

“I meant for this to go differently,” he confesses what’s obvious to me.

“Then you should have thought about this *before* making a permanent decision for me,” I say. Before he can reply with any more charming pledges of his undying love for me, I turn on my heel. I keep my feet from running, but I move as quickly as I can anywhere away from him. To his credit, he doesn’t follow or even call out to stop me. I can’t bear to look back and see his puppy dog eyes. I hate that I’m hurting him even if he deserves to feel bad for breaking my trust in him. A sickly feeling sinks into the pit of my stomach.

If I can’t bring myself to hate him for this, it must mean dangerous things about my deepest feeling for him. Lucky for me, those emotions are locked away for the time being. For once, I’m thankful for the wall I built inside that separates me from the woman I once was. After all, I made it to protect me. I didn’t expect to need protection from Kiri, though.

---

Adjusting to life at the embassy exhausts me because I feel like I've been dropped back at the start of a video game with all new characters to meet and all new rules to abide by. Thankfully, the stressors are mostly mental, because the Vansk staff and the handful of humans that reside at the Kar'Kali embassy are friendly and helpful. The surroundings are so picturesque that I often feel I've stumbled into a vacation resort. And I'd be remiss not to mention that the food is to die for. After eating dry rations for weeks on end, with only Onduu's meat pies to break the monotony, I've become addicted to the wealth of fresh fruit and vegetables that Vanskiikii has to offer.

Kiri respects my need for space without question. He vacates his own apartment, sending Bellam on his behalf to insist that I stay there. I question it at first, but the bubbly cat girl tells me that he often chooses to sleep in his office. The guest areas are apparently at capacity, too. The rooms that are available are being prepped for some impending visitors that have the embassy staff in a tizzy of activity.

When I start to make myself at home in Kiri's apartment, I find the welcome basket Togo had mentioned. It was sitting on the countertop that acts as a kitchen table, which I might have found if I'd taken the time to search for food before I ran into Bellam when I woke up. The contents are a sweet combination of makeshift human products: "chocolate chip" cookies, a box of oatmeal-adjacent grains, a carton of mystery milk, and alien products with human-friendly labels. There's a dropper bottle with a faux Advil label and instructions that say one drop on the tongue = one pill. The body wash, shampoo, and conditioner set has a lovely note that says, "Because the Kar'Kali don't think about bath products..." Sure enough, when I go to place it in the shower stall, I find only a black disc that must be soap and nothing else on the sparkly clean shelves.

The basket creator even thought to provide a printed map of the embassy layout that comes with the daily schedule. Bellam had showed me how to access such info on the many screens that can be found throughout the premises, but I'd much rather fold this little paper and keep it in my pocket. It feels good to have my human needs met without asking.

There are plenty of matters to distract myself with on the first few days back in civilization. I schedule much needed checkups with doctors that aren't robots. I get in touch with my family and friends via the ultramodern comm system equipped on the alien devices that Bellam helps me operate. Kiri put her at my disposal, and I tried to apologize to her for turning her into more of a babysitter than an embassy staff member. She wasn't having it though, enthusiastically claiming that helping me was an enjoyable break from her mundane courier tasks.

Deliveries arrive that I know Kiri is behind. Hot dinners appear when my stomach is growling. A pile of towels turns up in the bathroom, relieving me of the strange quick dry shower setting. I open the closet to find garments on hangers in my size. Every evening, Bellam leaves when the other workers clock out, but the deliveries continue when she's gone. On that very first night, a basket appeared while I was in the shower. Inside were five different pillows of varying size and fluffiness. I ran to the doorway, wondering if I would catch him, but there was no sign of him. But I knew it was him. I could smell his lingering musk, earthy and male. I can't help but wonder if he heard me in the bathroom cursing the alien technology as it blasted me dry like a dog at a pet salon. The thing couldn't be less curly hair friendly. Not only did I feel like a poodle, but I also looked like one. I don't know how the man anticipates my needs, but he manages to. The drawers even fill with underwear, and I cannot fathom how he determined my size or what human women like to wear. When I found them, I pulled out a hand-sewn silk bralette the likes of which I couldn't imagine treating myself to back on Earth. I sat cross-legged in front of the drawer in a state of shock and amazement for a moment. The petty, pissed-off Juana had half a mind to tear it apart and courier the pieces to his office.



Except then I put it on. Enjoyed the butter soft feel of it on my skin. Modeled it in the mirror. Admired the way it fit me like a glove.

*Why waste such a beautiful thing?* I thought.

So I wear the clothes. I use the pillows, eat the dinners, walk around his undecorated apartment with the fluffy towels wrapped around me. It feels like a much-deserved vacation, and even though I spend the days in solitude, I don't feel alone. I bask in laziness. I wander around. I ignore the prospect of going home and dealing with my real life. I simply exist, not thinking about anything too deeply.

But after three days or so, it becomes harder to keep up with self-isolation. Exchanging messages with my family becomes a constant question of when I am going home, and I can no longer skirt their inquiries about how I'm feeling and whether I'm okay. I don't know how to tell them that I'm not okay. So, I send updates that do not mention how I feel at all. I recount what happened without gritty details and promise them I'm working on scheduling a video call to Earth and a flight home. I send them selfies of me in the beautiful Vansk jungle with a smile on my face, claiming I'm enjoying it like a tourist. I do not tell them I'm married. I do not tell them I'm numb and strange and not the same at all.

I miss Kiri. I miss his presence even as it lingers around me like a ghost I can't escape. There's nothing stopping me from seeing him but my pride and my fears.

Flickers of anxiety seem to crop up at any inconvenience. I was once the queen of rolling with the punches, excelling at my job by figuring it all out on the spot. I was unflappable. I was hailed by my coworkers as a calm within the storm of set dressing chaos. It started when Bellam told me there were some issues with my paperwork that needed to be sorted out. When I met her at her office, I was a wreck, internally wondering whether some insignificant detail would be the difference between going home to Earth and being stranded once again.

“What’s wrong?” I had asked, not willing to show her any signs of the panic happening within me.

She had simply looked up, with her charming kitty cat smile, and said, “Oh, Juana! I clear forgot to tell you! Your production company returned my message to let me know they had already resolved all that mess for you. We’ll have your civilian travel clearance ready in no time at all, and then it’s just a matter of deciding when you want to arrange a flight path back to Earth.”

There was no problem at all, and I nearly hyperventilated over the whole thing. Is this my life now? Panicking over every minor setback because my body is primed to prepare for impending doom at a moment’s notice?

The following day, Bellam pages my room, and I jab the intercom screen to pick up.

“The office is swamped at the moment, so I can’t check in on you this morning. But—“

“Do you need help with something?” I ask her. “I might be terrible with alien tech, but I’m a quick learner.”

A beat of silence. “I think you should keep resting. It’s been good for you! Every time I see you, you’re looking healthier than the last time.”

I ignore the urge to remind her that I am not an invalid because I know she only wants the best for me.

“But I did want to ask you if you’d be open to receiving a visitor today.”

“Oh?” Her words send my chest into a tight flutter of hope and panic. Is it Kiri? Is he dying to speak with me? Missing me terribly? Should I throw caution to the wind and just accept this marriage, forgive him for everything, and hide from the world forever in his arms?

“Pakka’s mate,” she tells me. “Her name is Jennifer Marsden. I’ve mentioned her before, right? She asked me if you might be okay with meeting her and chatting with her today.”

Considering that Pakka is the unofficial leader of the remaining population of Kar’Kali warriors, his mate is sort of important. Through my talks with Kiri and the embassy chatter that Bellam babbles at me, I’ve learned she’s a bulldog who has taken on a leadership role for herself at Pakka’s side. Kiri once described her recently born daughter to me. He talked about the baby girl with stars in his eyes, calling her the future of his species. It was enough to make any girl’s ovaries twist.

“Yeah, of course,” I say. “I’ve been lying around plenty. It’s time I make some use of myself.”

“If you say so,” she agrees cheerily. “In that case, I’ll send her over. Oh, and shall I book that scheduled vid connection to the Los Angeles Public Intergalactic Comm Center? I was given a list of time options that suit your parents.”

“Sure,” I reply tightly. Whether I’m ready or not, I can’t hide forever. I didn’t escape Ra’Vaga to isolate myself from the world. I need to find the strength to go on living my life.

“Last little thing...” The words come out slowly in a high-pitched tone.

“What is it?”

“I sent a bot to deliver a note from Kiri. Did you get it?”

I start looking around with way too much enthusiasm. My eyes fall on a tiny pink square sitting on a tray in the living area.

“I got it,” I confirm, suddenly too focused on the note to hear the rest of her pleasantries.

The soft vellum pressed with flowers is folded quite intricately. I carefully unfurl it, trying to avoid tearing the delicate stuff. The perfume of the flowers tickles my nose. I’m surprised to find English lettering on the inside, done in a painfully neat typeface.

“Enjoy the rest of your day,” Bellam bids me goodbye from the intercom. “I’m heading home before the rains start.”

“Thanks, you too,” I reply distantly.

---

*Juana,*

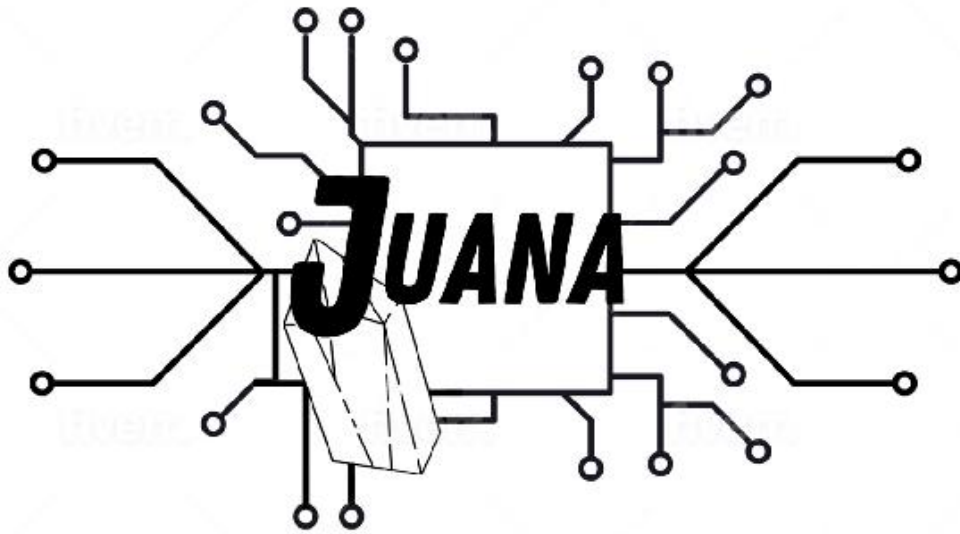
*If you are ready to see me again, will you come to my office when you have time today? I miss you. I have things I must say to you if you will bear to hear them. Or, if you are still angry, at least come by to tell me how hideous my English writing is. I want to see you, even if you feel like yelling at me.*

*Yours,*

*Kiri*

---

“Damn him,” I murmur. It takes me a few tries, but I manage to fold it up again into the crisp square it came in. I tuck it inside my bra, a Ra’Vaga practice I’m not rid of just yet. In any case, it feels right to have his words against my heart, in the warmth of my chest.



A FEW HOURS LATER, Kiri's door chimes to announce a visitor. I open it to find a petite blonde woman there with her arms crossed over her chest. She wears a flowy Vansk style tunic over a rather human-looking pair of yoga pants with flip-flops.

"Hey, I'm Juana. It's great to meet you," I say, happy that my automatic manners and disposition have clicked into place. I was a bit worried that I'd act like some feral thing when faced with a human face again.

"Jen." She grins, bright green eyes sparkling. She thrusts a hand at me. "Not a hugger."

I shake it and laugh. "That's alright by me."

"I came around to see how you're settling in. I don't wanna bother you or anything if you're still decompressing."

"Please come in," I say, welcoming her into Kiri's place like it's my own. "I've been decompressing for three days straight. I could use some human interaction."

I'm joking, but Jen frowns as she follows me through to the living area.

"Look, take all the time you need. Every human who's come through Vanskiikii has seen some crazy shit. It ain't easy."

“Thanks for the basket,” I say, not sure how to address this woman that is functionally the First Lady of my newly acquired nationality.

“Did you enjoy it?” she asks. “I thought it would make anyone from Earth visiting here feel more at home. I know how lonely it can be to end up on a strange planet with no one to lean on and no reminders of home.”

“Were you out there because of this kidnapping business as well?”

“No,” she says. “It’s a long story... tangentially related to the reason the other ships bearing human civilians were attacked. But I came here with Pakka when he first escaped Alliance territory. He had a mission that required him to leave me here by myself. Except Kiri was here with me. Back when it was so much quieter around here.”

My stomach flutters at the mention of Kiri. Guilt is pumping through me at the thought of him and his miserable expression when I nearly flayed him alive for his marriage stunt.

“It’s pretty quiet at this end of the building,” I tell her.

She nods, glancing at the door.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course. You can ask me anything.”

“Is it true that Kar’Kali matings can’t be dissolved? There’s no divorce.”

With a frown, she slowly shakes her head.

“No, technically not... But the legal implications of being officially mated changes drastically from one system to the next. The Kar’Kali mating traditions date back thousands of years, and they’re based on the mating call, which is only ended by death.”

I lower my voice, even though we’re alone. “But we didn’t have a ceremony... Does that mean we’re committing some kind of fraud? Can he really just put it on a form and make it so?”

Jen pulls a funny face somewhere between pain and amusement.

“Uh, about that...”

I brace myself.

“For reasons I won’t get into, we’ve established that the marriage rites for Kar’Kali are unique. At the time, we were sort of in a pinch with one of the flock’s mates on Earth and she was going to be taken into custody. Her mate didn’t want that, and he was throwing a mating call hissy fit, so he convinced the entire intergalactic community that consummation of the mating call constituted ceremony enough for them. It’s backed up by some dusty old laws that haven’t been changed since the Kar’Kali made mating illegal.”

I absorb that slowly.

“Consummation,” I repeat.

“Consummation,” she says, flourishing her fingers in a suggestive manner.

“There was no consummation,” I hiss.

She nods. Then nods again.

“I’m not sure what I can do about that for you,” she finally says. “Look, no one is going to question your marriage, even if it’s a sham. That’s not my business. How do you feel about it? You want me to go rake Kiri over the coals for it?”

She’s dead serious, and I catch a gleeful glint in her eyes at the thought of raking someone over the coals.

“No, no,” I insist quickly, waving my hand. “I actually already gave him a hard time about it. And I’ve been icing him out for days.”

“Well, he fuckin’ deserves it,” she says.

“I don’t know what to tell him,” I confess. “I care about Kiri. We obviously have a connection, but how can I forgive him for this? Especially if it’s not something he can fix. This is a forever mistake, and it hurt me. He knows I’m having a hard time as it is, just trying to ... exist.”

“I guess you have to decide whether to go home to Earth or try to work it out with him. I can check in with my lawyer on the marriage situation. Do you want to be with him?”

*Yes yes yes*, my subconscious answers the question. But my subconscious is a horny, lonely, feral being right now.

“I don’t know. This whole mating call thing makes everything so serious so quickly. I’m overwhelmed.”

“Being with a Kar’Kali warrior has its own unique brand of ups and downs,” she tells me with a sigh. “Before Pakka and I worked things out, he did things like mention my womb and my excellent genetics. Did you know he also left vials of sperm samples in my fridge when he thought he might die? It was one hell of a goodbye present. I fantasized about cracking him over the head with a heavy object more times than I can count. They’re still figuring out what it means to be a good partner. They never had an example. Their culture vilified the whole concept of love and marriage and family... So how would they know until we show them?”

“I didn’t sign up for this. How is that any different from marrying a man who turns out to be a child, incapable of doing the laundry and cooking a meal? What if I don’t want to teach a man how to act and how to love me?” Even as I ask the question, I know that Kiri hardly falls into a similar category. He is so much more than that.

Jen frowns. “Point taken. I get it. But you won’t find any man on Earth who would love you the way a Kar’Kali will. That might sound like honeymoon phase bullshit, and I admit I’ve got googly eyes for my man like no other, but I’m being serious when I say that Kiri would put everything on the line for you. If you told him to leave his position here, change his name, follow you to another planet, he would do it. He would die for you and never ask for anything in return. It’s in their DNA. I don’t know how that shit works, but I’ve seen it.”

Before I got to know Kiri, I would have rolled my eyes at her praise for Kar’Kali men. But I believe it. Kiri has already shown me that he would have single-handedly burned Ra’Vaga to a crisp to get me out of there. He was ready to go



toe-to-toe with the very same king he's made it his mission to forge an alliance with. He would have thrown all his diplomatic progress away for *me*.

"I know that Kiri is a good man," I say.

"He's not just good, he's a sweetheart. You know, when we weren't sure if Pakka would come back... it was a difficult time. I actually found out I was pregnant with Danica while he was away. I was an emotional wreck, and Kiri was there for me at a time when he could barely tell one emotion from the next. He even went so far as to tell me he would help me raise the baby if Pakka never returned. The fact that he said that always meant so much to me. Especially when you consider how recently the act of having sex and having a family was illegal in his world. He told me that Danica was the future of Kar'Kal, and that he'd be honored to help me."

I laugh for a moment, if only because it's becoming amusing to me how many people in this building are ready to sing Kiri's praises. Her story comes as no surprise to me.

"Sorry if I didn't actually help," she says with a groan. "But I almost forgot another reason I came down here to talk to you."

"Oh, it wasn't as a Kar'Kali marriage lobbyist?" I'm poking fun, and I'm glad to see Jen finds the humor in it.

"No, but it might seem like that in a second..."

"Okay..."

"Look, we're trying to seal the deal with these other Kar'Kali, the Deviants? You've been briefed on that whole sitch, right?"

I nod. "Well, they were there when I met Kiri. I know a little about it, but I'm obviously not an expert."

"They're coming here. After everything that went down on Ra'Vaga, I guess they felt more comfortable with landing here, which was what Pakka originally proposed. We feel they are warming to us mostly based on the way the warriors are dedicated to their mates, and we're hoping to show a united front. I don't want to pressure you, but we're having a

reception for the king and making sure that all the mated couples are in attendance. We wanna make it very clear to them that the new Kar'Kal is not going back to its old ways.”

It's obvious how uncomfortable she feels about pitching this to me after the misgivings I confessed to her.

“I see.”

“Yeah, so... we would love it if you would be there. But trust me when I say that we will all understand if you decide not to attend.”

“What exactly would I be expected to do?” I ask.

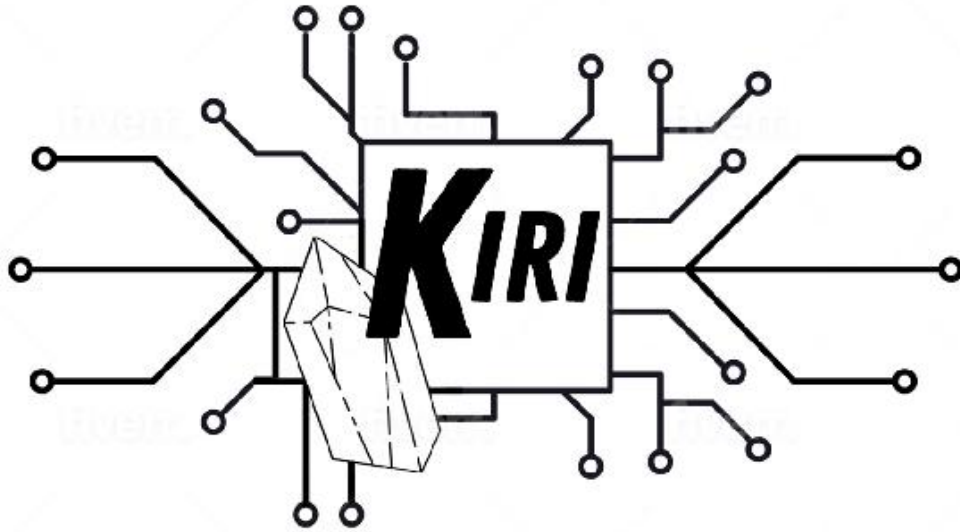
“Be present and be Kiri's wife,” she replies with a shrug, as if that's the easiest thing in the world. Except our last conversation was not the picture of marital bliss. “It's going to be a dinner and some mingling. That's all.”

“Can I think about it?”

“Absolutely. In the meantime, if you need anything, you can call me or even knock on my door if you want.”

“How long do I have? When's the event?”

“That's the thing... Unfortunately, we have no idea. Because the King of the Deviants told us to be ready for his arrival at any time.”



THREE DAYS HAVE NEVER FELT SO torturous. Every interval that passes is painful when I know that Juana is upset with me. Out of shame and respect for her boundaries, I stay out of her sight. There have been moments when I scented her coming down a hall where I was walking, and I hid myself away in a corner to spare her from seeing me. A warrior, reduced to sliding into the shadows...

And yet each time, I risk discovery just to catch a glance of her. It pleases me to notice that her neck is unblemished, her skin is clean, and her body is already plumper from some proper nutrition. Bellam is a very honorable female who does not tell me anything about Juana's activities or feelings, even though I have asked her to look after my mate. But she did tell my secretary, Merna, who proceeded to interrogate me about why I thought it was appropriate to mate a female who didn't consent to it. She has been treating me to disdainful looks ever since and huffing in approval whenever she notices my miserable existence. As an elder cat who has worked her position through the tenure of four previous Kar'Kali ambassadors, she is not the type you want to disappoint.

"May your dinner be cold!" she harrumphed with some angry tail flicking before she left my office that first afternoon she heard the news. "Never in all my years... That poor kitten."

Sadly, I deserve the female's criticisms. I have stooped quite low recently.

I have been sneaking around in order to leave her things she might be needing throughout my apartment. It might be terribly wrong, but every time I stop by to slip inside unseen, I take the opportunity to spy on her. *Only a moment*, I promise myself each time. I overhear her in the bathroom fighting with the bathing unit. I hesitate behind a column as she pauses at a window to admire the beautiful views of the embassy gardens. Like an addict desperate for a fix, I greedily soak in each glimpse of my Juana.

At first, each item was necessary. The pillows, the towels, the clothing—Juana needed those things, and both Ella and Jen were happy to help me acquire the perfect solutions that any human woman would want. It was absolutely *not* necessary for me to deliver them, but I wanted that chance to see her from afar.

This time, my choice is not as necessary. I picked it out myself instead of seeking assistance, partly because I know it is a farcical excuse to spy on her. Bellam might be keeping my mate's business to herself, but she did mention that Juana had taken to the gardens surrounding the embassy grounds. There are many trails here that vary in ruggedness, including a canopy walkway made from suspended bridges. I decided that Juana would need a hat if she is going to continue this. If she were speaking to me, I would advise her to track the rains before she takes a long walk on this planet. When I arrive at my apartment, I do not find Juana there.

I peek in the bedroom to see if she is sleeping, but she's not there either. So I enter with silent footsteps and hang the hat on a hook. With my task complete and no Juana to spy on, I turn to leave.

Then, I pause. The smell of her is all around me, so I stop to enjoy it. I close my eyes and picture her pretty smile, or perhaps the open-mouthed bliss of her climax. It is not just her natural pheromones lingering here, though. I scented a hint of her arousal.

I return to the bed, eyes tracing the tangle of sheets. Her body has been here, curled up and alone. Does she think of me the way I think of her each night? Does her mind also fill with sexual fantasies before sleep comes? Is that why I smell the juices of her cunt gracing the fabric?

With one last furtive glance at both doors, I give myself permission to be disgusting.

I drop to my haunches and press my face into the sheets.

A quiet groan releases from deep in my chest.

My cock is hard in an instant.

The way I want her is deeper than chemistry. The desire is in my soul, in every particle of my being. Her scent is not just haunting me; it is changing me. It is enough to make a male spiritual, even when I have witnessed death for no purpose and evil with no limit.

I inhale deeply, basking in it, ready to rub my cheek against the fabric like an animal. My cock is ready to hump the furniture if I pretend it is her soft body beneath me.

“What are you doing?”

My head whips up, and there she is, stepping in from the patio off my bedroom with a steaming mug in hand. I am in an incriminating position, squatting with my nose to the sheets. I straighten up and try to look more casual.

“I... I...”

“I caught you in the act, didn’t I?” she demands, placing her drink on the ledge that runs the length of the window. The bed is between us, and we stare at each other across it.

I cannot come up with a good reason as to why a self-respecting warrior would be sniffing her sheets.

“What is it this time? The bedding is perfect, so there’s no need for—”

She stops mid-sentence as her eye lands on the hat, recognizing it as the new object I have added. Then her gaze swivels back to the bed, and finally to me.

“You’re sniffing my sheets,” she whispers, almost to herself as she realizes what I was up to.

“I will go now,” I say quietly. “I am sorry for disturbing you.”

I move to turn, but she lurches across the bed to catch my arm, going so far as to climb one knee on the mattress.

“Wait,” she says. “I don’t care about the sheets. I knew you were weird before you pissed me off.”

“There is nothing weird about a male desiring his female,” I argue. “Your scent is irresistible to me. But this is low behavior for me. I am sorry, and I promise I have not done that any other time.”

“What is the hat for?” She drops my arm and settles herself on the edge of the bed, leaning her body toward me. It feels like the angle is meant to torture me because it provides a clear view of her cleavage from where I stand.

“Walking outside.”

“And you left all the other things here? Crept in like an elf in the night?”

“Yes. What is an elf...?”

“Thank you for thinking of me,” she says, wringing her hands. “I liked everything you brought. I’m sure the hat will be perfect.”

“I am glad you are relaxing.”

She coughs out a hollow laugh that seems to say she is not feeling relaxed right now. It is my presence ruining her peaceful afternoon.

“Look, Jen was here earlier.”

“I see.”

“She told me about the important dinner thing you’re planning for the king, and I told her I would think about it.”

I frown. “I told Jen not to bother you with that nonsense.”

“It doesn’t sound like nonsense to me,” she says. “I said I’d consider going and acting like your wife so th—“

“You *are* my wife,” I bite out, unable to stop myself.

This comment renders her speechless for a moment. I do not know how to fix this interruption, and I do not want to take back my words. She has no need to act any which way. She is simply my wife by existing, so I cannot understand what she means.

“Well,” she says in a higher pitch once she has moved on from my interjection. “Jen said that creating a united front about Kar’Kali matings was important.”

“I care for Jen. I respect her deeply. But her opinions have no place in our matebond,” I say evenly. “If you do not want to *act* like my wife, then that is your choice. What else did she say to you?”

Jen is very supportive of others unless she has her own thoughts on the matter. When a goal she deems important is on the line, she is not above manipulating everyone into position for her master plan.

“We talked about the marriage law situation.”

“What do you mean?”

“She told me that it requires consummation. So, considering that didn’t happen, I’m wondering if there’s a loophole there. We could annul it and start fresh.”

I step closer to the bed. My heart is in my throat. The tension of keeping my mating beast in chains is tearing me apart. I am one breath from losing control to that *kali*-fueled hormone high. I will be black-eyed and raging, and I might say something that will make me lose her forever.

“Consummation? There was consummation.”

Twice I learned her body, felt its rhythms move through my tongue and my fingers. Twice I made her come. Her moans filled my ears. Her juices soaked my lips, my chin, and my hand.

“Legally... I’m not sure what we’ve done was enough for consummation,” she says, voice low and careful. She senses the beast within me. Perhaps my eyes have turned black already. “So that could help our case if we choose to dissolve it—”

“Your climax seemed consummation enough in my eyes,” I grit out. “What more could be required, legally speaking? I consumed the taste of you. I held you through throes of passion. I provided your pleasure. How could that not consummate a union?”

“Technically, penetration is considered consummation on Earth.”

“We are not on Earth. You came on my tongue. Squeezed my fingers with your cunt—”

“Do you think this is easy for me?” She snaps. It is for the best she interrupts me because I am only spilling words that heat my blood, priming me to claim her here and now. “I would have let you fuck me on the ship over here, then you would have had all the legal grounds you need. I wanted you then, and I still want you when I don’t know what to say to you!”

Her admission to wanting me at this very moment is enough to make me fantasize about throwing her down and spreading her legs.

“Let us consummate it now, then. I thought I had satisfied you. But I will penetrate you right now to fix my mistakes if you tell me I left you wanting.”

“How could I not be?” she cries. “I wanted your cock then. I want it right now, and if we dissolve this marriage, I’ll still go on wanting it—”

“Are you trying to make me insane?” I am on the edge. I lean over the bed, palms flat on the mattress that separates us. I should be thankful it is there, otherwise I might have her up against the wall already. Now, we are face to face. Hardly any space between our lips. “Tell me right now. Look me in the



eyes, and tell me I did not satisfy you, and I will agree that the marriage is unconsummated.”

I wait for her reply with all the anticipation of dangling over a cliff. She is mute for a moment, staring me down with the look of prey ready to run for its life.

“I orgasmed tw—”

“That. Was not. My question.”

And then I notice it. The scent of her arousal growing, not just the lingering scent of her pussy clinging to the sheets. A fresh flood of her delicious desire is filling the air between us. My attitude is turning her on. Either that, or she is remembering the intimacies we shared.

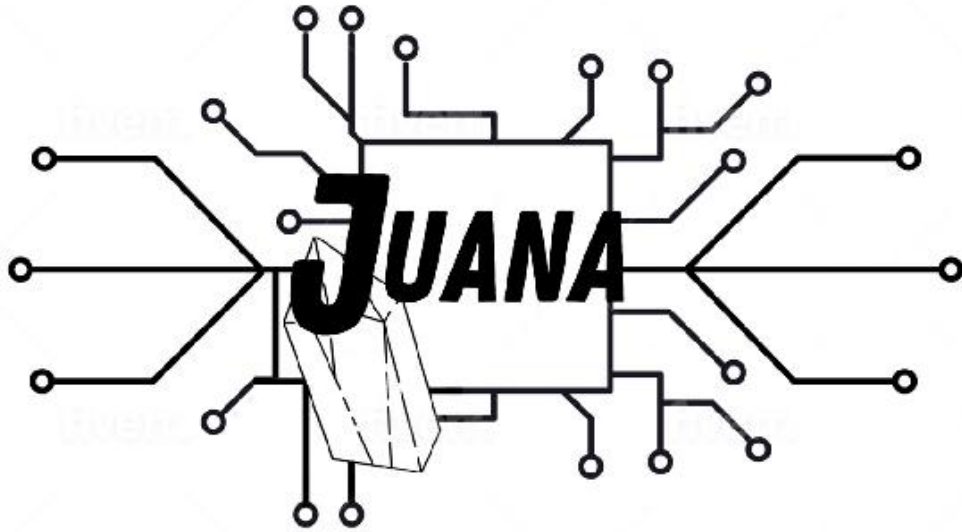
“Juana. Answer me, *ti kori...*”

“No.” Her body tenses up. She knows. She knows I can smell it on her, that she cannot hide how much she wants me right now. “No, I’m not satisfied.”

A pause. I straighten up and take a breath.

“You have one chance to kick me out of here. Otherwise, I am going to fill you with my cock until satisfaction is the *only* thing you feel.”

I would let her leave me. I would let her live in this apartment for the rest of my days while I sleep on the couch in my office. I could even sleep soundly knowing she is safe and happy far from me on Earth. Whatever she needs, I will deliver it... Whether it is hats or pillows or my cock in a box to keep on her nightstand to use at her leisure. If she desires more from my body, I will give it to her.



I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN when I found him sniffing my sheets with a hard dick in his pants that this conversation would lead in a dangerous direction.

Speaking to Kiri again soon was on my list of things to do. But I was planning on mental preparation and going into it once my mind was made up about matters. Now, because I stumbled upon him, I'm letting the situation spiral toward a point of no return.

I want him to fuck me.

He's looking at me with feral intensity. His eyes have turned black, and he's purely carnal in his movements and words. I want everything I never got from him—his cock thrusting into me while I scream, his naked body sprawled on me, his hot cum. I'd take it anywhere—inside me, on my face, on my back. I don't care; I just feel deprived of something I'm entitled to.

Don't I deserve that much from the man that claimed me as his wife?

"What will it be?" he asks.

My heart is clinging to our marriage, strengthening its position on his side as my anger towards him fades under a wave of passion. As for my body? My body is too far gone

down the road of desiring him. My desire for him rocks me to my core.

I choke on words, throat tightening.

“Do you want me to consummate this marriage with my cock inside you?” He asks with a seriousness that both frightens and arouses me.

“That’s what you wanted,” I say, letting both my lingering anger and my building need for him bubble at the same time. “So finish the job.”

He dives at me, and all I can do is brace myself for the attack. My instincts have me baring my neck and arching my back to receive him. It’s wild how quickly I can go from hesitating to even see him to spreading my legs like a desperate slut. It’s the effect he has on me, a level of horniness that defies all logic.

His weight slams me into the mattress, and I’m pinned. Hot, wet need builds at my center in a rush.

“You should have told me you had need of me,” he growls into my hair as his hips thrust into me. We’re both clothed, and this virgin has no idea what to do, but his instincts are serving him well. His dry humping has the hard length in his pants stroking me in all the right places. The raw aggression alone is enough to make me gasp. My arousal only heightens. My legs fall open, causing the short, loose Vansk tunic to slide out of the way.

He grips me by my neck and then descends to lick my face, kissing me with an animalistic lack of elegance. My brow, my cheek, my lips, and my chin are all fair game to him. I bask in it when we’re kissing, but he seems careful to avoid putting his tongue in my mouth, still keeping that mysterious aphrodisiac from me. It’s for the best, I think. We’re already making bad decisions together, giving in to our bodies despite the shaky circumstances. When he suckles at the edge of my lips, I feel the tingle of it stinging like peppermint.

When I’m primed enough to burst, I begin grabbing at his clothing, fighting against his weight to slip my hands between

us and tear at the closure of his pants. His cock emerges as soon as the ties are loosened, hard and thick in my palm. When I squeeze, he shudders atop me. The pre-cum on his tip wets my fingers. I use it to lubricate a few hasty strokes.

“That is all you wanted, is it not?” he whispers against my cheek. “Does it please you?”

“Yes,” I breathe out. “But you know it’s more than that.”

I push away his pants as best I can while restrained by his grasp.

“I suppose I should not keep my impatient wife waiting,” he says, releasing me for a moment. He lifts off me, rising to remove his shirt and toss it away.

My hands wander up to explore his abdomen and chest. He’s so deliciously cut. I want to lick every indentation and watch his muscles strain as he strokes into me. He gives another shudder when I pass over his charcoal-colored nipples, dark like his near-black tongue. When I see his reaction, I brush over one with my thumb to watch him react. Those pretty abs ripple.

“Juana,” he warns.

I want to push him.

“Don’t hold back,” I say. His magnificent length is on display, looming over me like an unholy temptation. I sit and appreciate the sight. He has enough girth and enough inches to make any woman quiver. His silvery skin is pink at the swollen tip, not unlike a human man. He’s almost panting from the way I caressed his chest. I take his cock in both hands and start to work him, gently at first. He whimpers, the sound like music to my ears. His eyes fall shut. My name hisses across his lips again, more a prayer than a warning this time. His hips jerk when I increase the pressure on him, but the hard squeeze also seems to snap him out of his trance.

Baring his teeth, he removes my hands and pins them above my head. The movement makes him sway forward, and his cock brushes my crotch. I feel that graze all the way to my toes.

“If it is penetration you are after, then stop playing with me,” he says.

I open my mouth, but he nips at my lip before I can say a word.

“Do not move.”

When he removes his hands from my wrists, I don't dare to even twitch my arms out of position. Have I pushed him too far? This is a Kiri I barely know, gruff and dominant. I think I like him. I *know* my pussy likes him, clenching on nothing at every aggression. This is the Kiri that stormed off to avenge my minor injuries. This is the Kiri that nearly murdered Wiruu for the crime of deceiving me. The polite words, the puppy-dog eyes... They have been replaced by growls and a burning black gaze that melts me into a puddle of need.

He works quickly on my tunic, untying the bows down my front that keep it in place. When they're undone, he tears it away, nearly ripping the strings from their grommets. Just when I think I'll be forced to move to assist him in removing the garment, he flips me and tosses away the dress like I'm nothing more than a doll. When his fingers brush the middle of my back to do the same with my bra, I nearly cry out. Every inch of my skin is sensitive to his touch. Noticing my reaction, he curiously drags the tip of his finger from the back of my neck to the base of my spine.

I muffle my whimper in the sheets.

He chuckles, a mix of surprise and satisfaction. His patience in removing my undergarments is a good reminder that he is still Kiri—deliberate, thoughtful, polite.

When he flips me over again, I level him with an indignant glare. He's dispensed with his pants. He grasps my thighs and drags my ass to the edge of the bed. He splits my legs open, eyes roving over my naked body.

“You're manhandling me,” I say.

“And what does that mean?” he asks, his amusement still lingering from my reaction to his touch.

“Throwing me around like an object. You know I can move on my own.”

“All evidence suggests you like it,” he says, glancing at my wet pussy and the glistening slick on my thighs. I’m more than ready for him to consummate this once and for all, and he hasn’t even licked me or touched my clit. “I wanted to take your clothes off. And I liked to see you face down. Why is that?”

His nostrils flare as he slides his finger over my opening. I’m dying for it. I don’t need any of this pretense. He could plunge into me right now. In fact, I wish he would. He releases a breath as he feels my wetness and massages my most sensitive places with his thumb.

“I don’t know,” I murmur, biting down on a moan. “You want to fuck me from behind?”

“Is it strange that I like you being helpless to my touches?” He muses, as he tortures me with more delicate circles on my clit. “But no. This is my first time. I want to watch your face when I enter you. It is all I have been dreaming about when I have jerked my cock these past few days.”

“Poor Kiri,” I sigh, daring to move my hands again. I run my fingers up his forearms, loving the way those strong muscled arms loom over me. “You had to get yourself off all alone?”

“I deserved it,” he says. “But to learn that all the time you were dreaming of me too? Dreaming of this cock in you, needing it? That realization is an added punishment.”

I drop my fingers to my pussy, wanting to tease him. I’m becoming addicted to his reactions. There’s so much below the surface that he hides with control. It’s time to unleash everything that he’s bottled up. I grasp his hand and show him how to work me, guiding his fingers over my clit.

“Kiss my breasts,” I demand, and his head drops immediately to fulfill my desires. His magic tongue licks at my nipple and then sucks on it. He hums like the act turns him on more.

“Bite me,” I say.

He gently drags his teeth and then nibbles on me. I cry out and he bites harder until I see stars.

He lifts his head in a panic. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” I urge. “It was good, so good—”

He moves to the neglected breast to apply the same treatment, biting me and then suckling me, licking my nipple gently when I make a sound that comes close to a scream. The tingles from his saliva mix pleasure with the pain, leaving my breast wet and sensitive. All the while, our hands work in tandem over my clit, mercilessly stroking until I’m no longer guiding but clutching onto him for dear life.

“No more waiting,” he says when I throw my head back, close to coming. “I want you now.”

He climbs on the bed, too tall by far to fuck me with his feet on the floor. I fold myself in two for him, the submissive in me purring for it. I support my legs with hands hooked behind my knees. The position puts me on full display, ready and waiting. I’m wet enough for him to slip right inside, and I’m trembling at the mere prospect of his cock filling me.

“You are too beautiful,” he groans as he shimmies forward to ready his cock at my entrance. His shoulders dip down to cloak me in his scent and his heat. His pink head teases my slit as he hesitates. Still nervous, even if his alien hormones have turned him into a hungry alpha male. My heart flutters. There’s no going back; he’s mine.

*My husband*, a quiet voice in my head reminds me.

His cock sinks in slowly, and he blows out a breath. He’s watching my face as he said he would, checking my reaction.

“Yes,” I sigh, wanting to encourage him. Half of him is divine; all of him will be mind-blowing.

He plunges in, groaning as his balls meet my ass. My eyes roll up when he fills me completely. His girth stretches me, plumbing depths that haven’t felt the kiss of a cock in over a year. Not since some forgettable bartender... But every man

will feel forgettable after this. My heart cracks open at the realization that there may never be a man after this. Only this alien. Only Kiri. How could I crave anything else but this?

“Never hide from me. From this moment on, I hope you will call on me when you want my cock. Even if you hate me all the while I fill you, I will deliver the pleasure you crave, Juana,” he tells me.

“Never,” I manage to gasp. “—Could never hate you—”

His hips roll experimentally, and I nearly shatter just from the pressure of his cock moving in me. Words of encouragement I meant to say become lost in a string of moans.

“Tell me, *ti kori*,” he says, “is it consummated yet?”

He pulls all the way out and then slides in again. But he quickly realizes I start whining every time he leaves me empty.

“Is this cunt mine?” he asks softly against my brow as he rocks deep inside me.

“Yes,” I pant, grinding my hips up to meet him. “Oh, God...”

He becomes lost in a sensual fog as he learns the rhythm to fucking me. I let out even the smallest whimpers, knowing my sounds of pleasure will lead him. Every time he bottoms out, I keen like a slut. It makes him even more vigorous. He’s in tune with my every movement, desperate to give me what I want. He pins me down harder, finding purchase by gripping the edge of the mattress above my head and thrusting with all his strength. The power of that body is no small thing, and it reverberates through me.

I feel the spikes of pleasure driving me closer and closer to release. He has found his stride now, grunting and panting above me with raw, masculine aggression. I babble some warnings that he mustn’t stop, but I’m not sure they come out as anything translatable. Still, he keeps his pace steady, not showing an ounce of fatigue. I know that this is his first time, and I don’t expect him to last for ages, but I already have fantasies dancing in my head. Kiri could turn me upside down,



hold me up all on his own, go non-stop for an hour with his strength and his stamina. This is only the beginning.

I shouldn't be thinking such things, not when we went into this blind. We never made any agreements, but this intimacy between us formed all on its own.

“Come for me, Juana,” he begs, sinking his fingers into my strewn hair. “I know you are so close. I feel you trembling.”

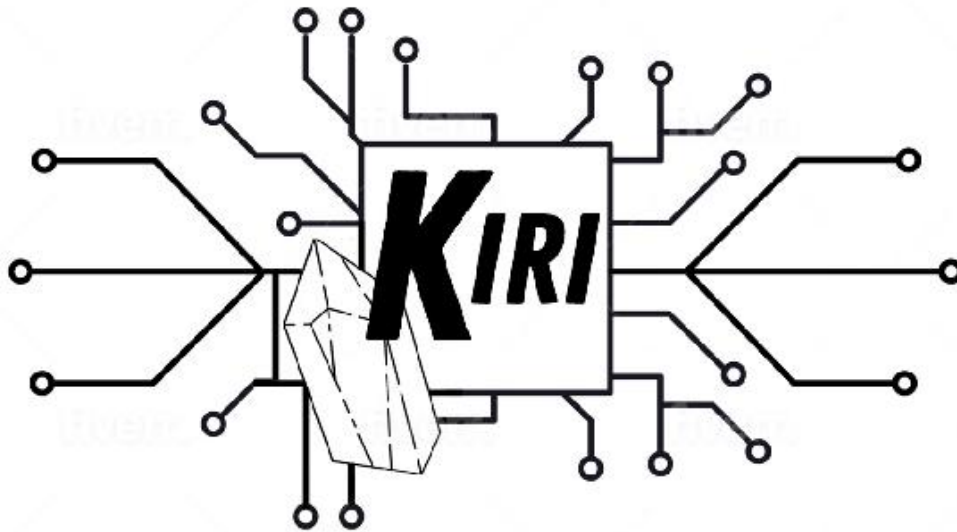
I'm tensing up, wanting to do as he says, wanting more than anything to reach that sacred pleasure, the kind that wipes your mind and frees you from worry.

“You are safe here,” he murmurs. “Let it out.”

My nails dig in; stars burst behind my eyes. Heavenly release dawns on me.

As I come on his cock, something shifts in me. It's a feeling deeper than the satisfaction I claimed I needed. He promised he would give me that, and he did not lie. But something snuck in alongside the fireworks of release. There's a rift opening in my heart.

*I'm falling in love with him.* That realization cuts deep through my cries of ecstasy.



THE CLASP OF Juana's cunt as she climaxes on my cock is enough to make me go mad. All my promises about being able to let her go fly from my mind like ashes in the wind. The sentiment I feel instead is possessive need and greedy obsession. I cannot see a universe in which I let this feeling fade away. After this, I might become a monstrous villain liable to lock her away.

I lift up to gaze down at her, releasing her from the barbaric pinning. I hope I did not cause discomfort, shoving her face in my chest like that. But all I heard were moans of pleasure, so I am guessing she was alright.

Her cheeks are pink and glistening. Those dark brown waves are strewn all over the bed in a tangle. Nothing could have prepared me for how mesmerizing it is to watch her breasts bounce to the rhythm of my cock slamming into her. Her nipples are hard and wet, tortured by my teeth and tongue until they turned as pink as her cunt. Now, I am making them dance for me, wishing I was able to bend and take them in my mouth again.

I do not stop pumping my length inside her, even as her tightness flutters around me. She is letting out little cries in the aftershock of her orgasm. Her arms go limp, reminding me of the way she melted beneath me in that dark storage closet. She has turned to malleable substance. Her eyes roll up as I take

hold of her legs, using them like handlebars to ram into her harder.

Her cunt is flooding with more lubrication. I had thought it was wet to begin with, but now that she has climaxed, the sound of my cock sliding into her is juicier than the ripest fruit. It elevates the sensation until I shudder with every soaked slap.

“Listen, Kiri,” she says, squeezing my wrist to snap me out of my erotic trance.

“Yes?” I slow my movements, craning my neck down to lick the sweat on her cheek.

“When you’re ready, I’d like you to pull out,” she requests sweetly. “Do you know what I mean?”

“When I am ready to ejaculate?” I ask, realizing this is an important question, and I should not get lost in the sound of her wetness.

“Yes.” Juana is a very patient lover, and I suppose she is intuitive enough to know I am on the edge of climax.

“If you wish it, of course.”

She nods her head and rests her eyes, once again losing herself to the pleasure of my thrusts.

“Where should I...”

Her eyes flutter back open, and she smiles. “Where would you like to?”

Automatically, I palm one of her breasts and squeeze. “Here,” I tell her. “Is that done?”

She laughs. It warms me to see her so relaxed and happy while I am inside her.

“It’s an extremely popular thing to do for humans.”

“The appeal must be a universal experience for intelligent mammals,” I muse, dropping my hand to watch her breast bounce again. I gasp at the feeling of her deliberately squeezing my cock. A way of teasing me with her cunt?

She grins at me. “That’s not sexy talk.”

“The desire to cover you with my cum falls only slightly below the desire to *fill* you with my cum inside,” I tell her.

“That, on the other hand...”

“One day, will you let me?” Imagining it brings me closer.

When she nods to confirm she will, two options pop into the forefront of my mind. In one, she has her face down and her backside up showing me cum oozing out of her well-fucked cunt. In the other, she’s slathered in it, from her neck to her belly button, soaked in cum.

“*Ahn! Kiri!*” she cries out as I find myself thrusting into her harder as my fantasies ignite. With my name on her lips, the repeated slapping of our bodies together, and the sensation of her tight walls squeezing me, pleasure overwhelms me. When I know it is imminent, I withdraw from her body and careen over the edge. Ropes of cum burst forth to coat her chest. My body shudders through it, rocking every synapse in my brain.

I release and release until her breasts are painted with the results of our pleasure. She smiles at me as I come down from the heights of ecstasy, running the tips of her fingers through my seed. The image of her toying with my fluids on her skin is enough to satisfy the mating beast. So I sag with flagging energy, groaning as my cock becomes too sensitive to touch.

I collapse at her side, letting my calves dangle off the side of the bed as I recover from the swirling lust and the strain of unleashing so much mating aggression on her. Slowly, I crash from the mating call’s heightened control over my instincts. I realize how rough I was and check her body for even the slightest sign I gripped her too hard. She assures me she is fine when she notices what I am up to.

We lose track of time, our limbs tangled up and our eyes never leaving one another. She strokes soft hands over my cheeks, my shoulders, and my chest. Even though it is heavy is on my mind, I would not dare to bring up the topics of consummation and annulment now.

“I wish I could lie here forever,” I sigh, dragging my fingers between her breasts. I like my scent on her, not unlike a barbarian from the Archaic era. I could fondle her pretty mounds forever, tugging at her nipples and playing with them at my leisure. “But I am scheduled to return to my office.”

“How long?” she asks.

I glance at the old-fashioned Vansk clock dial on the wall behind the bed. “Half a Vansk interval ago.”

She sits up suddenly on her elbows. “You mean you should’ve left already?”

“Do you think I would leave so soon after such bliss with you?” I brush a stray tangle behind her ear. “You are my utmost priority.”

“You have an important job—”

“Are you telling me to leave?”

“No...”

With a frown, I pull her hand toward my face to press her knuckles against my lips.

“When this aroused fog on your judgement has dissipated, I fear you will not want me around,” I confess. “So I am trying to enjoy this while I can. Because I am greedy.”

“Kiri, I—” She looks pained, and I hate to see the peaceful feeling I gave her did not last long.

“No,” I interrupt her. “Do not say anything about that now. We will talk about it when your mind is clear.”

She ultimately nods in agreement and presses against me to kiss my cheek. I reluctantly drop her arm and go in search of my discarded clothes. Most of the staff has gone for the day, anticipating the daily rainstorm. It is nearing the season on Vanskiikii when the rains become heavier and heavier. In a few cycles, there might be days at a time with no break in the rainfall. For this reason, I will not have to worry whether my rattled and unkempt appearance will raise suspicions as to how I spent my midday break. It will be an extra lonely night on the couch in my office.

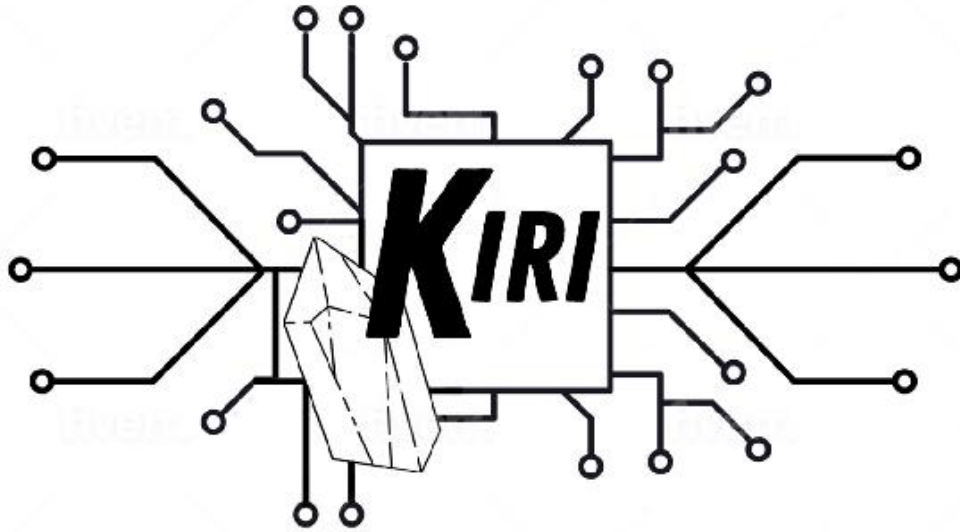
As if reading my mind, Juana suddenly says, “If you want, you could come back here tonight.”

“Hm?” I fear I have imagined that comment.

“You should come back tonight. If you want, that is. I know things are still up in the air, but... You should be getting better rest. Especially considering the big plans you’re making. But if you don’t want to, I unders—”

“I will,” I say immediately. “If you wish it, then I will be back.”

We share shy smiles. I think we are both still lost in the joyful mental mists of our sexual encounter. It is a glimpse of what I may have lost a chance to own forever, my happiest memory by far.



I RETURN TO WORK, but my focus does not return with me. My mind races over every complexity of my relationship with Juana. Nothing was resolved. Yet everything was changed.

I fear I might have made everything worse. I would never use the term regret when thinking of claiming Juana, but I do have reservations about whether it was the ethical choice. Did I seduce her? Last time I checked, I was not versed in the art of seduction. And yet, we started the conversation with her wanting to explore the option of annulment. By the end of the encounter, she was telling me there was no need to sleep in my office.

A buzz at the door startles me to attention. It is Kiva, Pakka's youngest team member, who has freshly arrived from Station City with his mate and their child to support our efforts with the Deviant alliance. His blue curls remind me of the king. But the hair is where their similarities end. Kiva is lithe and bright eyed with an amenable disposition, the kind of male who will do what he can to please all parties. His presence here surprises me, because it was my understanding that he only landed on Vanskiikii an interval ago.

"I trust your travel went well," I greet him, inviting him into my office.

“Yes,” he sighs, nearly panting from rushing here. I raise my brow. “My mate can be nervous about modern technologies, but I settled her and Evie in the guest suite. The both of them fell right to sleep.”

“I am glad they are comfortable here.”

He laughs. “Maxine was not particularly pleased to take the trip, but I insisted that there is not a soul in this universe who can resist my daughter’s charms. Not even a king. I told her we shall put Evie in his arms, and he will pledge his armada to her.”

I smile. “That would make my current task much easier.”

“The point, the point,” he mutters to himself. “Oh right! Yes, I came here for a reason.”

He digs into his jacket and pulls out a small tablet.

“I was told that the law I referenced to claim Maxine as my mate has become a problem for you. Believe me, it was never my intention to inadvertently prevent divorce proceedings when I invoked it. At the time, the Alliance authorities wished to temporarily imprison her while the criminal charges against her were investigated and resolved. In any case, I have an extensive knowledge of Archaic history, so I recalled that certain ancient laws were never removed from the intergalactic law registry seeing as they simply became inconsequential when familial connections were outlawed by the council at the outset of the suppression era—”

Kiva has a gift for speaking so quickly that my mind becomes dizzied. He adds in a good bit of details about Deviant marriage ceremonies and the laws surrounded their relationships that I do not think are fully relevant to the matter at hand.

“—which, that sort of legal language does not account for humans and their inability to experience the mating call in the same way. But I have a copy of the terminology used here and have provided modern Kar’Kali translations where I found Archaic language choices that are no longer in use for your reference. I believe we are bound to this until we officially



institute a new government approved by the Intergalactic Union and rewrite the laws to allow for humans to divorce Kar’Kali mates if they choose to do so, which I personally support because my experience of human females has been—”

I do not wish to be rude, so I simply nod along as I take the copy of the law and review it.

---

*The intergalactic community should be advised that Kar’Kali marriage ceremonies do not constitute the official start date of a matebond. Ceremony is not required to initiate a matebond that is accepted by the community. All Kar’Kali pairs that have consummated the sacred mating call should be observed by non-Kar’Kali governances as matebonded and treated as such by whatever governance they might encounter in inter-Sector travel, relocations, etc.*

*For absolute clarity, we shall define a consummated pairing below as including the following characteristics:*

*A) A pairing of any two individuals of mating age, gender notwithstanding, that have consummated the mating call.*

---

The continuing text goes on to be extremely verbose, describing every scientific detail of Kar’Kali mating responses and breaking down definitions for each and every gender combination imaginable. There are old-fashioned medical diagrams included, showing the system within the body that controls *kali*.

Kiva went to the trouble of highlighting the relevant details about male/female mate bonds specifically, and as I scan it, it all feels very familiar—my black-eyed insanity termed as *amma’ka*, the changing of my blood from blue to red...

“A pairing of male and female specifically calls for insemination as evidence of consummation,” Kiva explains. “As you can see, this language is extremely dated. Most human females would likely be disturbed by such barbaric requirements to matebond. Those earlier colonial times were rampant with suspect matebonds being used to initiate citizenship across borders. Now that modern documentation sharing is commonplace throughout the civilized galaxies, I feel we should work on striking this and simplifying to a mutual agreement contract style matebond, which has been instituted by the majority of cultures that utilize romantic and

familial unions and would eradicate the need for any gender specific definitions that are properly dizzying to the mind—”

*Insemination.* My mind flashes back to the sight of Juana’s chest coated in my release. So beautiful, so erotic... But the act does not qualify as consummation under this law.

“Thank you, Kiva,” I interrupt his diatribe on the bloated legal databases that prevent most commoners from accessing accurate information. “I agree that we must start fresh with the law when the time comes. We must not bind ourselves to laws that are thousands of years old anymore. The result of it makes us look rather ridiculous.”

Kiva and I talk for a while longer, discussing what will happen if we combine forces with the Deviants. He is thrilled at the chance to meet them and learn about their culture. Like most Kar’Kali warriors (myself included), he hardly knew they existed in substantial numbers. Between these laws, the suppressor chips, and the lies that were held up by our government, I am often at a loss on how to proceed. To be absorbed by a state like the Alliance would be easier than resolving these issues and forming a new world.

Their protection and all the comforts of their network come at a steep price: the loss of our independence.

I drop the tablet Kiva gave me. The screen cracks on the marble floor.

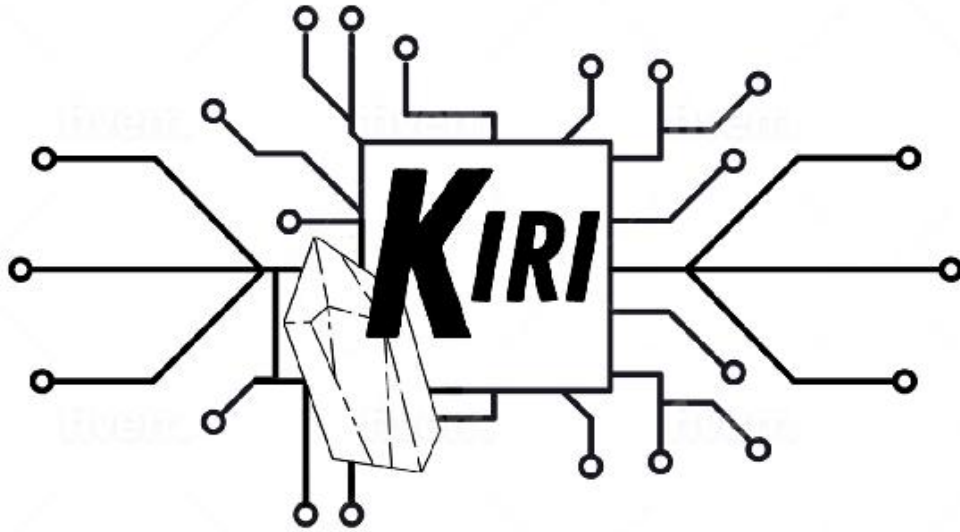
How could I be so stupid?

I have done to Juana what the Alliance seeks to do to Kar’Kal, claim control in the name of charity and support.

My hasty choice could not have been more wrong. My best intentions do not matter in the slightest. I need to make it up to my Juana, to show her that she is safe with me. I thought she needed protection to feel safe. I thought she needed to be provided for, given every imaginable comfort to ease her healing process. But instead, all I did was take from her. I took her choice away. And today, I fear I took advantage of her loneliness. She might have needed the comfort and release that my body could provide her.

It is time I made a plan to make it up to her. I will seek her forgiveness. I will return her freedom to her.

And then I will pray to a spirit I do not believe in that our bond is strong enough to bring her back to me.



WHEN I RETURN to my apartment, Juana is nowhere to be found for a moment. But I hear voices from the comm room and realize she must have requested Bellam to make a connection for her. The comm line in the residential area is public access, so I rarely use it. Every call I make is for business, so it requires a high-level security operation booth. It is one of those funny indications that when this apartment was built, the Vansk had a tenuous grip on how the Kar’Kali warriors of old lived. I always found it obnoxious that the place was so large, ready to accommodate an entire family despite the fact that every ambassador that has lived here has lived alone.

Until me.

Except any possibility that Juana and I could fill this space with a family has been crushed, and it is all my fault.

I hear my mate before I see her, and the cowardly part of me wonders whether I should scurry away and wait longer to face her. The rift between us has been made more confusing by our encounter earlier. I still would not trade that intimate moment with her for anything.

The door is ajar, so I linger there to check on her.

“When will you be able to come back to Earth?” Someone is asking her.

“I’m not sure,” she tells them.

Odd, because she could leave anytime she wanted to.

“It’s complicated and expensive to route from here to Earth,” she explains. “And there’s some red tape I have to get through...”

“Oh.” The female voice sounds disappointed. I realize that Juana is deceiving them for some reason, making excuses that do not exist. While it’s technically true that routing can be a pain and increase ticket prices, there is assistance available not only for victims of Azza crimes, but also for embassies. I gave my staff the go-ahead to throw our status around to fulfill Juana’s needs. It is not right to continue listening without her knowing I am here, so I poke my head into the room and politely signal to her that I am in the apartment.

She glances at me and gives a human hand wave.

“Well, you know we miss you so much. The way I was praying when we heard that news... Every day I was praying.”

“I know... I missed you too. So much,” she sighs, continuing to say more as I leave her to her privacy and return to the living space. Her mother, then? I doubt she has mentioned my very existence. The thought makes my skin prickle. What must it be like to have someone that has known you since birth? Much of the universe lives their life in that way, but before infants were populating the embassy, I did not think of it. If Juana loves her family, then I feel I should know them. I should hope they will like me... If Juana chose to introduce me to them as her mate...

I choose to distract myself with other things. For the better part of an interval, I run through a series of stretches that promote decompression. I quickly bathe and continue mentally preparing for my conversation with Juana about the marriage.

When my mate emerges from the comm room and pads slowly into the living space, her eyes are watering up. Humans tend to shed tears when they are emotionally distressed. It is called crying. I have seen other humans do it many times. When the others from Juana’s ship were rescued from the

stasis pods, there was a rash of crying the likes of which I had never seen before. It is difficult to know what to do about it. Jen taught me to hug her, and every time I attempt to calm a distressed human, I feel for their suffering.

This is something else entirely. As two fat tears start to fall from Juana's wet lashes, my first instinct is to find the person responsible and eviscerate them. I rush to my feet and meet her before she even steps into the room. I catch her at the edge of the hallway and throw my arms around her.

"Juana, why are you crying?" I meant to ask in a soft voice, so as not to frighten her. But it comes out gruff.

"Talking to my mother, hearing her voice," she sniffs against my chest, "I don't know why. I should be happy to talk to her, overjoyed."

She moves to pull away, but I squeeze her tight.

"The hug is meant to help, so give it a moment to become effective."

Half-expecting her to give me a witty human remark and extricate herself immediately, I'm surprised to find she drops her arms and sinks into my embrace. If things were working correctly with the application of this hug, she should be crying less. When Jen Marsden needed my hugs, she would end them quickly, wipe the tears away, and thank me. Since Pakka has returned, I have not given any more hugs. But as Juana lets me hold her, I start to realize that she is crying more, her shoulders shivering with the intensity of it. I need to fix this, but I do not know how.

Time to rely on whatever mating instinct the universe has seen fit to provide me.

"Come here, *ti kori*," I whisper. I loosen my grip for a moment and crouch to get my arms around her. I pick her up just how she's standing, not wanting to cause her additional discomfort. She drapes over my body and holds on as I carry her, turning us around. The shivering and sniffing have become loud intakes of breaths—sobs that sound like death. I take her to the bedroom and carefully lie down so that she can

recline on my chest. Once we're there together, I resume the squeezing.

I realize my plans will have to wait. When she is like this, the last thing I need to do is load her with more burdens. So I cling to her, promising myself that we will discuss the marriage issue tomorrow. Unless she brings it up first, I will hold off, even if the words I prepared are burning a hole through my chest.

She cries wildly. She cries for what seems like an unhealthy amount of time. Somewhere halfway through, I contemplate whether this much crying can become a medical concern for a delicate human female. I let my fingers plunge into her hair and stroke along her scalp. The petting helps turn the sobs into whimpers.

"I hate to see you like this," I whisper to her. "All will be well, whatever the reason. I will make it so. I promise I will fix it for you."

Eventually, it slows to an intermittent snuffle or hiccup. I cradle her in silence for a moment. I am relieved that she is calming down.

"Thank you for that," she says with a wobbly voice. "It actually felt kinda good. I've had this dead feeling inside. I need to get rid of it—cry like I'm having an exorcism."

"What is an exorcism?"

"Uhh... when a priest prays over you to get an evil spirit out of your body?" She lets out a strained laugh.

I squint, happy to distract her with another subject.

"Are these spirits observable by science, or are they imagined?"

"Some people believe in them," she says, fully smiling now. "My grandmother is pretty superstitious, and she believes in some supernatural things like that. She passed it on to my younger brother; he's a hobbyist ghost hunter, that one. He was thrilled when it turned out aliens were real."

I am curious about many things she brought up, but since she is talking about her family, I decide I must ask her about it.

“You miss them,” I say. “Is this the first time you have contacted them?”

“We exchanged messages, but it took a while to arrange the comm call. Bellam helped me. The average human doesn’t have a comm room like this, and my mother barely knew how to use her cell phone before the Alliance invasion. It was a bit complicated to get them to the right place at the right time for the connection.” She tenses up as if she might start crying again but blows out a breath and snuggles against my chest.

“I am glad you utilized Bellam. She handles these communication matters every day.”

“She’s great,” Juana says.

“I do not understand why you are lying to them about returning to Earth. Do you know that I will arrange the necessary tickets today if you wish to be done with me? It will be a cycle or so to wait for the right flight to be available, but... It would be no trouble at all.”

“It was partly true,” she says. “It *is* expensive, and I *might* be stuck here if you weren’t offering to foot the bill. And like you said, I would have to go through some questioning and evaluations if you hadn’t done what you did.”

Ah, so she won’t even speak the words, ‘made me your wife’ or ‘trapped me in this matebond’?

“Even if I was never involved in your return to the civilized galaxies, depending on where you turned up, you would have been provided a social worker or be assisted by a charity organization. Such things happen, and all the systems and empires on this side of the Azza border make a point of returning lost citizens to their homeland. This is the very point of calling it the civilized galaxies.”

“That’s a relief to know because there are others like me still out there somewhere.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “I don’t know why I said it. I’m just not ready to go home, that’s all.”



It is on the tip of my tongue to interrogate the issue further, but she is already overwhelmed by emotion.

“Oh, fuck, I guess I should just say it,” she groans.

“Say what?” I ask, mystified.

“If I can’t say it to you, who can I say it to?” she mutters, almost to herself.

“Please explain.”

“I’m afraid to go home,” she says.

I pause, waiting for her to provide more information.

“But why?” I ask when she does not continue.

With a purse of her lips, she hesitates.

“You’ve been through a tragedy... Does it ever feel like the person you were before doesn’t exist anymore? Like you can’t even access that part of your brain?”

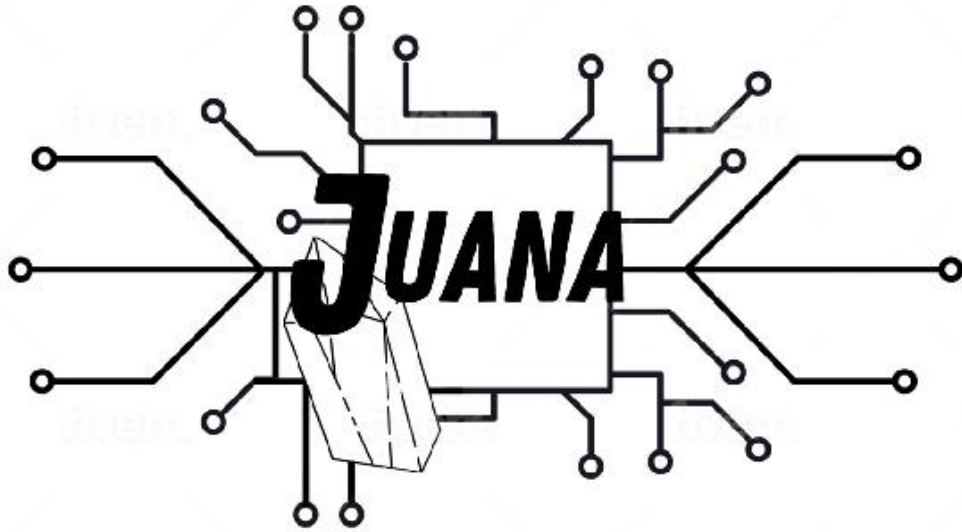
“It would be dangerous ground to compare my experience to yours,” I say, considering her questions carefully. “After all, I have been safe here at the embassy all while the world around me has changed. My answer to your question is that yes, I am entirely different now. But the reasons behind it might not help you in resolving the troubles you have.”

“It used to be that I would imagine going home as this dreamy light at the end of the tunnel. At the beginning on Ra’Vaga, I would put myself to sleep with thoughts of walking down the street that leads to my mother’s house. But the more time I spent there, the more I felt that the walk down the street in my mind got longer and longer. I would be roaming the streets of Los Angeles instead, just circling the block alone. For some reason, my dream self couldn’t walk down the stone path, up the stairs, and open the storm door.”

I stroke her hair as she speaks. It seems to help her relax into my body.

“You will be there soon,” I promise her, as her eyes flutter shut. The exhaustion caused by her emotional outburst is hitting her. She is slowly slumping toward sleepiness. “You

will walk through the door and be welcomed. Dreams lie to us all the time. You know the truth is that you belong there. Your family will rejoice, and you will finally be at ease.”



WHEN I WAKE up the next morning, Kiri has already left for his office. The events of yesterday feel more like the events of an entire week for all the emotional impact they have had on me. A bleeding gash of feelings has opened in my heart, and everything I pushed down and away is pouring out of me all at once.

The subtle bloom of pain in my chest feels deliriously good, reminding me how far I've come in a few days' time. I feel it ripple through me, the hurt and anger at the injustice of it. Why did I have to go through that? Why me? I didn't do anything to deserve it. It doesn't matter that it could've been worse. I almost died, I almost sold myself to a stranger, in fact, I *did* sell myself to a stranger. I became a servant to bandits. My choices were whittled down to nothing, and none of it happened for a reason.

But even with my numbness finally disappearing, I can't decide whether giving myself to Kiri yesterday was a good idea. Thankfully, he didn't bring it up last night or push the marriage issue.

Am I breaking his heart? Leading him on? Manipulating the man's obsession with me for some sexual release?

The new Juana is at it again, making stupid decisions that I never would have done before Ra'Vaga. Kiri doesn't deserve

to be jerked around because I happen to be spiraling.

When he held me through my sobbing episode, I felt like I never wanted to let him go. We continued our whispered conversation about fears and dreams until I drifted to sleep in his arms, my energy sapped from the emotions hitting me like a storm. It was the beginning of a much-needed mourning period. Kiri is so patient, so gentle, and the realization that I'm falling in love with him is not going away. It wasn't a mid-orgasm mirage; it's more real than anything I've felt for other men I've dated.

I stare at the hat hanging on the hook in the bedroom. It's stiff black mesh, wide-brimmed for sun protection. Still naked, I walk over and pick it up. My throat tightens.

Here we go. I'm suddenly crying again. I pose no resistance to the oncoming storm, letting the tears fall. I welcome it, needing the catharsis. It was better when I had Kiri to hold me through it and stroke my hair. But I am happy the gates have opened.

When I get ahold of myself again, I get dressed and assess the puffy damage to my face in the mirror.

Bellam messaged me a plan for my day, so I sit down to go over it while eating my breakfast. It's a strange feeling looking down at a neatly typed schedule for my day when I was once the person typing up schedules and distributing them. I used to run around like a chicken with my head cut off.

I have a few important things to do, like a fitting for new clothes that I'll wear when the Deviant Kar'Kali arrive. It's a rush order, so all the Kar'Kali mates are scheduled to be fitted at the same time. Considering Jen decided to turn the event into a 'luncheon' to encourage camaraderie and distributed an itinerary, I feel like a bridesmaid.

Later, I have another scheduled comm call with my family. Even my brothers will be there this time. One of them is driving in from San Diego, the other from Vegas. I feel lighter about it, happy to realize that the anxiety around seeing them is starting to fade with every message I exchange with my mother. My father has always been terrible at communicating

via text, but even he tries to send things to me. Usually, he sends me articles about dangerous incidents occurring in my general galactic vicinity as an ominous paternal warning. Today, it's a weather advisory for powerful rainstorms on Vanskiikii. I don't know how to tell him that it rains here daily, and I've already gotten used to it.

I take a walk in the gardens to calm down before my day begins, dutifully wearing the hat and hoping the humidity helps to reduce my puffiness.

All the human mates to Kar'Kali warriors are present at the fitting/luncheon aside from one. Sophie, who lives on Station City and works as a journalist, will be arriving later because she's working on a story. That disappointed me, because I'd like to meet her after devouring all her publications over the past few days. There's Jen, who I've met already, and her close friend Ella, who is the first human to experience the mating call chaos. Ella is a bubbly brunette, pregnant and glowing as she reclines in the corner. Maxine is a willowy younger woman with porcelain pale skin, dark hair, and a moody expression. She arrived from Station City only this morning and looks ill-at-ease in the silky gown the Vansk seamstress is pinning on her. Then there's Quinn, my fellow California girl who was also taken captive during the same raid as me and awoken in a stasis pod. She has violet hair tamed into ringlets that bounce around her, every aspect of her amply curved body groomed to perfection with sparkling nails and a full beat of makeup.

Jen is fussing over whether we should move forward with Vansk gowns, arguing with herself about the pros and cons.

"Shouldn't we be promoting some kind of national harmony?" Jen asks both herself and the rest of us. "We're going to look like Vansk representatives, not Kar'Kali ones..."

"Except we're not cat people," Ella points out.

"Well, would you decide it before the poor woman's done with me?" Maxine gestures at the seamstress.

"It's not like we can turn up in Kar'Kali military outfits," Quinn says. Having been through the same experience, we

have stuck to each other like glue. I never had a chance to meet her on the ship we were both on, seeing as we hardly made it to the planned orientation before the emergency alarms started blaring. The purple-haired siren scooped me up in a heartbeat, quickly winning me over with an extrovert's charm that an introvert like me can never resist. She told me she's obsessed with my hair and sat me down to braid it while we wait for our turn with the seamstress.

"At least we'd be comfortable," Maxine grumbles.

"But Max, you look fabulous," Ella croons with wide eyes and palms clasped together in excitement. Though she's been put on bedrest, she was delivered here by a very intense Kar'Kali soldier who propped her up on a pile of pillows. He quite severely warned us all that if she was overly fatigued when he picked her up, he would be very angry. I was a little concerned, but Ella just laughed and waved him out of the room.

The seamstress stops what she's working on and looks at those of us gathered around.

"We can make whatever you envision," she says. "The shops in the city have every fabric you could imagine. I will send a courier out for it."

"You've met the guy we're trying to impress, Juana," Jen points out. Every eye turns to me. "What do you think?"

"I'm not sure it matters," I say at first. "When I met the guy, I was looking like a low budget Princess Leia. And I'm talking metal swimsuit version. It's low-key embarrassing to try to look like a fancy lady in front of him now. But he seems more interested in judging our mates, not us. For some reason, he already seems to like humans."

"Hmm," Jen muses. "How many humans has he really met, though?"

"He told me the 'spirit' is leading him to believe that his mate will be human," I tell them.

"The Kali'Ka?" Maxine questions. "He's talking to it?"

“Not really? I don’t know how it works. Point being, he’s curious about us.”

“So, we go with being human,” Jen concludes, waving her finger with sudden certainty. “Yes... we’ll have to really sell the human side of things.”

“That’s perfect because I’m great at being human,” Quinn jokes.

“Does that mean I can wear jeans?” Maxine asks hopefully.

When I decided to attend the fitting and commit to playing Kiri’s doting wife for the sake of this Kar’Kali alliance, I did not think that the process would lift my spirits like it did. Being around my own kind, even though I barely know these women, was a balm for the soul. No one pried into how I’m feeling or asked about the status of my relationship with Kiri.

We worked together to draw up some dream dresses for each person. Maxine got her pants, although Ella convinced her to have them made from a silky material to make them more formal. Ella wanted something with puffed sleeves and an empire cut to show off her bump. Jen prefers fitted, short, and sexy, while Quinn was asking about sparkly fabric options with a plunging neckline. I requested a simple matching set with a flowing high-waisted skirt and bralette style top. When the seamstresses have what they need, we settle in to chat over a delicious Vansk buffet of food and submit to Jen’s advisements on how to not cause a diplomatic incident. We all notice with amusement that many of her ‘rules’ are targeted at the hot-head Max, who has apparently been known to attack people with a baseball bat.

We receive word from Sophie by messenger that she would buy something off the rack in Station City, where they produce every imaginable style of garment from every corner of the galaxies.

“I don’t see why Sophie gets to miss this orientation bullshit,” Max grumbles.

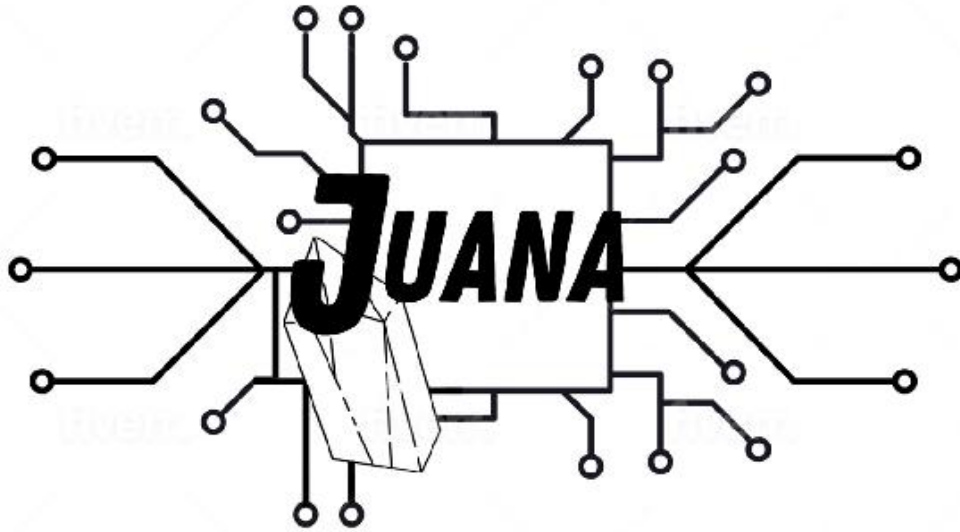
Jen looks her right in the eye and says, “Because she’s not an idiot and everyone likes her! Do you realize that if it wasn’t for her, we’d be sedating Mori for this event? If he wasn’t a genius, he wouldn’t be attending, but unfortunately, the Deviants are interested in him. You don’t just charm the biggest asswipe on the planet into becoming marginally bearable overnight. Fuck, I’d give her an award if I could...”

I laugh, saying, “I am so curious about this guy. The more I hear about him, the more I want to meet him now.”

“Trust me,” Maxine says flatly, angrily forking her food. “You don’t.”

Everyone finds that funny and we laugh together. I sit back to hear more stories about how awful this Kar’Kali boy-genius is. It reminds me of home, this feeling of gathering around a meal and enjoying each other’s company. When I’m surrounded by humans again, Earth doesn’t feel so unattainable. I’m not an alien here, and I’m not some stranded victim. I can be Juana, and none of them know what Juana was like before. So none of them can be disappointed. And that feels oddly freeing.





TO GO from numbness to a cascade of emotions has been a tiring experience. Yesterday I was in ecstasy. Last night I was sobbing. In the morning, I felt a shred of peace after I cried again. Today I was laughing, further from loneliness than I have been since I left Earth. I'm overwhelmed as I head back to Kiri's apartment, and I look forward to feeling his grounded presence keeping me solid. Sometimes I wonder how I would cope with returning to society without him there to hold me. I might be even more lost with no dark eyes and silvery skin to cling to. Or worse, I might find something else to cling to, something else that could make me feel alive.

I intend on going to sleep before the sun goes down because my comm call with my family is scheduled for the middle of the night.

As if I summoned him with my thoughts, the alien elevator opens to reveal him waiting for me. He's leaning against the columns that support the courtyard roof, staring out at the misty jungle. I soak up his silhouette, powerful and cut from stone. At the sound of the doors sliding shut behind me, he turns.

"*Ti kori,*" he greets me. There's a nervous crookedness to his smile. I meet him in the middle of the tiled walkway. When he reaches out to brush his knuckles over my hair, I bask in the affection.

“Were you waiting?” I ask.

“Yes.” His shoulders are stiff.

“You wanna talk, don’t you?” I freeze at the realization that the time has come for me to figure things out. Do I confess the growing feeling of me falling for him? He’s been forgiven in my heart, but that doesn’t mean I’m mentally in a place where I know what the right choice is. All I know for certain is how he makes me feel. With him, I’m safe. He’s my sanctuary.

He nods. “Come and sit,” he says, taking my hand and leading me to the same lounge I once sat in when we argued.

“Are you feeling better today?” He asks.

“Yes,” I say. “Being around the other women was good for me. And I’m finally starting to let out my emotions. It’s hard. It feels a little painful and overwhelming.”

“I know... We do not have to do this now,” he tells me. “Not if you are still struggling.”

“No, we should. You deserve that.” I can tell he needs to get this off his chest, whatever it is that has him twitching with nerves.

He snorts. “What I deserve? Juana, I fear I do not even deserve your presence for the wrongs I have committed. I certainly did not deserve the gift you gave me yesterday.”

“Don’t be silly.” I scoot to the edge of the seat, needing his closeness and wanting to pull him down to sit beside me. But he’s intent on standing. “I think we both enjoyed that.”

“We have been putting off this important discussion for a while now,” he begins, his words sending my heart into a rapidly beating mess. “And I made some arrangements recently that I hope will help to resolve this once and for all.”

*Arrangements?* I think. What arrangements could he be referring to?

He bends down and then gets to his knees. My eyes are bulging out of my head and my ability to breathe is on hold. Kiri looks attractive in the lighting, in any outfit, with any

expression on his face. But this is something else. His muscles strain the white fabric of his simple sleeveless tank. His eyes blink up at me, soft and imploring. He is putting himself at my feet, those massive hands gripping my knees like I'm his lifeline.

*He's going to propose*, is the first thing that flashes through my mind. The part of me that can't control my chaotic emotions is giddy with girlish excitement. Internally, I'm turning to mush before my insane assumption is even confirmed.

"What I have done does not deserve forgiveness. I realize that now. But I am going to beg you for it regardless. The first time I apologized was done in haste, out of desperation to set things right without truly reflecting on why I was wrong. I am sorry. I am sorry a hundred times over," he says, his mouth is twisted up. It's visibly tearing him up.

I'm shocked into silence because I'm not sure I've ever been apologized to so formally.

"I have realized that my entire attitude toward our matebond was born of selfish paternal instincts," he confesses. "I wanted to protect you, but I stole your choices from you instead. I made you feel trapped. That alone is unforgivable, and if you never wanted to see me again for that reason alone, I would understand. But Juana, I am begging you to find it in your heart to forgive that. There are many things in this world that I can bear. I have borne loneliness, self-hatred, a serious case of existential crisis. I have watched my planet fall to enemies. I have watched my race come near to extinction. But I cannot lose you. One thing I cannot bear is to be hated by you. Having known your trust and your smiles for only the shortest span of time, I know I cannot live without them."

"I don't hate you. I never could," I tell him, glaring because I've said this already.

"I know that I've failed you. I've failed in everything, it seems. You needed to feel free, and I robbed you of that. You needed trust, and I betrayed you. I am sorry, so sorry for being too selfish to see that. I cannot even blame the mating call

because I am at fault for thinking I knew better. I took my desire to protect you too far, made presumptions about what you would benefit from. All this, I promise you, I did it out of love. That does not make it right.”

“I forgive you. Of course I forgive you.” I’m tired of resisting the urge to touch him, so I reach out to hold his face between my sweaty palms. My pulse jumps as his eyes turn black. It’s the mating call showing itself. There’s something so honest about that look. He couldn’t hide his love for me if he wanted to.

“I meant it when I said I would find a way to fix it. And I think I came up with a resolution that will repair some of the harm I have done you.”

It becomes clear that there is no impending proposal when he pulls out a piece of paper and hands it to me.

“‘Annulment Claim’?” I read the title aloud. “Kiri, is this what I think it is?”

“With some assistance, I have determined that our marriage is founded on a law that requires further consummation than what we have done. And you were right. This allows for us to dissolve the union and strike it from the records.”

“What are you talking about? We consummated it yesterday,” I say, my eyes bouncing around the paperwork too frantically to absorb any useful information.

“I have had my secretary complete the necessary information, so all you must do is sign the document before a notary. We have one who works in the embassy office, so it will be easily done—”

“Kiri,” I choke out his name for the second time like a broken record.

“A fresh start, as you said.” He bows his head, nearly dropping it into my lap. “Furthermore, I have found a safe route of travel for you to return to Earth in a couple days’ time. You should take all the time you need, heal at home with

your family, without having to worry about explaining to them that you have some strange alien mate looming over your life.”

Except I do have a strange alien mate looming over my life. He’s been worming his way into the deepest chambers of my heart.

“You’re sending me home? You’re divorcing me and sending me home.”

“You deserve to have your life back,” he says. “I am sorry I tried to take it from you.”

“No,” I blurt.

He winces. “You do not forgive me for my behavior.”

“I already told you I forgive you,” I say. “I already forgave you. I forgave you days ago. I... I ... sure as hell forgave you while we were having unbelievable sex.”

A smattering of pink rushes to his cheeks. His shoulders drop in relief. “So we are at an understanding. I am forgiven and my reparation plans are amenable to you—”

“No!” I cry, tossing the paper. “I forgive you, but I changed my mind, Kiri. I don’t want this annulment.”

He looks confused.

“And what if the king shows up after I’ve already gone home to Earth?” I ask. “I can’t leave in a couple days, and make you look like a fool to him. I only met the guy once, and it was clear to me that he wouldn’t respect you if you can’t keep the mate that his precious religion gave you.”

“You should not make decisions based on this,” he says, frowning. “It is not your problem to resolve. And if the Ka’lakka judges me for sending you home, then he would be the fool. I do not care what he thinks of *our* bond.”

“I need to think about this,” I tell him, awash with panic and heartbreak and fear all at once.

“Certainly,” he replies, glancing over at the pot of plants the paper landed in. “I am happy to know you are not rushing

to sign the paper, but I will need to retrieve it from the herb garden if you intend to consider it as an option.”

When he leans over to reach for it, I stand up. My legs are twitching to pace. I suddenly want to burst out my feelings for him, but I’m frightened that if I do, I will end up hurting him. After all, I hardly know my own mind. If I confessed my love, only to turn around and run home to Earth, it would break his heart. What if I stepped into that transport ship and discovered I made the wrong choice? I couldn’t throw away plane tickets like that—spaceship tickets—whatever they’re called. When I see my mother, I already know I’m going to spill the beans, tell her everything about Kiri, gush over him like I’ve done with every crush. And she’ll see right through me. The minute I tell her about him, she’ll know that I’m in love.

The real world doesn’t work like Hollywood. I can’t sprint through the airport and into his arms if I fuck this up.

I need to stop my brain from running in a hundred different directions. I can’t think.

“If I sign that paper, it would be a big, fat lie anyway,” I argue. “What more consummation would there be? I don’t want to... you know... perjure myself or something, right?”

*Any excuse to avoid the truth, my mind accuses. The real Juana would tell him how she feels. And she wouldn’t be scared about it.*

“You seem extremely distressed, but I cannot work out whether you are happy about my solution or not,” he says slowly, eyes tracking me as I wring my hands and walk in a circle. “I learned that insemination is invoked in the ancient bylaws. Rather primitive, I know. But the fact is that the act did not occur.”

My mouth drops open. Why is my own primitive brain telling me to hop on him right now and ride him until this stupid bylaw is appeased?

“Say something,” he pleads. “I thought you’d be smiling. I thought this was what you wanted, that you would feel free again.”

“I need to think. Give me... fifteen minutes.” I spin on my heel and rush through the columns. My feet follow the path outside, trusting it to guide me somewhere, anywhere I can think of something other than kissing him and screaming that I don’t want to leave him—not ever.

“Minutes? Is that like taps or intervals?” His voice fades as I quicken my step. “Juana!”

“In the middle!”

“Where are you going?” He calls after me. “Juana!”

“For a walk!” I shout back over my shoulder, speed walking toward the gardens that surround the embassy.

“The rains are coming,” he says, and I realize that he’s easily keeping pace with me.

“I need to think,” I grit out. “I can’t think clearly when you’re right there.”

The sight of him makes me weak in the knees, after all.

“I understand, but can you please think inside?”

“A little rain is not going to kill me,” I snap.

As if on cue, a crack of thunder shakes the atmosphere.

“There is a serious weather advisory today,” he insists. “You stay in my apartment, and I shall leave again if you need more time.”

The rain starts falling. It doesn’t start gentle, but rather with big, fat drops that pelt me like water balloons. I gasp at the cool water on me and rush further into the thicket. I’ve come here before when the rain caught me off guard.

“This whole planet is a serious weather advisory,” I mutter. Even now, the greenery around us is becoming denser as I head toward the wilder side of the garden. Deeper into this area, the canopy of trees gets so thick that it should protect me from most of the rain.

He wrenches my arm back to stop me from continuing down the stone path. I stare, flabbergasted by his tight grip on me. It’s so unlike him to stand between me and what I want.

“Surely, you can think clearly from indoors.”

The darkening sky is suddenly lit with a flash of lightning. It illuminates his face like a strobe light, drawing attention to the black eyes that mean trouble. His pupils have grown in a heartbeat.

“Come inside this instant,” he demands. So like a man, gone from begging on his knees to telling me what I must do.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I say.

“Are you trying to say that if I pick you up and carry you that you will fight me?” Those intense eyes and the heaving chest are enough to sink any woman. “I tell you now that is a losing battle. I will pluck you up and there will be not a thing you can do to stop me.”

“No, I’m trying to explain why I’m out here!”

With more thunder building, we are yelling at each other over the storm.

“Yes, help me understand that!”

“I don’t want to do anything stupid,” I say.

“A different stupid thing than this?” He pulls me against him, bending toward me. His body shields me slightly, but we’re already drenched to the bone. “This is not an average rainfall. This is a dangerous storm, and I am one lightning strike from tossing you over my shoulder, you silly human woman—”

“Kiri, I’m in love with you.”

He stops short but doesn’t let go of me. Another flash of light blazes in the sky, but he doesn’t toss me over his shoulder like he promised. He’s short-circuited.

“But I don’t want to hurt you. Because I know you’ve been committed to me since the moment we met, and up until yesterday, I wasn’t even sure feeling this way was on the menu anymore. I’ve been numb until we made love. And when you got down on your knees, I thought you were proposing to me, and I wanted that. I realized I want to be your wife.”



“In what universe would this hurt me?” he asks, jaw flickering. “You *are* my wife.”

“I’m a mess. Isn’t that obvious enough? You hardly know me, so you wouldn’t understand—”

“I know you.”

I snort out a laugh. “I don’t even know myself anymore.”

“But *I* know you,” he insists.

“I’ve only felt this way for a day. How do I know it won’t go away? If I’m numb again tomorrow, it would hurt you. If I fall apart and run away, it will hurt you.”

“You do not run away from things.”

“I could.”

“Remember on our first night when you told me you were numb?”

I frown. “Yes.”

“It could not be further from the truth. Did your body not respond to me with such enthusiasm? Did you not cry out for me and the pleasure I provided?”

I’m thankful for the cold pelting raindrops, because my body heats up any time he mentions our sexual entanglements.

“You could have said I did not know you that night and it would have been true. Now, you are wrong. I know you are a woman with a strong heart. You speak your mind, and you never shy from the truth. You love your kin back on Earth so deeply that you are afraid to show them the pain that you are in. You do not want to burden them. You told me you wanted me those three days we spent apart, but you know that you could have seduced me, and I would have claimed your cunt and gladly licked you every night you stayed in my bed. You did not take what you wanted because you would not cross my boundary after I confessed how I felt about our intimacy. You would not hurt me then when you were angry with me, so why would you do so now?”

He palms the side of my head with his massive hand, sending shivers down my spine that have nothing to do with the chill of the rain.

“I could have barged into your office.” I’m doubling down now. “Stripped naked... Made you get those black eyes like you have now. Maybe I would have taken advantage of you, and gotten what I wanted from you, and then left for Earth. I could’ve—”

“Do not try to lie now that I said you were honest.”

“Don’t you ever wonder?” I ask him. “What if I took my little registration as your wife and got all the money out of your fancy Vansk bank account? What if I took it and left?”

“Except you would not, Juana.”

“You don’t know—”

“I know you,” he whispers, pressing his forehead against mine. “If you are not sure, let me tell you. You are my good female. *My Juana.*”

Our lips are so close, I can almost taste the kiss I’ve been wanting from him. My body is trembling, and I can’t tell whether it’s from the damp or from his words or from my aching need for him.

“How are you so sure?”

“Your heart is so deep that Ra’Vaga could not scratch its surface, *ti kori.*”

I press my body against his. We’re drenched so thoroughly that it feels close to nakedness. My thin dress hides nothing now that it’s plastered on my skin.

“Is that what you think of me?”

“That is what I know.”

He hauls me into his arms.

“May I please take you inside now?” Always so polite.

The rumbling thunder warns us that things will only get worse. My sandals are caked in mud, but I suppose that’s why

the Vansk make shoes from a washable rubber-like substance.

“Yes, I... I’m sorry I ran off and worried you,” I say, as he turns to carry me back toward the residence. “Every feeling is amplified right now. It’s like my heart is under a magnifying glass with the sun beating down on it. It’s all too much. But the only thing I’m sure of is that I love you. I have so little control over it; I’m scared it will go away or I’ll mess it up.”

His strides are so powerful that we are quickly back under the roof, which is spilling sheets of water over the side. We have no choice but to walk through the waterfall, but once we do, we are finally relieved of the rain. It’s misty in the courtyard now, and we fill the area with sounds of dripping.

“Perhaps we should start this conversation again,” he says, placing me on my feet again.

We are soggy and our clothes beg to be removed, but he gets down on his knees for a second time. He grasps me by my damp dress.

“You have generously forgiven me, and for that, I am grateful. Now, I will beg you to remain my wife, because if you love me, I will not abide annulling this matebond. If you love me, we can fix any problem that arises. I am begging you not only to trust me, but to trust yourself. Things are difficult, but if you feel for me anywhere near what I feel for you, then I believe nothing could break this bond—not Ra’Vaga, not a war, and not a trip to Earth or time spent apart from one another.”

The tears start falling again. He’s too perfect, and these are not tears of mourning; they are tears of relief and happiness.

“You can keep that paper,” he says, nodding his head over at the herb garden where it fell. “Keep it and know that you can sign it any day you decide you do not love me. I do not want to keep you with paperwork and ancient bylaws. I want to keep you with my tongue and my gifts and my dedication to you.”

I pull on him, dragging him to his feet. “Kiss me right now.”

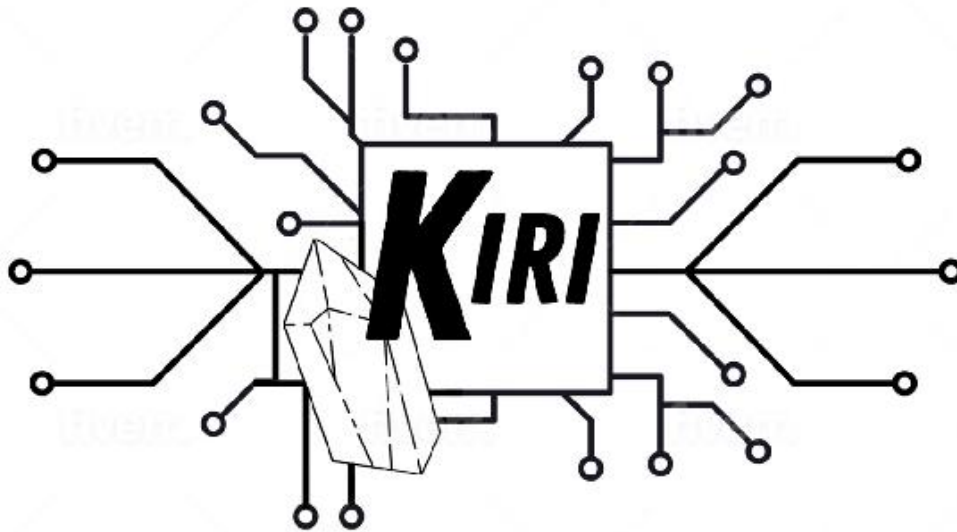
He opens his mouth.

“Before you say a word, I know you have some drug on your tongue, but I don’t care. I want to be kissed by the man that belongs to me. Whatever it does to me, I want it. Make the rest of the world go away, please. Because if only me and you existed, then you would have had me from the moment of our first kiss. We wouldn’t be rained on, there wouldn’t be an annulment, there would be no need to beg about anything.”

“Our first kiss?” he asks, curious.

“The one between my legs,” I remind him.

He chuckles when he realizes, then leans down until his lips are close to mine. “You will have to teach me how to kiss your tongue, too.”



OUR MOUTHS COME TOGETHER GENTLY AT FIRST. Though Juana is demanding the act, she still initiates it with soft lips on mine. The first touch feels like sparks lighting in my belly. How lovely it would be to take her mouth against mine while my cock was inside her. I am familiar with the idea, though not sure how we could implement it. Our height difference dictates that I would crush her under my chest while thrusting into her. I have come close to kissing her many times, since I cannot resist licking her cheeks, sucking her ear, and rubbing my face on hers. The need for that intimacy is instinctual.

While I am thinking all these things, Juana's mouth opens slightly. Her tongue laps gently at the seam of my own lips, as if knocking politely at my doorway. I open for her, trusting her to show me what to do. But I must be stiffening, because she pulls back for a moment to look over my face with concern.

“Are you alright?”

I nod quickly. “Of course.”

“Relax, Kiri,” she says, petting my hair.

“Please, keep going,” I say, desperate to feel her tongue against my lips again.

She smiles, and I bend again to accommodate her. When our mouths are together again, blood rushes through my head, creating a roar in my ears that could even drown out the downfall. Her fingers slide up my chest, warming me as they creep across the clinging, wet fabric. Her tongue begs me to open again, and I oblige.

She licks my tongue, and I suddenly feel as if hot water has poured over the crown of my head. I let out a high-pitched moan, and she hums in approval. My arms go tight around her, and I lift her without warning. There's a squeak of surprise, but she does not mind enough to stop kissing me. Her legs clamp around my torso. Her curious tongue does more troublemaking in my mouth, caressing, exploring me. She suckles at my lips, even bites. I am the receiver, a strange reversal of what I thought sex should be. I suppose I assumed that I must always please *her*, enter *her*, claim *her*...

But this feeling... of doing naught but receiving her motions and letting them ripple pleasure through my body...

I love it. I could become addicted to it.

I carry her as she kisses me, pulling groans and sighs from me with her tongue.

It is only a matter of time until the effects of the aphrodisiac begin. As soon as she licked my tongue, she dosed herself with the powerful drug that all fertile Kar'Kali males produce. All I know of its effects is through secondhand accounts: it drives your partner wild, makes them insatiable, distracts them from all else but your cock. Having heard stories of it since coming of age, I once heard those details and thought it was truly a curse on our genetics. I thought it addled the mind, forced females to become wanton, procreation-obsessed temptresses.

Now, I am anticipating her reaction with excitement. She is going to be aroused at a heightened level, her body made more sensitive, and she will be begging for my cock.

Water drips everywhere as I take her down the hall, trusting my memory because her mouth is on mine, and I cannot see a thing. I even close my eyes as I stumble, wanting

to be lost in her kisses. She starts panting against my lips, nipping at me more frantically as we leave puddles in our wake. By the time I make it to the bedroom, she is grinding her hips against my abdomen.

I sink down on the reed rug, knowing that our clothes will soak the mattress. She does not hesitate or question the fact that we are suddenly on the floor. She accepts our relocation and straddles me, kissing me with ever more aggression. Her tongue has gone from gentle licks that tickle my brain to a furious assault on my mouth. When I finally decide to kiss her back and stroke my tongue against hers, she giggles against me.

We break apart, both needing to catch our breaths. Her cheeks are flushed, but when I run my hand down her back, I realize she is shivering.

“Great *Ka, ti kori,*” I murmur.

She does not seem to care, lunging for my mouth again despite my concern.

“Don’t stop kissing me,” she says, her voice husky with desire. “You were just learning to kiss me back.”

“You will become ill,” I say, catching her with my hand softly closing around her neck. She moans quietly at the sensation of me holding her there and digs her nails into my chest.

“I don’t care. I need you now, Kiri,” she demands, still trying to crawl atop me and mate our mouths again.

“Patience,” I tell her.

I start to remove her clothes, and she becomes more cooperative when she realizes what I am up to. As soon as I peel her dress off, she is pawing at my clothes. I allow her to unbutton my pants and pull off my shirt. The aphrodisiac has her feral for my skin. But still, her arms are shaking, and her limbs feel cool in contrast with her burning center. None of it matters to her; she is ready to straddle me again and perhaps take me inside her immediately.

What she does not know is that she is going to have to wait.

I scoop her up. She is still damp, but less so now that she has been relieved of her dress. Her hair certainly holds onto a great deal of cold water.

She is purring with excitement as I lay her down on the bed and remove her underwear. In fact, she assists me by tossing her chest support garment across the room while I am occupied with pulling her underwear down her legs and off her ankles.

Her beauty distracts me for a moment. The wet tangle of dark hair clings to her neck and breasts. She bites on her lip in hunger for me, waiting for me to pin her down like I have done before.

Instead, I toss the blanket over her and sternly say, “Stay put while I get a warmed towel.”

“Kiri!” she whines when I turn away and jog into the bathing room. “How dare you leave me at a time like this?”

It is amusing to hear her protests, not unlike how I yelled at her for walking out into the storm. Thankfully, when I return to her with a warmed towel, she has not moved.

Instead, she has her head hanging off the side of the bed, eyes watching me upside down and fingers on her cunt. I nearly drop the towel. She is slowly circling her clitoris.

“I’m right here and you’re busy getting towels,” she complains.

I brush my knuckles over her arm. “You are ice cold.”

It is quite nice to appreciate her laid out on display for me. Her legs are parted, and I can see she is wet already, even though I have not touched her—the aphrodisiac at work. Reluctantly, I cover her with the towel and start working it over her skin to dry her off.

She makes mewling noises of pleasure, mumbling, “That feels nice, but I’d rather you start licking me.”



“Behave,” I tell her, tending to her wet and muddy ankles. By the nature of her position on the bed, I must bend over her, resulting in the rather sensual act of dangling my cock near her face. I also have a very appealing view of her cunt as she grinds it against her own fingers.

I dispense with her shoes, wipe her feet, and flick some clinging vegetation off the bed. She is entertaining herself after all; she can wait a moment while I make her comfortable and prevent her from taking a chill. Then I notice her stop her self-pleasuring. Her fingers disappear from view, and then suddenly—

“*Juana*,” I groan her name as the warmth of her mouth envelops my cock. I forget what I was doing. The towel goes slack, and I hunch over, clutching her ankles because they are there in front of me. The sound from below me is a combination of moaning and sucking. She has half of my cock in her mouth, and her hands soon join in to stroke the base of me and play with my balls. I lift up when my head stops spinning, dying for a good look at what she is doing.

It certainly does not look comfortable with her head both dangling and craning to take as much of me as she can. But she has stopped shivering, and she is no longer muddy... I fondle her breasts and she wriggles in approval. I let go of trying to dry us off for the moment and give in to the arousal of my insatiable mate. I play with her nipples, and she does not let up on my cock even as I pluck at them, squeeze them, and make them pink and hard.

While I enjoy her mouth on my cock, I hate how she strains her neck in this position. So I pull my cock away. She pants, saliva expelling from her swollen mouth, strands of her spit clinging to my cock in the most indecent manner. I lift her up, finding her head a bit reddened from hanging upside down.

“I fear you are on a mission to worry me,” I say, arranging her in an upright position. She is very malleable, allowing me to move her like a doll.

“Then tell me to behave again,” she replies with a smirk.

“Behave,” I say sternly. “Or I shall not lick your cunt the way you like.”

The smirk fades and her aroused expression near frightens me.

“You like that, do you?”

She nods, clutching the towel.

“Be patient and you will receive the pleasure you seek,” I advise her. I take the towel and turn her so that her back is to me.

A pout appears. She sits and squirms her hips like her aroused cunt is burning her. I lift all her hair in my hands, taking a moment to enjoy the scent of it—both naturally hers and infused with the Vanskiikii rain. Then I slide the towel between her naked back and the mass of wet locks. I fold the towel over her hair and begin drying it off, patting gently to keep from pulling on her neck. More hums of approval zing out of Juana as I pet and towel her, only stopping when I feel it will not drip all over her body and make her cold again.

“I’m being patient,” she whines. “But I can’t wait much longer when you play with my hair like that. This drug is making me crazy. My pussy is burning up...”

“I am sorry,” I say. The sentiment is genuine. “Tell me the truth. Are you feeling warm and comfortable now?”

“Yes,” she replies innocently. She turns, takes the towel from me and drops it. Between the puddles and our discarded things, we have made a mess. “Can we pick up where we left off?”

“Where was that?” I ask.

“Here.” She crouches down and slips my cock into her mouth again. She sucks on me with fervent movements. I am breathless, left to sink my fingers into her hair. At least she is right side up this time. It feels divine, dragging my mating beast out from hiding. My hips jerk forward, and she makes a wet choking sound. I nearly pull out for fear of hurting her, but then she grips my behind with both hands to lean into it. I keep

panting her name as she squeezes me with her throat and licks me.

I pull her back when it becomes too much too quickly. The last thing I intend to do with her after her love confession is come in her mouth without bringing her to climax. Her mouth is wet, dripping saliva with her tongue wagging out.

“I would like to see you flip over,” I say. I have fantasized about fucking her from behind like an animal.

She obliges my request, peeking at me as she moves to her knees. Her hips wind seductively until she has her ass in the air and her cheek against the mattress. Her pussy is on display, and I find her other hole quite appealing from this perspective as well. I do not know where to start, and I might start drooling.

“Please, please touch me,” she whimpers.

“The way you beg me,” I groan, caressing her from the nape of her neck to the base of her spine. My touch elicits a desperate moan from her. “It drives me wild. Tell me, is this how it felt when I begged you? I want to hear more, but I cannot stand making you wait.”

I take hold of the flesh of her backside and squeeze experimentally. She is so well-curved here, and I like the way my fingers sink into her. I pull her open to salivate over her cunt and her hole.

“Yes,” she replies sweetly. “I like it when—*Mmmph*—” She cuts off mid-thought when I curiously drag my thumb over the brown pucker that tempts me. “— y-you’re on your knees, but I hate it when you suffer.”

I drape my body over hers, and my cock brushes between her legs. I kiss the top of her head, reaching beneath her to grasp her breast. My hips hump between her thighs, ratcheting up my desire to plunge inside her.

“A word from you and I will be on my knees before you any time, *ti kori*,” I promise her.

“Get on your knees, then,” she whispers. “Lick me until you can’t stand it anymore and then fuck me blind.”

My pulse thrums at the prospect of following her order.

“I am your servant.”

I drop my lips to her exposed cunt before my knees have hit the floor. She cries out as soon as my tongue traces her slit. Even my slightest tease sends her reeling. I lick her hungrily, a hand on each flank to keep her wide open for me. The drug must make her incredibly sensitive; her cries are climbing towards orgasmic from only a moment's effort. I do not let up, pressing my face against her ass while I tongue her like she tongued my mouth. I dip inside her, taking her juices. That wetness is a drug all its own to me.

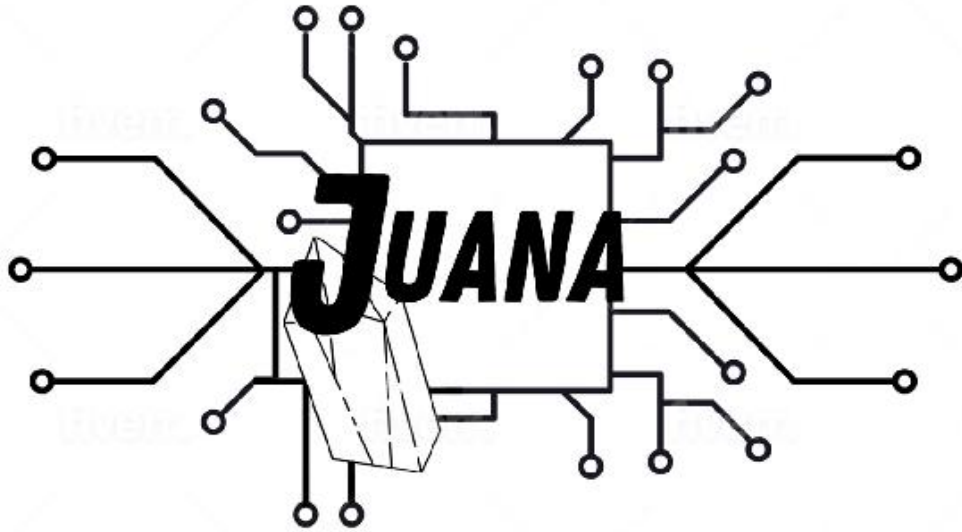
She grinds herself against my face, so I move in rhythm with her. Her sounds are indistinguishable murmurs of neediness. When I hear her pleasure rising up, up, up, I shove my tongue into her as deep as I can to thrust her. I lick inside her, flicking my tongue to taste her from the source. I feel the climax ripple through her, but I do not stop. I remove my tongue from inside and continue assaulting her clit. Her thighs start to tremble.

“Kiri!” Her tone is almost annoyed. “Fuck me already.”

I pause for a moment.

“You told me to lick until I cannot stand it, not until *you* could not stand it.”

Without awaiting a reply, I pick up her thighs and toss them over my shoulder. She should not have any complaints when I am supporting her weight. I dive back between her legs, determined to make her come on my tongue once more.



KIRI IS TRYING to kill me. First, he dosed me with his aphrodisiac and left me on the bed to fend for myself. I know he was only in the bathroom for a minute or two, but my body had already heated up from the all-consuming arousal. Being under this spell is like being dipped in hot water and emerging with a full-body tingle and an unquenchable thirst for cock. It was only a matter of time before the shivers passed. He was being an angel, trying to take care of me while all I wanted was his body crushing me and his cock pounding me into a coma.

But then, there was the hair-touching. The feeling of his fingers grazing my scalp, and the gentle care he put into toweling my hair dry...

I was feral for him. My pussy was wetter than the pouring rain battering the windows.

And now? Now that the distractions are behind us and we're getting down to business?

The man is still torturing me.

The bottom half of me is slung over his shoulders, and I'm face down in the pillows with my moans becoming weaker and weaker. The first orgasm felt like heaven. The second one had me screaming and clawing the blanket. The third one? That one went on for longer than usual; the wave of climax

freezing at the apex like time had stopped temporarily. I convulsed through it silently, stunned that I could go that far. And he is still going, licking me from the inside out, tonguing my clitoris until I'm seeing stars, and grasping my ass hard enough to leave a permanent of his hands. Does he realize I feel the tingle of his saliva at tenfold intensity? Does he realize that I'm not sure what happens after four orgasms? For all I know, I'll lose consciousness.

"Please," I whine as I gasp for air. "Please, Kiri..."

A rumble of impatience. He circles my clit with painful slowness. My insides prickle with need.

"I am reaching my breaking point," he admits.

We paraded past my breaking point one climax ago.

My legs are gently lowered, but I can hardly move them. He props me into a position that will accommodate his height.

I've been begging for reprieve, but when he removes his tongue, I feel the loss. Thankfully, I only have a breath's time to crave sensation before he plunges his cock inside me. My eyes shoot open, and I crane my neck for a glance at him. Though somewhat blocked by my own ass, the sight is powerful. His black eyes are blazing with desire for me. His muscles are taut as he drives into me. His short hair, usually so neatly coifed into an unassuming style, is falling over his forehead and shaking with his vigorous movements.

My body responds with renewed energy. I was soaked and ready for him, so he glides in and out of me with ease. The sound of our lovemaking fills the room with wet slapping, male groans, and my pitiful whimpers. My poor, oversensitized clit thrums to attention with every reverberating slam of his length. I can feel him straining to go even deeper into me, holding fast to my hips and angling himself to plumb my depths.

At some point, he must decide it's not enough. His hands slide up my sides and he folds over me. I bask in the weight of him draped over me, the heat of his chest against my back.

His thrusts slowly for a moment as he stops to kiss the crown of my head and drag his nose against the part in my hair. What is it about the animal side of him that makes me melt? I love it when he smells me, and when he rubs his face against me like a loyal pet. He does just that, dragging his cheek against my hair with a satisfied groan. His hips grind on my ass while he's deep inside.

"I am going to lift you," he whispers a warning to me. "Is that alright, *ti kori*?"

As if I'd disagree with anything he says right now...

"Mhmm," I manage to respond.

He grasps me by my chest and pulls me up. I'm secure between his arms and his back, and I have no time to adjust before he starts rocking his length into me. My head lolls against his shoulder as he finds his rhythm. I take it like a rag doll with my legs dangling. I love how he uses me, unafraid to move my body for me. The way I've given in to him, trusting him to always support me, to keep me safe. There could be nothing more freeing than the way I feel in his presence: unable to fall, unable to fail.

The angle he's taken and the way all his power drives into my body pushes me towards another release. I feel it build with such suddenness that the pleasure mixes with a spark of pain. The press of his hold means there's nowhere for me to go, no bounce to relieve the pressure. Every inch of him fills me with every stroke. I hear my own screams, but it sure as hell isn't like any sound I've made before. Like a woman possessed, I squirm in his arms and then come hard. If it weren't for the battering roar of rainfall on the metal roof, I believe the entire embassy would've heard me.

"So good," he murmurs against me. My heart flutters when he praises me, and my pussy clenches him despite my flagging energy. "You feel so good, Juana... I am close, too. Hold on a little longer..."

My body's need to become a puddle must be noticeable to him with the way he's talking me through this.

“Come inside me,” I quickly urge him.

“But I told you—”

“Don’t care.”

“Bu—”

“Fucking do it,” I grit out, digging my fingers into his forearms. “Do you hear me? You’re mine, Kiri. Mine.”

He hisses a breath of surprise at my aggression.

“You like being my wife?” He adjusts his hold to lift my chin. His hand clutches me like a necklace that I never want to take off. “You want this cock to be yours always?”

“Always,” I murmur. I want to feel him everywhere. I want to wake up with his essence between my legs. If that paper he brought survives the storm, I’m going to burn it. Fuck his ancient laws and fuck the fears I let consume me for days on end. If my feelings have returned to me, then I’m going to trust in them. I’m going to hold tight to them and never let go again. My pussy might be numb after this, but *I* never will be again. The Juana I was might not exist anymore, but she never had *this*.

He thrusts into me with rapid finality, and as he moans with pleasure, we pitch forward. I’m pinned as he releases inside me, collapsing from the force of his ecstasy. I hum with satisfaction as I’m flooded with his heat. The twitch of his cock as it pours seed into me sends fresh goosebumps over my sensitive skin. His body envelops me as he squeezes me tight within his arms.

“Am I hurting you?”

“No,” I quickly say, muffled by him and the mattress and my own hair in my mouth.

We lay like that together for a moment, his length still lodged inside me.

I’m hit with exhaustion that could put me out cold in a minute.



He pulls out of me with a reluctant sigh and rolls onto his back beside me.

“When my eyes are black, and I am in the thick of the mating frenzy,” he says slowly, perking my ears to attention, “I sometimes say things that I would not say in my right mind. I am sure you have noticed that I become rather aggressive.”

His hand gently moves my head for me, adjusting my hair out from under me. I turn my head to smile at him, wanting him to know how much joy he’s brought me, how much peace I feel in my heart.

“Mm, yes,” I agree. “Don’t worry; I like it.”

“I know,” he says. “That is not why I bring it up.”

I don’t have enough energy to move, but I reach out to stroke his arm. “What is it?”

“Did you mean what you said, Juana?” His vulnerability kills me. “Does our bond please you enough to keep you at my side?”

“I meant it. Didn’t I hear you say I’m honest?”

He laughs. “I did say that.”

“I know my feelings for you better than I know myself right now,” I confess. “I don’t know how long it will take to heal, but I know I want to do it with you. You make me feel safe. You feel like home, and I don’t want to let you go.”

Kiri pulls me toward him, flipping me so he can take my mouth. The kiss has stinging intensity that tingles my swollen lips. His newness to kissing doesn’t stop him from making me breathless, but he does not press his tongue inside my mouth. When we break apart, I wonder if I should make him dose me again and start all over. It’s a delirious thought, a dangerous temptation.

“You need to rest,” he says, as if sensing my wild thought.

“You can’t let me sleep through my comm call,” I tell him, feeling a death-like sleep coming on. “It starts in the middle of the night.”

“What time is it?” he asks.

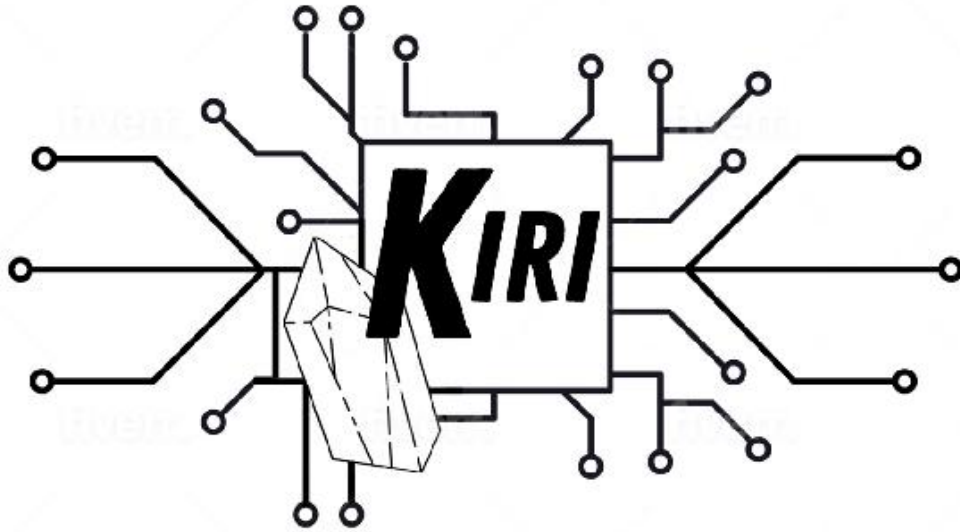
“I don’t know, but Bellam set an alarm on the bedroom clock.”

“I will wake you,” he promises. “I have a feeling I might lie here and watch you looking so peaceful.”

“I’m gonna need some buffer time to shower,” I murmur, laying my head down again while Kiri runs his fingers across my back.

“Understood.”

Sleep starts to take me. My body feels light and airy. The Vansk rainstorm and Kiri’s gentle touches lull me into a state of blissful relaxation. I am only vaguely aware as Kiri picks me up and puts me into bed the way one is meant to sleep on it. He takes away the blanket we fucked on and covers me with another. As consciousness slips away, he leans over to scent my hair one last time before closing the light.



JUANA INSISTS that we wait to reschedule her flight back to Earth until after the Deviant King has left Vanskiikii. This time, I will be purchasing two flight paths, because I will be accompanying her. The very same night she confessed her love for me, she broached the topic of my existence with her family by comm call. Though I did not attend the call with her, she told me that they now demand my presence for the next one. The prospect made me anxious, but she assured me it would be fine. She told me we would not under any circumstances be mentioning the fact that we are married despite having known one another for less than an Earth months' time. Apparently, she fears this would send her father into an early grave. Any plan she thinks will gain their approval is an excellent plan in my eyes.

When the cycle comes to a close, the king appears with the same small group of warriors. Again he travels without his battleship, and without any indication of where exactly he came from. I greet him with Juana and Pakka by my side, and we install his group in the guest suites. The following night, we hold our reception. The embassy has not seen such a glittering event since Pakka returned from his mission with the other Kar'Kali survivors. Pakka is quite nervous, seeing as we have made ourselves a target by gathering the majority of the

remaining warriors at the event. It is a show of vulnerability, and I assure him that it will pay off.

The beginning of the night is something Jen Marsden termed a 'cocktail hour', in which everyone is encouraged to mingle while drinks are circulated. All three of the children are briefly in attendance, and Makiva shows an interest in them. He holds each one, Evelyn, Danica, and Yennmara, with the sort of ease of a male who has often encountered such younglings many times. The greatest secret he withholds from us is the population count and location of his existing community. After all, warriors do not spring up from nothing. He hints at their existence but reveals nothing about them.

Juana is distractingly beautiful, making it difficult for me to resist dragging her back to our apartment and stripping her naked. She is dressed in a vibrant green that calls to mind the canopies of the jungle in bright light. It makes the golden tones of her skin sparkle. Her hair is piled on her head with carefully selected tendrils falling to frame her face and brush her shoulders. Her midsection is on display, reminding me of the first time I saw her. Someone has even given her jewelry for her belly button, which seems strange to me. Strange, but erotic. It draws my eye every time it catches the light. The mating beast stirs within me every time I glance at her.

The Vansk that I have invited are the perfect buffers between the Deviants and our group. Vasser, his family, a handful of staunch Anti-Azza philanthropists, and some military higher-ups round out a circle of Vansk that can strike up conversations with Makiva and his warriors while not leading to concerns about security.

In the interest of not causing a scandal, we have all come together to bully Mori into being quiet throughout the evening's events. In fact, Jen spends much of her time with her eye on the sullen genius. His mate Sophie sticks by his side to dominate all conversations they find themselves in. Most attendees hardly notice due to Sophie's charms, but the king is much more observant than the average person. Makiva does not react well when he senses things are being hidden from him. He makes a point of singling Mori out to request his

opinion on the alliance proceedings. Despite being seated at the opposite side of the banquet table, he stops by while returning from a trip to the bar in the adjoining room.

After exchanging pleasantries with Sophie about the articles she has recently written, the king turns to her mate.

“You are reportedly a brilliant mind. Yet I have not heard a word from you this evening on your opinions,” Makiva says directly to Mori. “Do you blindly follow your captain, then?”

Mori does not hesitate.

“From what I can tell,” he drawls, “despite Pakka’s best efforts to propose compromises, you cannot seem to move past your obsession with establishing Deviant rule over the entirety of the planet. And we are expected to live under your kingdom because you presumably outnumber our warriors?”

Sophie slowly presses her fingers to the bridge of her nose.

A silence falls over the table for a moment, and every eye seems to turn toward the Ka’lakka Makiva, waiting to see what reaction he will have to Mori’s insult. The formality of the event makes the use of that uncomfortable term quite offensive.

“I have always hated that word—Deviant. Because it was founded on a false concept that we are the ones that deviated from the path of Kar’Kali culture. Perhaps if the stupid name that you and the civilized universe ascribed to us was accurate, I would wear the label proudly.” The king sniffs and lazily takes a sip from his glass before continuing. “As I see it, *you* are the Deviants. You’ve been cowering in the face of nature for too long, hiding from what you are. *We* are the true Kar’Kali, and our way should be the established axis of power on the planet *when* we re-inhabit it. If we’re not successful in that goal today with your help, then we’ll wait until the time when it is possible. Your suppressor chips may have temporarily lulled the planet into a false equilibrium, but right now, it’s crying out for its people to return and set the balance of *kali* right. No, I won’t budge on ruling the planet in the tradition of my ancestors. Your kind had a thousand-year reign, and you failed. Your fertility rates were dropping. Your

generals were squabbling. Your entire population had to be drugged en masse to prevent the rampant suicides, defection, and other dangerous results of untreated mental illness that were being swept under the rug. You were losing the war. And all this was before that tragic event that leaves us with near-extinction status. Oh, and I almost forgot, the surface of our planet is volcanically volatile. That's a fun bonus."

The quiet is deafening.

Mori opens his mouth to reply, "Do you think I—"

Sophie slaps her hand over his face.

"We understand your reservations," she replies smoothly. "But if you wouldn't submit your people to the rule of another, then why should Pakka submit his to yours?"

"I never said I wanted to rule *you* specifically. I simply refuse to allow the same insidious regime to return to my planet with me."

I glance over my shoulder, scanning the room for Juana. The reflex is automatic; I want to check on her. She sits beside Vala's mate, the one who was on the same film crew as her. I thought for so long that she should benefit from me as her mate, just as I was taught that the state should benefit from me as its citizen. Give, give, give, and never ask for anything in return. Duty before self. But my duty to her is not what made her love me. My position does not matter to her. Titles... they are much the same. A title does not make a warrior powerful. If this Makiva did not command an army and the respect of his people, then we would not care to form an alliance. Conversely, if he commanded the Deviants without the title, we would still be seated here in this predicament.

"And what if there was another Ka'lakka?" I ask.

His head swivels toward me.

I wait for him to react, expecting anger or laughter or disgust. But eventually, his mouth twists into a grin.

"At the height of the Archaic era, there were close to seventy Ka'lakka scattered across the globe, not to mention

many ruling houses that were autonomous but pledged to another Ka'lakka," Makiva replies.

"And what if Pakka was a Ka'lakka?"

The king throws back what remains of the drink. "Then I might consider attending his coronation with great curiosity. But does that mean you would follow the old ways? Or would it be a meaningless title?"

Pakka narrows his eyes and looks at me for some further explanation. "I have no intention of becoming a king."

But before I can respond, Makiva continues.

"I never called myself a king. That's a name that others give me because they don't understand our rules, and it's easier for them to call me 'king.'" He turns away from Mori to return to his assigned seating. But no one has returned to their side conversations. "I take it you have studied some of the history to prepare yourself for meeting with me."

"I did," Pakka admits.

"Then you know all ruling houses choose how to govern their own, so long as their rules do not strip citizens of their spirit-sent rights? That by taking the title of Ka'lakka you welcome members of your house to challenge your right to rule? That those within your borders have every right to abandon you for another Ka'lakka should they deem your state unlivable?"

"I have read some of the old laws, but do you expect me to agree to abide by ancient documents?" Pakka asks.

"Are you considering what your diplomat has proposed?" The king sweeps into his seat, glancing askance at the warrior to his right. His advisor silently signals a Kar'Kali motion for 'proceed.' It is a good indication that he looks to his supporters to ensure they agree. "Would you become a Ka'lakka? I would consider it an acceptable compromise if you committed to all the duties that I committed to when I accepted the bid to rule."

Pakka inclines his head, his eyes searching for his mate who is seated opposite Mori. She straightens her back, and

almost imperceptibly raises one shoulder. It's as if she's saying, 'Why not?'

"I am not committing to anything over a dinner table," Pakka wisely replies. "But we will discuss this possibility in more detail. I am uncomfortable with such concentrated power. I have already burdened my daughter with too much public attention. I am not convinced she needs a crown, too."

The atmosphere is still a bit uncomfortable as a few seated at the table attempt to move on by putting bites of food in their mouths.

"I wouldn't mind a crown," Jen Marsden quips. "It's high time I got the recognition I deserve."

There is some laughter, and the king joins in. Others pitch in to poke fun at Jen's reputation for imperiousness, and the high-tension conversation devolves into a sharing of stories about how Pakka's mate went about corralling the other humans into preparing for today's event. Juana participates, joking around with her fellow women. Seeing Juana relaxed allows me to relax. Seeing this dinner transpire with nothing more than a few awkward interactions to stall the progress sets me at ease too.

Freed from his gag order, Mori decides to sting Jen with some amusing comments about how she would treat him if she were his 'queen.'

"I fear I would spend my days in a cage of her personal making," he says with a snort. "Or worse, she would monopolize my time with whatever projects she decided I could be useful for."

"I had no idea your mate had such a well-known penchant for managing others," Makiva addresses Pakka in a friendly tone.

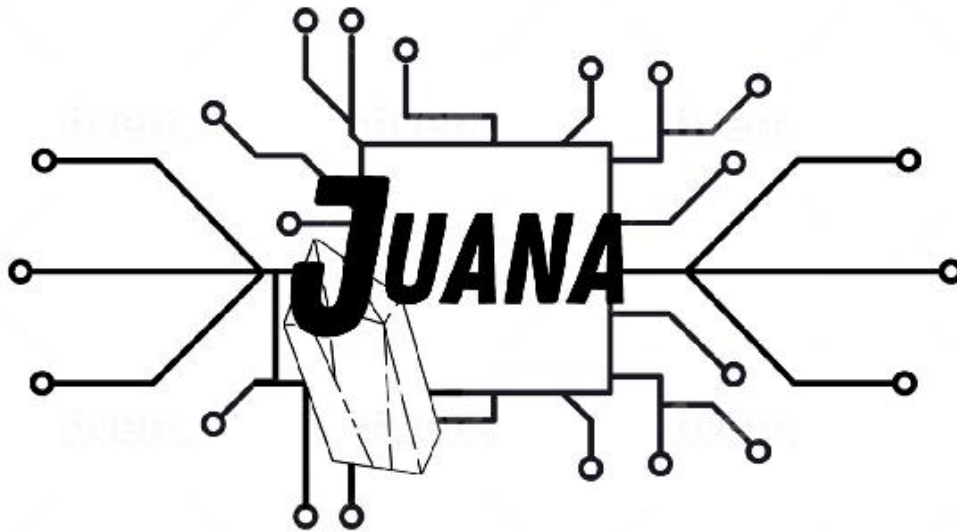
"They complain and tease her," Pakka says with a shrug, "but you would not find a single member of my team willing to stand in opposition to her. When she gives them tasks, they will run to complete them like soldiers in her army. She is a



warrior armed with comm calls, lawyers, and stacks of paperwork. I warn you, never cross my Jennifer.”

“Noted,” the king says, eyeing the side of the table where the human females are gathered with naked curiosity. “And how did you court such a female with no knowledge of their ways?”

“Very carefully, and while committing many errors in judgement.”



WHEN THE VANSK attendees that are not staying at the embassy start to trickle away, the dancefloor becomes sparser and sparser. The musicians switch to a more relaxed evening set, and some of the warriors that came to support their king are feeling loose enough to consider heading into the capital city for a night of further drinking and carrying on.

The other wives relax, too, or start doing the rounds before making their exit. Mori looks like he'd prefer to have left an hour earlier, even as Sophie zips around the room having deep conversations with everyone she happens to meet. To no one's surprise, Maxine apparently slipped away without a word, and after anxiously checking the time every other minute for a while, her Kar'Kali mate Kiva disappears to follow her. I stay at a table, watching everything unfold while chatting with Quinn. Eventually, she too begins eye-fucking her man from across the room until he gets the message that she wants to call it a night.

"I'll see you at the breakfast thing tomorrow, right?" She asks as she gets up from the table and fluffs her hair.

"Yeah," I say, as her huge alien mate parts the crowd to book it for her. "Have a fun night."

She grins. "Oh, I will."

“Quinn,” her man is hissing as he drags her away. “Do you know that everyone else can see what faces you make?”

“And?” She winks at me to say goodbye, with her alien jealously explaining that he would rather keep her seductive gazes and tongue signals to himself.

I wish I could pull off that move. But no matter how much I want to be alone with Kiri, this is his big event. He’s in his element, making introductions or leading someone away to have an important conversation in private. He’s often nowhere to be found, and I hope he’s not overly stressed.

I glance over at the balcony, craving some fresh air. No one will mind if I take a minute alone to decompress. I’ll return before Kiri notices I’m gone.

When I slip through the glass doors that lead onto the balcony, I’m letting out a sigh of relief before I even realize that I’m not alone.

Leaning over the edge with a thoughtful gaze and sagging shoulders, I find the king of the Deviants, Ka’lakka Makiva. I’ve caught him in a rare moment in which he is not straight-backed and confident, and I strangely feel like I’m interrupting an internal soliloquy. When he notices me, his body immediately pulls up to full height, and he changes his expression to exude that royal charm.

“Oh, sorry—” I start to turn away to let the king have time to himself.

“No, no,” he invites me with a flourish toward the tray of fruit and liquor that the Vansk servants have left on the balustrade. “I’m just enjoying the night air after a lovely round of dance.”

I stop and shuffle over to the bench near him. Would it be rude to walk out on a king’s invitation? I’m not sure what to say to him.

“The smell on Vanskiikii is wonderful,” he comments, tilting his face toward the golden light of Vanskiikii’s massive moon. “I believe it’s the rain, sending up the earthiest scent from beneath the surface.”

“I’ve heard they’re known for their soil,” I say.

“I hope it hasn’t been too obvious or unsettling that I’ve been paying close attention to the humans I’ve encountered tonight.” He drops that line like it’s not the strangest way to pivot out of small talk.

“No,” I assure him with a nervous laugh. “We were all busy trying to make sure everything went smoothly, so we barely noticed. Any reason for the creepiness?”

“I have been sensing something strange,” he tells me. “An inkling that my mating call will be ignited for a human. A message from the spirit, I think.”

“You had said that before.”

“We are something of acquaintances now,” the king continues, leaning his elbow on the balcony. “If you are willing to cross into the territory of friendship, I would love to ask you a question.”

I raise my brow. “You’re making me very suspicious, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious about befriending a king...”

Besides, this is a perfect chance to help Kiri with his goals. They want to form a relationship with the Ka’lakka Makiva.

He chuckles. “Once you know royalty, you will realize we are the same as any other breathing life-form.”

“What do you want to ask me about?”

“It’s about your matebond,” he starts, pausing to swipe his hand over his mouth. Then he locks eyes with me. “Would that be inappropriate?”

“I’m an open book.”

He squints.

“It means I have nothing to hide from anyone.”

A grin. “What a relief that must be for you.” Then he shifts his weight. “I’m having a hard time taking the Deadheads’ matebonds seriously. I understand certain aspects of human

culture is similar to our own, so I'm hoping you can help me understand."

"Understand what? Human culture is about dating anyone you might find attractive and hoping for the best. Kiri and I are together because of the mating call. You understand that better than I ever had."

"As much as their kind would like to think so, a matebond is not built on hormones alone," he says. "How does one love a mate that is more cyborg than male?"

I feel myself flinch, and he notices it.

"Since you asked to be my friend, I'll give you my answer without frills," I say, trying my best to keep my voice steady despite how heated I feel, "Because that's how talk to people I care about. You're being a hypocrite. For someone that is so offended by some stupid label like Deviant, you sure are quick to stereotype others."

"I was too harsh in my phrasing, and I apologize for that. But surely, you understand the point of my question." When he runs a hand through his curls and looks properly sheepish, I remember just how young he is compared to most leaders.

That doesn't mean I feel like holding back on him.

"Yeah, I get your point loud and clear," I say. "But in the short time that I've known Kiri, he's shown me more love, more dedication, and more patience than any human man. He saved my life, proved beyond any doubt in my mind that he would die for me. Living on Ra'Vaga was difficult, but somehow dealing with the aftermath has been even more confusing. Kiri is the person that has been there for me through all this, and he has the purest heart."

He stares, a flush of blue appearing on his cheeks. I realize I shouldn't talk to him like this, but he's the one who started the personal questions game. A frown pulls at his lips.

"I am sorry for upsetting you. That was wrong of me to interrogate a matebond, and I'll admit that I did it because I had my doubts about whether your relationship was a matter

of convenience or a true uniting of souls. But you're right... Perhaps I am a hypocrite."

"I should go," I say shortly, ready to stop this before it escalates any further. The pressure of the night is obviously getting to me.

He straightens up and shakes his head. "No. I will leave you to enjoy the view, and I humbly apologize once again for my inappropriate comments."

He gives me a wide berth as he exits the balcony, leaving me to my quiet panic.

I lectured a king, spoke to him with too much familiarity.

It was a perfectly good opportunity to extol the virtues of my husband and his fellow soldiers. I think I royally fucked it up. My numb emotions have recently transformed into a short fuse, and I've gone from searching my heart for a response to being overwhelmed at the drop of a hat.

I turn my back on the window, not wanting any lingering stares to catch sight of the tears bubbling up. I stare out at the Vansk horizon, which glows with the kind of nighttime beauty I could get used to. The jungle has turned into a black abyss, and beyond it, the capitol city's skyline sparkles. In the dark, I could almost mistake it for Earth.

The glass doors squeak again. I quickly wipe my eyes and hope it's only a servant come to check for forgotten dishes.

But a warm hand grasps me, and when I'm spun around, I see Kiri. He's looking at me fiercely. All my words gum up in the back of my mouth. My throat tightens.

"I saw the Ka'lakka on my way to you," he says, nostrils flaring when he sees my damp cheeks. "Must I turn around and hunt him down again? I do not care if he is descended from the Kali'Ka itself; I will gut him like a fish—"

"No!" I blurt. "That is totally unnecessary."

"Then solve this mystery for me. How is it that I come looking for you, passing him by on the way, and now that I see you, it is clear someone has upset you? All evidence suggests

he was the last person to speak with you. What did he say to you?"

"It was my fault." I rub my eye with the heel of my hand. "I ruined everything."

His eyes alight with murderous intent, his pupils growing in size.

"Tell me what happened, or I will ask him directly," he growls. "With a blade in hand."

"I might've called him a hypocrite," I admit. "He was really surprised by it, but anyways he must be embarrassed, and I was so worried that I'd ruined all the progress you made tonight."

"You called him a hypocrite?" His fury deflates slightly.

"He was asking me about our matebond," I start to explain. "He doesn't understand how humans could fall in love with your kind. And he basically suggested that you're like a robot, and I don't like that. So I gave him a piece of my mind."

He blinks rapidly, and with each blink, the black pupils seem to shrink back to their normal state.

"Are you angry with me?" I ask. "Did I just screw over all your plans?"

With a breath of relief, he sits down on the balustrade. "He insulted me, and you came to my defense? That is what happened?"

"Yes."

"I do not care what he thinks. I only care about you," he says. "My work, this war, my list of priorities, they all fall below you, Juana. Have I not made that clear? Should I get on my knees and beg you again to stay with me and be my mate?"

It's my turn to feel relieved when I realize he couldn't care less about what I said to the king.

"There's no need," I tell him. "If you start begging me again, I'll start to feel guilty since I enjoy watching you do it."

And you have my heart. We're husband and wife now. I pulled that paper out of the herbs and shoved it in the incinerator."

His body jerks with such an expressive release of tension that I jerk forward to grab him, thinking he's about to tip backward over the balcony.

"Oh my God!" I cry. "Don't scare me like th—"

He grabs me, pulls me into the v of his thighs, and rains kisses down on my face. His lips pepper my skin with little hints of the aphrodisiac's tickle from my forehead to my cheek and then down the side of my neck. It's an almost inhuman way to kiss, but I've never felt so smothered with affection.

"I am not going anywhere," he whispers between kisses. "I have been waiting all night to see you. I was ready to feign illness, come up with any reason to ruin our intricately laid plans to be alone with you again."

"It would've been welcomed by more than just me," I say with a gasp as his trail of kisses on my neck becomes more passionate. "For being so built up and anxiety inducing, the actual event was a bit boring."

He nips at my earlobe.

"This was amusing by diplomatic event standards," he jokes. "I advise you now that as my wife, you will have to endure much less entertaining galas, charity functions, and the like."

"If this is how we end them, then I think I can handle it," I murmur as he returns his attention to my neck. There's nothing more I can say as he's suckling on me, licking me from collarbone to temple like he'd devour me if he could. I try my best not to moan like a whore and draw attention to us, but it gets harder and harder as his hands wander. I feel his erection stabbing my belly as he grips my ass cheeks.

"Anyone could see us," I point out, glancing over my shoulder at the wide-open glass doors.

He hops off his seat to close them, and before I can say another word, he hooks my arm and drags me toward the corner of the balcony. My back presses into the cool metal



exterior of the building. To one side, the balustrade cages us in, and to the other, a massive bouquet of flowers flanks the door hinges. I giggle in spite of myself as he gets his hand right back to where it was trailing under my skirt. We are mostly blocked from view, with the exception of anyone that might be taking the canopy bridge trail through the gardens in the middle of the night. Or I suppose someone on the floor above could peek their head out and look down to see us.

“Remember when you came on my fingers in that awful closet?” he asks, eyes darkening once again.

I nod. His other hand creeps up my neck. His fingers tease over my lips.

“Should we consider this a continuation?”

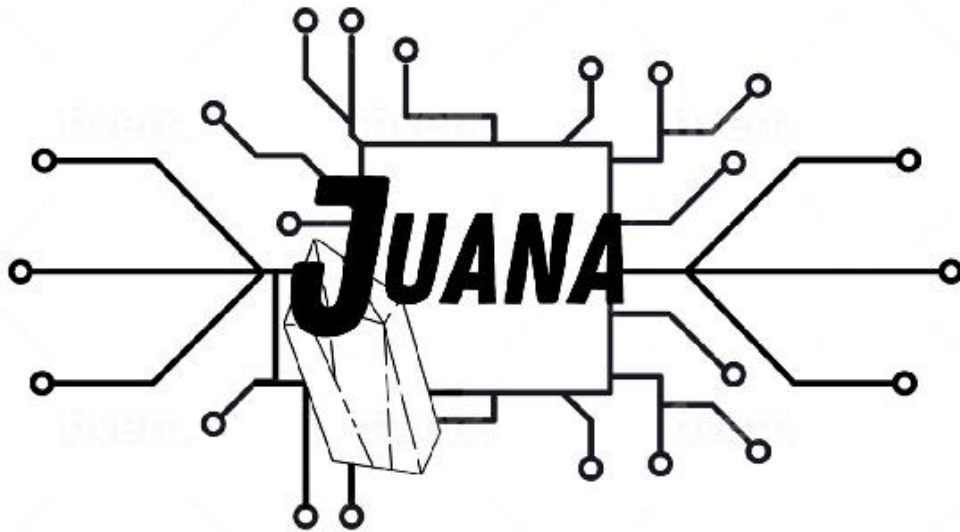
This time, instead of being wedged against a door, I am wedged against the wall. At least the darkness is natural, and we’re surrounded by fresh evening air. I palm his crotch and tease his cock through the fabric. *That’s right*, I think as the last sliver of white disappears from his eyes. *This is mine now. Mine forever.*

I have him panting as I say, “No, I don’t think we should.”

He’s surprised for a moment.

“This is our new life. Together,” I continue. “Let’s start fresh.”

The wandering hand on my thigh grips down on me and spreads my legs.



AFTER THE WHIRLWIND OF CRYING, hugging, and introducing an alien significant other to my overwhelmed family, Kiri and I take a walk through the backyard of my childhood home. He took the ordeal well, showing off his diplomatic skills by charming everyone with his manners. He's amazing with languages, having quickly learned enough of both English and Spanish to easily communicate with my parents. Neither of them have translator chips, so they were very impressed. I only gave him a few lessons, and he did the rest on his own with a language learning program on his comm device. Ever the gift-giver, he presented my mother with Vansk honey and seeds for her garden. For my father, he purchased a news subscription to a whole host of intergalactic papers and magazines. The man knows how to work a room, and my brothers were pleased to see he was making such an effort.

But it's time for a breather, so I show him the pool, the patio, and my mother's precious tomatoes, herbs, and peppers. Not much has changed since I left here, and I find that comforting.

"I know it was difficult for you to work up to this reunion," Kiri says slowly. "How are you feeling now that it has come at last?"

“I realize all my fears were stupid thoughts holding me back,” I confess. “Seeing them puts my heart back together again.”

“I do not agree that your thoughts were stupid.” He frowns, cupping my cheek and running his thumb over the corner of my lips. “But it is good to see you this way. That smile has not left your face for a moment.”

I grin, delirious with joy; the joy of him joining my family, even when my loved ones are still unsure about his sudden appearance in my life.

“You did well,” I tell him. “I know you were nervous, but I think you won them over.”

“You are being kind...”

“How long do we have to stay?” I ask. “My mom asked, and it occurred to me that I have no idea.”

He pauses for a breath too long.

“I may have to leave when the next opportunity arises on the flight path listings. Bellam is keeping me updated about what options are open on any given day.”

“And I can follow later, when I’ve wrapped things up here?” His choice of “I” over “we” has me wondering.

“You need not follow if you—”

“Kiri, what the fuck?” I snap, realizing this man’s deepest insecurities are trying to rear their ugly head at me.

“While it pains me to say it, I fear your smile says it all. I will leave here satisfied that you are content on your home planet,” he says. As soon as the words reach my ears, a ringing sensation follows as I try to understand. “With the way our plans are progressing, there are matters that could interfere with flight paths between the Alliance and Vanskiikii. There are other situations that could take me away from the embassy, leaving you alone there—”

“What are you saying?” I fist his shirt, liable to start shaking him by the shoulders.

“We are at war. And a new dawn of that war begins imminently.”

Panic takes hold of my heart.

“But you’re the diplomat,” I say quickly. “You’re not... going to the front, right? You’re going to have meetings and not go risking your life, right?”

“I will remain in my current position. I will not pretend that Vanskiikii isn’t a target that the Azza would love to strike, but I will be relatively shielded from danger. Remaining on Earth will be easier for you. You will be happy here. Your status protects you. Earth is so far from the war that you will be safe. You will be with family.” He glances at the sliding doors off the patio. “It is clear you are cared for deeply here.”

The last thing I need is for this conversation to become a silent theater for the family members gathered in my kitchen, so I haul him by his shirt to the opposite side of the shed that houses pool equipment and gardening supplies.

“Why are you trying to get rid of me now?” I demand. “After everything we’ve gone through, you told me you wouldn’t let me go.”

He places his hand over my fist and squeezes it within his own. “I stand by that statement. You are mine, and I never plan on releasing you from this matebond. I am trying to do what is best for you.”

“I’m going back with you.”

Curious blinks answer me.

“Do you hear me? I’m going back to the embassy, and you’re not going to argue with me about it or make any dutiful decisions on my behalf!”

“Have you taken the time to consider this?”

“There’s nothing to consider.”

“Things will not be easy with the campaign that Pakka and Makiva have agreed to launch together.” He glances surreptitiously at the garden that provides a privacy buffer

between our yard and the neighbor's. "You agree that this is a secure place to discuss such things?"

"I doubt there's a listening device in the prickly pear," I mutter.

"As I was saying, I know you have been homesick from the very start of your captivity. Looking toward the future with a realistic lens, I could spend stretches of time lobbying for war contributions on another planet or be called to a mission that *will* put me in a dangerous zone—"

"Kiri, when did I ever give you the impression that I can't handle a difficult situation?" I ask him, interrupting before he gets carried away with imaginary hurdles for our marriage.

"... Never," he replies carefully, as if sensing a trick.

"I didn't get asked to join the film crew I was on because I like easy jobs. I survived on Ra'Vaga because I don't quit. I have never once in my life backed down from a challenge just because it was hard. You have rescued me and confused me and pissed me off in a million ways. You're not what I imagined my husband would be when I used to dream about it. But I fell in love with you for a reason. And to me, saying that I love you is not just a confession, it's a commitment. You wouldn't let anything stop you from keeping me safe. If you're about to go down the hardest road of your life, then I'm not going to let anything stop me from doing the same."

"I am not the one that needs safekeeping," he softly insists, even as his eyes are flickering darker.

I slide my hands up to hold his face between them, dragging him to stoop down as if to kiss me. I can't help but smile at the intensity in his expression. Weeks ago, I might have been irritated by the act of expressing myself to an alien who barely understands human emotions. But now I feel nothing but amusement because I've learned that all his feelings toward me are firmly planted in the world of selfless protection and depthless love.

"Our bodies are not the only thing that need safety. Your heart and mind need that too, and I'm claiming those for

myself. I want to be there for you, for your heart and your mind. I think yours are the purest ones I know. If I'm going to be your wife, I'm going to support you, no matter where we are."

"You claim my heart and mind, but not my body?" His lips quirk up.

"No, I claim that too," I whisper before kissing him. He welcomes it, lifting me from under my ass to relieve himself from bending down. His movement causes me to surge against his lips, and I crave the pressure of us crashing together.

When we break apart breathlessly, I find myself staring at his whiteless, lovemaking eyes.

"I do not know how to express my excitement aside from fucking you right here on the ground, but I sense that it would be inappropriate to do so at your childhood home," he says.

"Save it for later," I laugh. "Because you'd be right about that."

"Juana, if you are certain about this, then this visit to Earth will be the last time you see your family for quite a while aside from comm calls. And even that, I must warn you that in times of war, there might be attacks that affect access to comm tech."

"Then we'll spend lots of time here," I say. "They'll understand. My mother told me she knew I was in love the moment she saw me. It's amazing how the people who know you can see right through you. That's when I knew I had no reason to fear coming home. She hugged me so tight and whispered in my ear, 'Are you in love with him?' I laughed so hard I thought I'd cry. I told her I couldn't believe that was the first thing out of her mouth."

"This was happening while your father interviewed me on the state of Sector 5 war affairs?" he asks.

"Yes," I snicker.

"Should we tell them we are married now?" He brightens at the thought.

I tighten my grip on him. “Well... I don’t want to give anyone a heart attack.”

# EPILOGUE



“I HAVE BROUGHT the Vansk notary to get this done quickly. There is much to prepare if we are to launch our campaign with any success,” I mutter, waving the notary into the secure meeting space. It is a small, quiet room to be transforming the future of our planet from.

“Where is your diplomat?” The king asks with a grin. “Is he busy trying to find some supporters to help you destroy me?”

The Ka'lakka is wise in many ways, but he likes to say provocative things for dramatic effect. Strangely, it reminds me of my mate. Humans also like to make dark jokes about serious matters like betrayal and military coups.

“He has gone to Earth with his mate.”

“Is everything alright?” he asks, surprising me with genuine concern.

I smile, for the first time feeling at ease with this male.

“He is well, thank you for asking. It is a visit because she has not seen her family since she was taken captive. According to my mate, Kiri had it in his head to offer her the option to stay there while we enact our plans.”

*Kali* blue brows raise, nearing his hairline. “He would allow his female to be separated from him like this? In Alliance territory?”

“It would be safe, I believe. She does possess his immunity, but Jen assured me that she does not believe Juana will take him up on the offer.”

“I would think not,” the king agrees, blowing out a breath. “She nearly attacked me for questioning their bond.”

“Kiri is still learning the complexities of life with a human mate.”

Makiva inclines his head. “I’m curious about the humans. It’s clear that the spirit has much in store for the binding of our two species. One of my own has already found his mate in a human female.”

“You know my thoughts on spirits,” I say. “But whatever the reason behind it, our DNA is soon to become inextricably linked to theirs.”

There is a beat of silence as the notary prepares everything we need to confirm identity via our blood samples, facial recognition, and *kali* signature. When all has been collected, Makiva picks up the stylus and taps it against his bottom lip.

“My advisors have found no fault with the document. Shall we sign?”

“We shall,” I agree. I pick up my own stylus and we bend to add our names to the highlighted box on the tablet. His handwriting swirls dramatically, and his full name is quite long. Meanwhile, I have neatly printed my name and the number I was ascribed at birth. Danica has no such number. Danica has her mother’s last name.

In a rare spontaneous moment, I quickly add ‘Marsden’ behind where I have written ‘Pakka’. I leave the identifying number. It is part of me.

The notary collects our styluses and smiles. “In just a few taps, it will be live on the Intergalactic Union’s system.”

I am now Ka’lakka to the newly initiated House of Pakka.

“How does it feel to have become my equal?” The king asks with a companionable bump to my shoulder with his elbow.

“Your ego is near unbearable,” I tell him with a smile. “My Jennifer might grow her own ego to rival it. I am not sure she should have such a powerful position, that one.”

I have made my mate a queen, and she will not let anyone hear the end of it.

He laughs, surprisingly jovial for a male that just gave over some power to another.

“She’s a formidable one.”

I frown, hoping I have made the right choice. Makiva seems less concerned, which troubles me.

“Are you not torn?” I ask him. “I thought you would have a different reaction to this.”

“It’s not traditional to have only one Ka’lakka,” he says. “I have been the only living Ka’lakka because my ancestor was the only House leader to escape with his mate and smallest child. To have you keeping me in check brings me one step closer to reinstating the old ways.”

“But I will not be taking on the old ways within my ‘House’.”

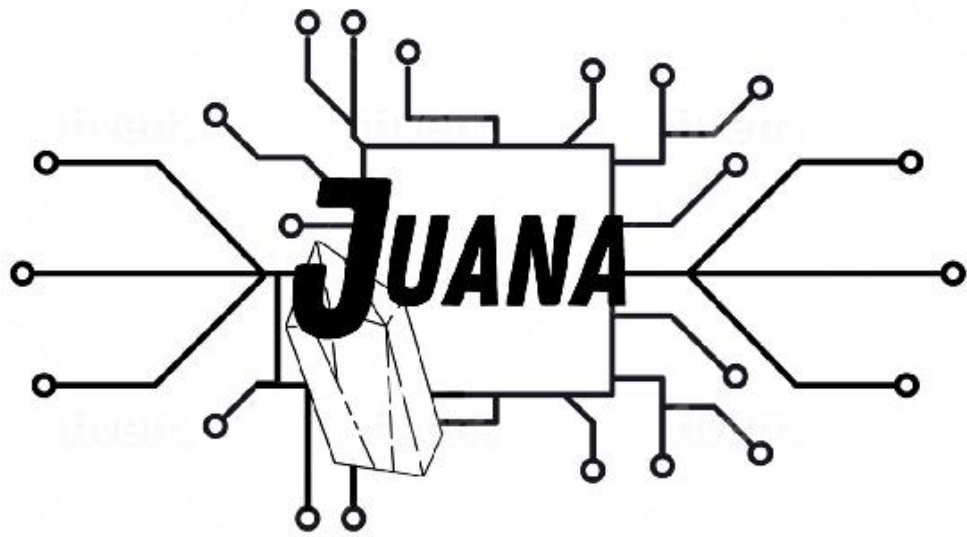
“All the more interesting for us then,” he replies. “Our planet does not need a new regime. It requires a community. If all goes well, I hope there are more than two Ka’lakka when I die.”

“Now,” I sigh, my head feeling heavier. “While war talks are very important, I have been asked to broach the topic of re-writing certain Archaic bylaws that are currently still in effect.”

“You do know that those by-laws were written in part by my great-great-great-great—”

The notary is running for the door with their materials. I would not mind running out along with them.

Here we go. Becoming a king will not be easy.



## ONE WAR CAMPAIGN LATER...

---

*To my dearest Onduu,*

*I have missed you on many occasions since I left Ra'Vaga. Sometimes I cook up your recipe to feel close to you again. I hope you're healthy and that the business is thriving! Did you know that when I finally landed in Alliance territory, I woke up with a husband? For the past few years, I've been happily mated to the Kar'Kali diplomat that helped arrange my return to civilization. I don't know what gossip has penetrated the world of your little outlaw town, but I'll expect you've heard the news that the Sector 5 Wars are turning a new tide with the Azza border receding. The planet of Kar'Kal has been officially cleared for civilian habitation! Kiri and I will be there for the first landing where families will be introduced to some new homes in refurbished Kar'Kali apartments.*

*There's going to be plenty of room for new faces, and that's why I'd like to extend an invitation that I worked out with Kiri's help. There will be some opportunities for non-Kar'Kalis to move to the planet, considering the current population is pretty small. Any interest in opening a new bakery and moving in? Kiri promised he could work out all the details if you wanted a change of scenery.*

*I'm sending this letter with a few of the Ka'lakka's representatives that plan to speak with Wiruu about how to handle relations with the outlaw town moving forward. I warn you, things on Ra'Vaga might get dicey if Wiruu can't fall in line with the new rulership. I want you to be safe, so I hope you'll consider my offer.*

*If you're happier staying on Ra'Vaga, I'll understand. I won't pretend it's been easy to leave my home planet, but Kiri and I are excited for the future of Kar'Kal. I've even been working on my family, hoping they'll consider joining us too. I have a feeling that the moment I start talking about children, they'll be jumping on the next flight here. There's other non-Kar'Kali coming here, ones that aren't mated to Kar'Kali, so I hope you know you would be welcomed.*

---

I hand the screen to Viro, who proceeds to tap on the tiny tablet until my message is encoded. Then he slips it into his bag and slings it over his shoulder.

“Do you think your friend will come?” he asks.

“Honestly, I don't know. As much as Ra'Vaga was torture for me, it was a haven for some of the people that lived there. Onduu doesn't have a criminal history though, so there's

nothing holding her there other than the fact that it's all she's ever known."

"I'll do my best to convince her," he says with a grin, and gives me a friendly pat on the shoulder before leaving.

"Thanks. Be safe," I bid him goodbye.

I turn my attention back to the closet that once held a single jumpsuit. Now, it's full to the brim with Vansk fashions, human clothing gifted to me by the others, and various random things I've acquired in the past years living at the embassy. One of the younger Kar'Kali warriors, Kiki, has been appointed to this position, and Kiri and I have to remove our belongings to make way for him. For once in my life, the prospect of navigating a new home location is something exciting to me instead of triggering. Kiri's nerves are sending me into positivity mode, as I try to counteract his anxiety with sunny smiles and encouragement. It's a hint of the old Juana peeking through to remind me she's there inside me. But I'm still not her anymore, and that's okay.

With a deep breath, I proceed to take out each piece one by one, neatly fold it, and pack it into the case.

It's strange to think that our new position will be so important. Pakka has asked Kiri to fulfill the role as ambassador between the two Ka'lakkas. He will work with whatever Deviant ambassador that the king Makiva contributes to ensure that the peace between Pakka and Makiva stays strong.

When my rattled man appears later, I already have everything in order. There isn't much aside from the cases of clothing and shoes, considering the apartment was furnished by the Vansk and all of it must stay here for Kiki's use. I *am* bringing my favorite pillows with me, though. I've grown pretty attached to them. I don't know where Kiri dug them up, but they are cloud soft and never show signs of deflating.

"Did you accomplish everything you planned on?" he asks, glancing at the pile of baggage by the door. Bot couriers will be picking them up in the morning and taking them to the flight loading deck.

“Yeah,” I say brightly. “We’re all set. Nothing to worry about. And if we forget something, I guess we’ll just have to make do with what’s there.”

He nods, tapping his fingers on the counter.

“Right. Most deliveries should be able to arrive now that the Sector has been cleared and secured. We can order what we need. And apparently, we will finally be treated to experiencing this community Ka’lakka Makiva has been hiding away. That is, if he allows it.”

“You’ll work it out with the king,” I assure him. “Viro took my message for Onduu. I guess we’ll just have to wait and see what she says.”

“If she rejected your offer and you still wanted to see her, I could accompany you there for a visit. If that is something that would make you happy.”

I shiver slightly at the memory of Ra’Vaga. It seems so distant now, but the sunless sky and the never-ending ache of a hard day’s work there still haunt me in my dreams every so often. I’ve come to terms with what happened there and how it affected me. With the help of a therapist that Jen sought out for me, I’m finally able to talk about it without shutting down. I’ve been through ups and downs on this healing process, and Kiri has kept his promise to never let me go through it alone. But just because I’m healed doesn’t mean I have to face down my demons. I can be different without hating the change. I can accept what happened without letting it consume me.

“No, I don’t think I ever want to go back there,” I reply.

He nods, pulling me in to kiss the top of my head.

“Of course. I wanted you to know it was an option.”

“Thanks. Onduu understands. We always understood each other. I have a good feeling though. A feeling she’ll come around to my idea. Like all Ra’Vaga citizens, she’s an opportunist.”

Something flickers in Kiri’s expression that tells me he’s concerned that the subject of Ra’Vaga will hurt me. He watches my face like a hawk.

“I’m okay,” I tell him softly. “It’s in the past.”

“Everything will be in the past soon,” he says. “There is an entirely new future ahead.”



# BONUS SERIES EPILOGUE

WARNING: THE FOLLOWING PASSAGE  
CONTAINS MORI...

MORI

I DODGE FLYING articles of clothing as my mate raids her closet as if she has never seen its contents before. I lounge on our bed, deciding it would be better to pack for myself once her frantic explosion has ended. Perhaps I will even have time to fuck her before we leave for the flight.

“Shouldn’t you be a little more excited about this?” She calls to me, muffled by the piles around her.

“Should you not be angry about it? This is your city we are leaving. I told you we do not need to follow them.”

Her head pops up. A glare. I grin back at her.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” I ask innocently.

“You are *so* plotting to fuck me.”

My Sophie knows me well.

“It will help you fall asleep on the transport. I think you need to relax after this.” I gesture at the wreckage she has made of our apartment.

She rolls her eyes and disappears again. The sound of her using the compacting suitcase is all I hear for a moment.

“All you’ve ever talked about is ending this war, taking back your planet... It’s what you’ve been working on for years! Every time you come home after days of work with no sleep looking like a bomb went off in your face, this is what it was all for, remember?”

“Yes. The war is not over just yet.” An empire that massive will not fold over night. In Kar’Kali history, we have seen them retreat this far before and they turned the tides then. We beat their borders back, but there is still work to be done. No treaties have been signed, and their emperor still lives.

Slowly but surely, Sophie works on her piles of clothing. I cannot understand why she possesses so many garments. Every time I see her return from her day with a box or bag from one of the many retailers on Station City, it boggles my mind. How will what is inside be any different from the countless options she already has? One thing I greatly enjoy however is watching her try them on for me. I like watching her turn about in front of the mirror. She always tells me her reasoning for acquiring it, but ultimately, I most prefer the part where I take it off her.

“Okay, now get off.” She attempts to shove me off the bed.

“Why?” I demand, allowing her elbow jabs. I move to the side, and she is already grabbing the blanket out from under me.

“I’m not leaving this here,” she says, folding up the Vansk quilt I bought for her centuries ago. “It cost a fortune, and it feels like butter.”

“If I want this more than you, then why are we doing it?” she huffs. “You’re usually more miserable when you don’t get your way.”

“For once, I am not certain which path is best. So I put it to you, and you seemed so sure...”

“How lovely that my opinion matters.”

I could leave it at that, but as I watch her shoving the comforter into the compacter, I sense her unsettled energy. Sophie is often irritated by my decisions, whether they are insignificant ones or very important. But I find there is something that needs resolving. She watches the blanket shrink inside the suitcase with glee. The consistent satisfaction she takes from using modern technologies never fails to endear

her to me. She is adorable, as the humans say. So cute I cannot *stand* it.

We have discussed the matter of moving to Kar’Kal more than once. As with anything that requires a big change, Sophie interviewed me thoroughly about my ‘feelings’ about it. I told her over and over again that my lab could remain here on Station City. We do not have to relocate. If she thought it would be inconvenient for her career, we could stay here. She was convinced that I was lying about that, convinced that I wanted to move to Kar’Kal and was afraid that it would upset her to make her move.

She always assumes I am kinder than I am. Which is cute, but untrue. She also assumes I have hidden ulterior motives at all times. Which is often correct.

After she considered the idea for a cycle or so, she came to me and said in no uncertain terms that it was our duty to move to Kar’Kal and participate in reinhabiting my home planet. She told me that it was a “no brainer,” that not everyone has an opportunity to “make history.” She was not amused when I pointed out that I have already “made history” by surviving a mass genocide and enabling my fellow warriors to restart the planet’s defense system. I should not have brought up that incident, because the time I spent away from her while working on the defense re-engagement was a dark time for her. She was alone and worrying for me, wondering if I would ever return. I quickly switched the subject by pointing out that before any of this chaos began, I was sent to Earth without a real time frame on when I could return home. Living on Kar’Kal has never been my goal. To save it and protect it is more important to me.

But there is a reason I do not disagree with Sophie’s decision to pack us up and move to my home planet. It is a reason I hesitate to reveal to her. This particular ulterior motive might send her into a frenzy of emotion.

“Do you know that I would live anywhere you would like so long as I could move my lab there?” I ask her.

She freezes and turns to look at me. Her smile lights up. “I’m glad that you believe that.”

“You do not believe me, then?”

“What if I said I wanted to move to the Rathe System, then?”

“The Rathe System is full of fools who listen to the wind and call it fate. They have a monarchy. And they do not consider the behavior of the Azza Empire to be worthy of war declarations—”

“But you could move your lab there easily,” she says. “And therefore, if I wanted to move there, you would, right?”

She thinks she is so clever. I frown.

“You do not want to move to the Rathe System.”

“No, but I think I’ve made my point,” she declares with a grin.

“My intention was to express a romantic sentiment,” I huff. “And you have ruined it.”

“Mori, what is it you want to say to me?” she asks, rising to her feet. “I can tell there’s something going on in there.” She wiggles her fingers in the direction of my forehead.

“I want to ensure your happiness,” I tell her. “I want to give you everything you desire.”

Realizing that I am being serious, she climbs onto the bed to sit beside me.

“I know that. I *am* happy.” A worried line appears between her dark brows. “It was my idea to move. I’m not giving up my career. I’m going to have so much to write about when we’re building a new world and meeting new people. You know that I love learning, and we’re going to be meeting people who are carrying on the traditions of your planet’s culture, traditions you don’t even know! I’m excited about it. And Maxine will be there, and Ara... They’re my friends.”

She has become close with Kiva’s mate, a female that tends to avoid social interaction. My Sophie has a skill for

charming even the most prickly of characters. Ara was a party to our imprisonment, and Sophie calls that ‘water past the bridge.’

“There is something I have noticed, and it has not left my mind since this thought first occurred to me. You want children.”

Her hands tighten into little fists.

“What gave you that idea?”

“I see you with children. I see how you look at them. And then you look at me. I can feel the desire coming off you,” I explain.

“Look, whether I want kids is a complicated conversation. When I left Earth, I made up my mind that having a family was not something I needed to check off my list. I made my peace with that long before I met you. Back then, it was about my goals coming first. So, I appreciate your concern, but I—”

“You have not denied my conclusions about what you want.”

“Mori, you so obviously don’t want them, so where is this coming from?”

“You have not asked me, so how would you know?” I ask; perhaps a petty question on my part.

This topic is made more complicated by what we have been through. The pressure to impregnate her that was put on me during our captivity means that the prospect of doing it triggers my deeply ceded contrarianism. It was so long ago, but I still think that Turi’s corpse should never know peace. Sometimes, I lay awake at night, watching Sophie sleeping peacefully. This should always be a moment of happiness, but thoughts of Turi creep into my mind. I picture waking him from the dead to kill him all over again. It is already painful to consider that he is the reason my Sophie and I have found the joy of mating together. Would it be more painful to think of producing the offspring he was so intent on having me force upon my precious mate?



But I would never let hating him and his actions keep me from loving Sophie. So why should I let it keep me from other things?

The way Sophie is watching my face makes me wonder if she has gained telepathic abilities. Her eyes are already wet. I knew this conversation would cause tears, and that is one of many reasons behind avoiding it for so long.

I hate her tears. I hate being the cause of them even more.

“Do you want to have children?” she asks, patient enough to indulge my pettiness.

“I do not know,” I sigh. “But I know that you love babies. You love holding them. You call Ara just to talk to Yenn.”

“You don’t know?” She cocks her head.

“I confess I am curious about it. I am not made for things like comforting small, irrational beings. I had one of the lowest scores possible for the youngling care aspect of the skills testing. I lack empathy and patience. The world around me consistently reports that my presence causes misery among many people.”

“None of those things mean that you can’t be a good father,” she says.

“And what does make one?” I certainly would not know. The closest thing I had to a father was a trainer who zapped my tongue until I passed out for arguing with him. He told me that I would not survive until the age of eleven passings if I could not trust in the superiority of those that outrank me.

“The first thing is wanting to be one and wanting to do a good job of it.”

“You know perfectly well that I am successful at whatever I commit myself to accomplishing.”

She wrinkles her nose, eyes still shiny with emotion.

“You’ve seen all your closest friends become fathers,” she points out. “You should know by watching them whether it’s something you want.”

She refers to Pakka, Kiva, and Kila. The three of them all have children. Vala recently informed me that he and his mate would plan on trying for children once they were settled on Kar'Kal too. They are all very different, so I am not sure how to make sense of that. I am nothing like them, so if being like them would make me a good father, then I suppose I might be doomed.

“How did this conversation become about what I want, when the reason I brought it up is because you want it?”

“I’m not having children if you don’t want them for yourself,” Sophie says. “Because I don’t plan on doing it alone, and I’m not bringing a baby into this world to have a father that didn’t want them.”

“Why would I not want my own offspring?” I demand. “It would be made from my body and yours.”

“You cringe at the sight of infants!” she argues.

“Well, they are not mine. And they are strange creatures, so why would I not? I have gotten used to them. When I saw Evelyn, I did not know what to think. I had hardly seen a baby up close before. They are so defenseless. How am I expected to keep one alive until an age at which it can express its needs?”

“And this is you trying to convince me that you *want* one?” She groans. “Every time I think I have you figured out...”

“Now that the three girls can communicate well, I find them quite entertaining,” I say.

“Why do *you* want it?” she asks me.

“Because my mate should have everything she wants in this world,” I tell her.

“I want to know a reason that has nothing to do with me,” she snaps. “Until I hear one, I’ll keep taking my birth control.”

Now I am irritated, and I am not sure why yet.

“Do you think I would be a good father?” I demand. “Have I not proven myself to do things that others might never have

thought me capable of? I make your body sing with pleasure. I perform many romantic gestures to please you, and they never fail to make you smile, with the minor exception of the Mori-Bot, which I admit in hindsight was not appropriate—”

“Oh, the Mori-Bot!” She rolls her eyes up. “Don’t remind me.”

I thought it might help her to have something to pleasure her in my place while I was away for longer stretches, but Sophie said it was “creepy” and that she’d rather be celibate for a full passing than share a bed with a robot. She also claimed that my traits were not likable when applied to an AI-based model. However, she did not have any complaints when we tested it out together. She told me she would not be left alone with it. But when I used it on her in concert with my own lovemaking efforts, all she had to say was “Oh, God!” and “Don’t stop!” That is why I have kept it in storage, just in case she needs another round of double the fun.

“I think you could be,” she says. “You know I believe in you. You said it yourself, when you want something, you make it so. But I’m not convinced you have the right attitude about this.”

“I will work on convincing you, then,” I vow.

“Oh, *you’re* convincing *me* that we should have babies now?” She is incredulous. “File this under things I never thought you’d say to me. Go ahead, what other thoughts on our imaginary children do you have?”

“Genetics are a complex matter, but there is a chance that this offspring will be like me,” I say. “I am interested to know what a person like me would be like if I had not been penned in. If the offspring was like me, I would ensure that they never know fear of their own mind and their own mouth.”

The tears that have been building in her eyes finally fall down her cheeks. I lean forward to wipe them with my thumb.

“Oh, baby,” she whispers, then throws her arms around me. “You break my heart when you say things like that.”

“Why? I do not want to break your heart.”

“If we had a Mini-Mori, they would terrorize the whole planet,” she jokes.

“As they should,” I say with a strangely strong feeling of pride toward this nonexistent iteration of myself. “You complain of my inflated ego often, but is my ego not a strong indication of how I would greatly encourage a miniature version of myself to flourish? Because I would see their abilities as an extension of my own?”

“Darling,” she sighs. She calls me that when I’ve exhausted her, either in bed or in an argument. “That is not the healthiest perspective on having children.”

“Hm, is it not?” I scratch my head.

“What if the baby was like me, hm? What would you think then?”

“Then our lives would be very easy. Because you are perfect in all ways.”

That makes her laugh hard, a giggle that warms me straight to my cock.

“Let’s keep talking it over, okay?” She kisses my cheek and wipes her fresh tears. “We have time to decide. But I could look into freezing eggs. There’s no rush to figure this out. But what does this have to do with moving? Is it because we’re going to be around the others with kids more often?”

I shake my head.

“It has been on my mind for a while. But moving to Kar’Kal brought it to the forefront. I might not know whether I would be a good leader to my offspring and give them what they need to thrive. I might not even know whether I want that lifestyle, but I do know that if we have children, they should be raised on my home planet. I would want to share its beauty with them, and to know where they come from.”

“Is this you trying to convince me already?” she asks with narrowed eyes.

“That depends,” I reply with a grin. “Is it working?”

# THANK YOU FOR READING!

If you want to stay up-to-date on Gemma's publishing plans, please consider subscribing to her [newsletter](#). Newsletter subscribers have access to spicy bonus content, new release sneak previews and advanced cover reveals.

---

Find more on the web...

Visit [gemmavoss.com](http://gemmavoss.com)

**Email:** [gemmavossbooks@gmail.com](mailto:gemmavossbooks@gmail.com)

[amazon.com/author/gemmavoss](https://amazon.com/author/gemmavoss)

**Instagram:** [@gemmavossbooks](#)

**TikTok:** [@gemmavossbooks](#)

## ALSO BY GEMMA VOSS

DEVIANT WARRIORS OF KAR'KAL

[Alien From Nowhere](#)

VIRGIN WARRIORS OF KAR'KAL

[The Alien's Handler](#)

[The Alien's Criminal](#)

[The Alien's Boss](#)

[The Alien's Dilemma](#)

[The Alien's Cargo](#)

[The Alien's Woman](#)

ALIEN INDENTURES

[The Indenture & The Alien Prince](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gemma Voss began her independent publishing journey in 2020, and has her close friends and family to thank for all the love and support it takes to be an indie author. She left her teaching position in 2023 to pursue writing full-time from the comfort of her home in South Jersey. Coffee, pasta, and trashy T.V. fuel her through difficult times. Her favorite recipe for romance features flirtatious banter, sexual tension, intergalactic hijinx, and a dash of mortal peril. Her hobbies include thrifting, yoga, and curling up with a good book.