



THE
LITTLE
THINGS

A *DARKSTAR* *MERCENARIES*

SHORT STORY



ANNA CARVEN

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THE LITTLE THINGS

A DARKSTAR MERCENARIES SHORT STORY (RIANA &
KAIL)

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ONE

RIANA STARED AT THE HOLO, mesmerized by the glittering advertisement. Shimmering bubbles rose slowly in the aquamarine-tinted ocean, alongside pink 3D hearts and surreal swirls of glitter.

In the center was a familiar character—one that tugged at her heartstrings in the weirdest, most illogical way.

It was a mermaid. Not just *any* mermaid, but a kitten-mermaid, complete with fluffy white face, shimmering green-blue tail, and cute little paws.

This edition had a funky white collar with black spots. She recognized that design instantly. It was the distinctive art of *Chibikuro*.

“Oh my god,” she gushed. “I. Need. It.”

She didn’t know why she was so obsessed with the inane little kitten-mermaid, but ever since she was a kid, Merpipi’s cute little half-smiling face had evoked a warm and fuzzy feeling inside her.

Merpipi X Chibikuro.

Only at Eukia.

New store opening tomorrow in the New World Orbital Mall Complex.

“That’s it. I’m going.” She glanced at Kail, who was reclining on her worn-in leather sofa in all his bare-chested, ripped Kordolian glory.

They were in the living room of her apartment—a brand new, architecturally designed building smack-bang in middle of the desert near Teluria—in the secure Kordolian compound, of course. As more and more Kordolians became entangled with human mates, General Tarak was intent on making sure they all had somewhere comfortable to stay. So these crazy buildings had gone up in a flash, and they had every creature comfort she

could hope for, along with an underground basement area where her light-sensitive mate could chill during the day.

Kail's eyes were closed. His brutally elegant features—marked with an intricate pattern of scars—were deceptively peaceful. His chest rose and fell in a slow, rhythmic cadence.

If she didn't know him so well, she'd think he was asleep.

But this was Kail. He wasn't asleep. He just liked to be in her presence—big, still, and silent. Almost as if he were meditating, or in some sort of trance. But he wasn't. Occasionally, he would open his eyes to slits, or his nostrils would flare ever so slightly as he inhaled deeply.

Whenever she was plugged into the Networks, whether gathering intelligence or simply entertaining herself, he would come and find her, and they would just *hang out*.

She wondered what he could possibly be thinking about—in his cold, brutal, labyrinthine mind. He could be terribly considerate and warm too, but only when he was with her.

He was her very own huge, lethal teddy bear.

Huh.

And to think she'd once been terrified of him.

Really, he was just a big old softie inside.

"Riana," he rumbled, still with his eyes closed, his features smooth and unreadable. "Where are we going?"

"Um... there's this thing I need to get."

Kail opened his amber eyes. In that moment, he reminded her of a large, dangerous—albeit patient—predator, like a big hunting cat; one that had decided she was his to possess and protect. "Where?"

"Um, it's in the new orbital mall. There's this shop called Eukia. It sells all kinds of things. Food, furniture... *things*. It's not too much of a trek. Just in Lower Earth Orbit. I can go there with Darius if you're busy." She really couldn't imagine dragging big, scary Kail around the hyper-colored maddening shrine to unfettered capitalism that was Eukia.

"Busy?" Slowly, gracefully, Kail sat up, draping one powerful arm across the backrest. His beautifully patterned silver skin glistened in the gentle glow of the lamplight. "I'm not busy. This thing... it is important?"

"To me, yeah."

"What is it?"

“Um, it’s kind of hard to describe.” How did she explain to him that she was desperate to obtain a small doll of a kitten-mermaid? “It’s a... figurine. It means a lot to me. I’ve been collecting these things ever since I was a teenager, and it’s a pretty rare edition. I want to get one before they sell out.”

The FOMO was riding her hard.

She knew perfectly well that her *Merpipi* obsession wasn’t entirely rational.

And that Kail—cold, hard, logical—would never understand.

How did she, a mere human, explain the concept of being an *otaku* to a lethal warrior like Kail? Whose hobbies included fighting, killing, and intimidation?

The devious side of her had an idea. It *would* be kind of handy to have Kail looming around her as she fought through crowds of desperate shoppers.

But no. She loved her big, growly Kordolian, and she wouldn’t want to put him through that kind of torture.

She’d go with Darius, because even though her brother always complained about the sneaky psychology of Eukia’s seemingly endless maze-like layout, she knew he secretly enjoyed going there.

Darius was the one who always took too long and ended up with a cart full of random impulse-buys.

“I will come,” Kail growled.

“A-are you sure? There will be lots of people there. *Humans*. The sort that annoy you. And it’s loud and busy and crazy, and...”

Kail held up a hand. He beckoned toward her. “Come.”

Her body moved before her mind kicked into gear, and Riana found herself padding barefoot across the floor, unable to resist Kail’s low, rumbling command.

She slipped her fingers into his. He drew her into his arms, running his big hands over the small of her back. “I don’t care what it is. If it’s important to you, I’ll come.” He smiled, revealing his gleaming fangs. “I’ll even take advantage of Zharek’s infernal gadgets and pretend to be a human.”

Riana’s heart fluttered. Kail didn’t smile for *anyone* but her. “You sure? I don’t want to put you through unnecessary torture.”

“I can handle a few irritating humans. What I *can’t* handle is the thought of you going to some unknown floating station in space without me. The risk is unacceptable.” He pulled her into his lap. He was warm and big and all-

encompassing.

Riana drew her legs up and melted into him, losing herself in twin pools of amber. “Well, I’m not going to argue. And you look very handsome, even when you’re doing the human-disguise thing. It’s fun. Just... please don’t bring your swords, okay?”

Kail gave her a deadpan stare. “I’m not *that* un-subtle, my sweet human. I will bring my guns only, carefully concealed.”

“Eukia has security scanners.”

He snorted. “*Crude* technology. Easy to elude.”

“Of course it is. Well, promise me you’ll play nice with the civilians. Try and smile occasionally.” Riana shook her head. “Actually, no. *Don’t* smile. People might misunderstand.”

Kail drew her close until their lips were almost touching. “That’s the correct answer. The only time I find it possible to smile is when I’m with you. *Alone.*”

She kissed him gently. “And what a glorious thing it is to behold. Well, *thank you*, my love. I really appreciate it. Because even though I’m in with your people and I know a hell of a lot more about the Universe than I should, I’m still human, and I get stressed out, and I need these silly little things from time to time. Tiny shots of dopamine.”

He kissed her back; forceful, insistent. “I know. We’ll go get your thing. Goddess have mercy on anyone that gets between you and your thing.”

“It’s called *Merpipi*. It’s a character. But never mind.” Riana slowly trailed her fingers down his sculpted chest. “I appreciate the moral support. Who knows, even *you* might find something you actually like at Eukia.”

Kail wrapped his arm around her waist and held her tightly. “Nothing in that place could possibly interest me. I have everything I need right here.” He slipped his fingers under the hem of her tank top, a hint of a smile hovering on his lips.

“You don’t look like it, but you are the *most* romantic bastard I’ve ever known,” Riana murmured as he lifted her top, running his hand across her belly. “I’m really looking forward to going out with you.”

But first...

“My turn now,” he rasped.

And FOMO was all but forgotten about.

TWO

IT WAS SO UNCANNY. There was no question about it; he looked as Kail-like as ever, only his skin was human-toned and deeply tanned, and he had longish black hair, and the beautiful, intricate patterns on his face were no longer visible to the naked eye.

What kind of sorcery was this?

Damn Zharek. He just had to go and create a device that formed the perfect holographic disguise, camouflaging Kail's unmistakable Kordolianness.

He just had to go and make him look impossibly *hot*. And even though Riana would always find his true form the most beautiful of all, she couldn't help but admire him when he looked like this, too.

How fun it was to see him in all his different incarnations.

Almost human-looking. But not quite. Never quite.

The one thing Zharek couldn't change was Kail's striking Kordolian features. If you looked at closely enough, it would become obvious that he wasn't human at all.

And no human could pull off that demeanour of his.

Kail with dark hair. Kail in clean-cut indigo jeans and sharp black boots and a goddamn charcoal-grey turtleneck. The knitted fabric became taut around his shoulders and arms, accentuating his undeniable physicality.

And he looked so adorably grumpy.

"*What?*" Kail growled as they descended the ramp and made their way into the private docking bay. They'd taken one of the small Kordolian cruisers that General Tarak and his men had at their disposal. Someone in the

Kordolian security team had managed to get them an unlimited pass to use the New World Orbital Mall's highly exclusive and secure docking bay, which was reserved for the ships of trillionaires, celebrities, and politicians.

No crowded public transport for them. It was true; being mated to a high-ranking Kordolian certainly had its perks.

And none of those prominent people even dared park their ships near the Kordolian vessel.

So much for Kail's disguise. Security would know what he was, even if they had orders to keep it strictly under wraps. But at least they had the ability to be relatively incognito when they mingled with the crowds.

"I was just thinking about how nice you look," Riana said lightly as they crossed the floor and entered a wide, brightly-lit corridor. "You're a handsome bastard, you know that?"

He turned and gave her a long, inscrutable look. "Hm."

Kail was a hard man to read. Sometimes his expression could be so cryptic that she didn't know whether he was thinking about warm and fuzzy things or killing someone.

But she was getting better at understanding him. He had these little tells... she was pretty sure nobody else knew them but her.

Like now, for instance. His mouth curved ever so slightly. His eyes narrowed. He gave her a quiet little look.

Almost as if her compliment made him feel a certain way.

Chuffed, for instance.

Kail, of all people?

Ha.

But suddenly, he was all business again as a humanoid robot approached them. It was a simulation of a distinguished man in his mid-forties, dressed in an old-fashioned butler's suit complete with waistcoat and bow-tie. He started off in Universal. "Good morning, Ma'am and Sir. What is your preferred language, please?"

"Universal is fine," Riana answered.

"Noted. My name is Boris, and I am *delighted* to meet you. As honored VIP guests, my purpose is to attend to your every need as you explore the New World Orbital Mall. How may I assist you today?"

Kail shot her a decidedly grumpy look. He had little patience for this sort of thing; pretense and bullshit.

Riana made a dismissive motion with her hand. “Boris, if you could just point us in the direction of Eukia, we’ll take it from there.”

“Are you certain you do not wish to attend the Executive Lounge for complimentary *hors d'oeuvres* and refreshments before you shop? We have an outstanding selection of—”

“No,” Kail grunted.

The robot somehow managed to look shocked. “Very well. I can provide you with a map holo of the—”

“No.”

“A hover-cart for your purchases?”

“Leave.”

Riana stared at the android, surprised at its insistence. Someone must have programmed it to squeeze maximum shopping potential out of people with lots of money. “You can go now, Boris. I’m sure you have a lot of other things to do. We require no further assistance during this visit.”

The robot looked at her with blank aquamarine eyes. “If you insist. But please remember that I am can be summoned in an instant if you *do* need any assistance at all.”

“Pretty sure we’ll be *fine*.” Riana hastily waved the bot away, fearing Kail would do some serious damage to him.

The Boris-bot gave them the android equivalent of a dirty look as he stiffly turned and walked away. “Enjoy your orbital shopping experience.”

Kail snorted; half-amused, half-irritated. “Why do your people have to create the most annoying machines in the Universe? Do they intentionally make them so ingratiating? Do humans enjoy this sort of servitude?”

They passed through a set of sliding doors and into a wide avenue lined with shops. Humans and the occasional alien milled about, strolling at a leisurely pace. The roof of the mall soared above them. Made of transparent aluminum, it was perfectly clear, providing a spectacular view of the glittering stars above.

The blood in Riana’s veins turned ice-cold. She shot him a cool stare. “Better to have androids than slaves though, isn’t it?”

Kail stared at her, his eyes narrowed, eyebrows drawn together. He looked so intimidating that the people around them instinctively gave them a wide berth.

But Riana wasn’t worried. Kail was just perplexed.

Maybe she could read him pretty well after all.

“Hm,” he said at last, letting out a short, sharp huff of exasperation. “Better to be irritated amongst humans than corrupted amongst Kordolians, is it not?”

Riana slipped her hand into his, finding reassurance in his presence. She knew perfectly well what he meant. “Something like that. Let’s call them the *old* Kordolians. Not you guys. You’re not a corrupting influence at all.”

Kail’s expression was completely deadpan. “Aren’t I?”

Well, sometimes.

“Nope. If anything, *I’m* the one that’s going to corrupt you.” Excitement flickered in her chest as she caught sight of the familiar lime green and white logo of Eukia. The entrance was massive. Bright fluorescent lights illuminated endless rows and bins of shiny new *stuff*. It was by far the largest individual shop on this station; probably around the size of two big warehouses on Earth.

Eukia was a global juggernaut, and this was their first venture off-planet. Of *course* it was going to be over-the-top. They sold everything. You name it. Flat-pack auto-assembling furniture, homewares, fashion, toys and collectibles, and even rare, exotic food items imported from space.

Things you couldn’t get from ordinary supermarket drops.

And the way it was designed...

It was dopamine on steroids; an endless, maze-like riot of vibrant colors and too many options.

Kail looked suitably unimpressed. “Ever since I claimed you as my mate, I have been incorruptible.”

Riana stared at the lights, the colors, the shiny white floor, the people streaming through the gates. “We’ll see about that,” she muttered as a sense of urgency overtook her. She tugged at Kail’s big, callused hand, *dragging* him toward the entrance.

Her Kordolian followed; silent, lethal, a pool of indomitable stillness amidst the chaos.

THREE

KAIL PUT his arm around Riana's waist and watched the commotion from behind his human-appearing visage, quietly bemused by the scene before him.

Humans truly were the most *un-serious* of all the alien species. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't understand how their minds worked.

Their little inventions and entertainments were endless. They turned their native fauna into characters—miniaturized, distorted, ridiculous.

And then they became obsessed and worshipped them like deities.

They became enamored of *things*—shiny trinkets and baubles with no apparent purpose other than to sit on a shelf in a collection somewhere.

Humans were horribly sentimental.

His own mate included.

But something about their strange ways intrigued him. For Kail—a warrior who'd dedicated his existence to honing his lethal skills and fighting for the empire—the pursuit of small novelties, purely for the purpose of attaining a dose of happiness, was utterly incomprehensible.

He was a simple man. The only things that made him happy were fighting, peace and quiet, and Riana, and not necessarily in that order.

They passed through the front part of the store, which was filled with endless arrays of puffy fabric-covered squares in every color imaginable. *Cushions*, humans called them. They used them for sitting against, or just for decoration. Even Riana wasn't immune to the human compulsion of collecting non-functional decorative things. She'd placed so many of these so-called *cushions* in their little dwelling. Not that they bothered Kail, but he

just couldn't see the point.

Well, as long as his mate was content, he would put up with all her little human quirks. She filled the void of his cold soul with warmth, brightness, and unpredictability.

Was he going soft?

No, he didn't think so. He was in peak physical condition. He was as fast and precise as ever.

His truth-sense never steered him wrong.

And he wouldn't hesitate to destroy any enemy that crossed his path. He would crush anyone or anything that threatened harm to his mate.

His priorities had changed, that was all.

He had a human mate now. A lush, vibrant female who was the complete opposite to him.

She was *his*. He wanted to protect her and see her flourish. And his yearning for fatherhood was growing with every passing moment.

Even when the Universe was in flux and chaos, he would do everything in his power to keep her safe.

And if he was so fortunate as to welcome a child...

He could only imagine how it would be—how out-of-his-mind protective he'd become. He was starting to understand Tarak's way of thinking around these things.

They passed through the cushion-hall and into another cavernous, brightly-lit room filled with small machines and devices that appeared to be involved in the preparation and consumption of food. It was loud in here. The buzz of hundreds of voices mixed with frantic, energetic music. All kinds of humans were roaming around, their wheeled carts filled with random items.

Riana looked up at him. "Normally, I'd be tempted to hang around here for hours, but I won't put you through that. I'm just going to pick up this one thing. And Mari asked me to get one for her, too. She's actually a fan. I didn't even know. Actually, I should drag you out more often. You're good for preventing impulse-buys."

Kail had no idea what she was talking about. He stared down at her gorgeous face; at her sparkling deep brown eyes and her plump, kissable lips. She'd accentuated her elegant features with a smudge of glittering bronze on her cheekbones and eyelids.

Her lips were painted glossy pink.

Her long, curvaceous legs were encased in sleek, shiny black tights tucked into heavy black boots. She wore a thick, fluffy pink dress over the top.

The intricate coils of her hair were fashioned into two neat braids that ran down her scalp, her natural brown hair interwoven with long strands of pure white.

The white hair was her cheeky little tribute to his kind. The style made her look regal and fierce—and *him* horny.

Even now, he could easily shut out the noisy surroundings and immerse himself in her presence, allowing her sweet scent to engulf him. His nostrils flared as he inhaled her; as he held her close to him.

That's what made all of this tolerable.

It didn't matter where they were. As long as she was by his side, he was content.

In a state of mild arousal, his head filled with thoughts of the future—thoughts that would have been inconceivable to him not so long ago—Kail allowed Riana to lead him through the winding maze of human consumerism; past thousands of useless objects and hundreds of hapless shoppers.

When they passed, they attracted attention.

Most humans couldn't help it. They *stared*.

They stared at him *and* at his mate.

And when he caught anyone looking at her in a certain way—because she caught the attention of both men and women alike—he gave them a warning glare. *Back off. She's mine.*

Interestingly, he caught her doing the same thing.

Luckily for them, most humans possessed good enough survival instincts that they immediately came to their senses.

At last, they reached the place where this infernal thing of hers—whatever in the Nine Hells it was—was supposed to be. There was a brightly lit area with a display in the center. Saccharine music played from a hidden speaker. People crowded around the place, their faces blank; their expressions drone-like.

Lurid holos danced around the central platform.

They depicted some sort of hideous creature with pointed ears and whiskers and white fur and a green scaled tail.

What evolutionary disaster had created this infernal thing?

What special level of hell was this?

He shot Riana a wry look. “Is this the thing you were looking for? This fish-creature?”

Kail folded his arms and frowned, but he couldn’t help but feel secretly amused. *Humans*. They were so *strange*.

Her shoulders slumped. “Well, yes, this is the thing. And it isn’t a fish-creature, it’s a mermaid. Well, a mermaid-cat. A rare and special edition of a cute character that’s inexplicably attained cult status amongst my people. And yes, we’re programmed to fall for the hype. But I don’t understand. We’re early. Why is the damn thing already *sold out*?”

Kail scanned the throng of humans. “Who do I need to kill?”

Riana gently punched him in the side. “Oh, you. You’re very sweet, my love, but this is far from a death-worthy situation. I’m gutted, but I’ll survive. Let’s go and check out the cafe. There’s a sushi train. Can I tempt you with the promise of sashimi?”

He *did* like sashimi.

“That’s it? You’re going to give up on it?” Kail inclined his head, half-focusing on her, and half-concentrating on the crowd.

He was aware of every single person in that room; what they were doing, how fast they were moving, whether they represented a potential threat.

This state of vigilance was normal for him.

He logged three humans exiting the space; pushing a wheeled cart filled with small gleaming boxes. Two males and a female. The males were armed. Their weapons were concealed beneath their clothes—they wore heavy black jackets—but Kail just *knew*. His truth-sense told him as much.

Also, they looked like they knew how to fight—for humans, that is. Heavysset builds, swaggering walk. Arrogance.

He’d seen these types a thousand times before.

“Well, it’s just a figurine. I’m obsessed and obviously disappointed, but I know when to snap out of it. Being able to come out here with *you* is good enough for me. It’s fun going out in public with you.” Noticing the three strange humans with the full cart, Riana turned, her eyes going wide in disbelief. “Oh my god, are those people just taking off with the entire stock? Like *hundreds* of them? That’s ridiculous. I can’t believe the store doesn’t have a one-per-customer limit.”

Her disappointment was fuel for Kail’s icy anger.

Sensing his mood, she placed her hand on his chest. “Kail, relax. I’ll handle this.”

“No.” Normally, he would have let her, but these people were armed, and Kail wasn’t going to take any chances. “I’ll handle this. You want those things in their cart, yes?”

“Well, I only want *two*, but other people might want one too. They can’t just take the entire stash of *Merpipis*. That’s so rude and entitled.”

Kail really couldn’t care less about those useless objects, let alone a bunch of human strangers who all wanted one, but when Riana’s happiness was affected, *he* was affected.

“Stay close to me,” he murmured, slipping his fingers through hers.

“Kail, don’t go overboard,” she whispered as they swiftly walked toward the group of humans.

He smiled at her, baring his fangs. His truth-sense was telling him to go after these people. “I’ll only do what’s necessary.”

FOUR

RIANA WASN'T GOING to fight it. When Kail was in this sort of mood, even she couldn't talk him out of things. All she could do was try to prevent the collateral damage.

They reached the cart-pushing trio, who were headed for the checkout-bots. Kail quickly moved in front of them, blocking the exit with his large frame.

"Are you fuckin' serious, man?" One of the trolley-pushers, a muscular guy with long blonde hair tied up in a ponytail, glared at Kail.

Riana was momentarily distracted by the fact that for such a tough guy, his hair was ridiculously smooth and silky.

Well, who said tough guys couldn't have nice hair?

She stood slightly behind Kail as he loomed over the humans, radiating pure menace. Part of her was afraid that he'd go full Kordolian on their asses and cause a huge scene, but part of her was wanting him to do that, because how *dare* these selfish assholes take off with the entire stock of *Merpipis* that everyone around here had waited so long to get their hands on?

It just wasn't decent.

"I'm taking that," Kail pointed to the trolley. "Hand it over."

"Excuse me." One of the trio was an impeccably dressed woman. She wore a long, elegant black coat trimmed with black fur over a slinky black dress. Shiny black heels and gleaming silver jewelry complemented her outfit. Her dark brown hair was fashioned into a helmet-shaped bob. "Please move."

The other individual, a buff guy sporting cobalt-blue hair and a black

mustache, a leather jacket draped across his wide shoulders, sneered at them. He lifted his faded t-shirt to reveal a bolt-gun tucked into his waistband. Riana had no idea how he'd gotten that thing through security. "Fuck off, asshole."

Kail rolled his eyes. Then he let go of Riana's hand and moved faster than the eye could see, turning into a vaguely human-looking blur. Before the guy could react, Kail was beside him and the bolt-gun was in his hand, its tip pressed against the blue-haired man's belly. "What did you say?"

All around them, people stopped what they were doing and stared, but they probably couldn't see the gun, because Kail had cleverly concealed it between himself and the human. To the observer, it just looked like they were having a very close conversation.

Riana tried not to gape.

Sometimes, she forgot that her Kordolian was capable of such astonishing speed... amongst other things.

He whispered something in the human's ear.

The man visibly stiffened, his eyes going wide in fear and disbelief. His companions stared at him in shock. Their attention shifted to Kail, who didn't pay them even the slightest bit of notice.

"If you value your lives, then you will leave *now*," he said quietly. "I don't want to upset my mate with the sight of blood today, so I am giving you the choice. If not for her, your heads would be on the floor right now."

He was the only person in the Universe whose death-threats could make Riana swoon. Sweet, stoic Kail, who was willing to kill for her over a damn figurine.

These people had no idea. She really should step in now, because these poor people were so outmatched it was just unfair.

"I'll take that, thank you," Riana said, swooping in and wrapping her hand around the trolley's handle. She smiled sweetly at blondie as Kail's attention snapped toward her.

For a moment, the human resisted, but then Kail pressed the tip of the gun a little harder against the mustached guy's belly, causing him to hiss in pain.

At last, he released the trolley. Riana quickly scooted it away from them, dancing back into Kail's radius of protection.

The bob-haired woman's glare could have cut through diamonds.

Riana sighed. "Look, I know you people can make a fortune scalping

these things on the black market, but you shouldn't take advantage of regular people's obsessions. Life's hard enough as it is. Sometimes, these little things just make it bearable. And you never really know who you might piss off, right?"

Now they were *all* looking at Kail. Her mate glared back, and his presence was so overwhelmingly intimidating that Riana could almost feel the air around them turning heavy with the force of his annoyance.

Because he wasn't angry.

He was just annoyed.

If he was angry, it would be a whole different vibe around here. Heads really would be on the floor.

That's why Riana wasn't overly worried. She was here, so he wouldn't do anything extreme.

That's why she felt so safe around him—*always*.

Riana lifted up her Link. "*Capture individuals.*"

The little band on her arm beeped, informing her that it had indeed taken a video recording of these three humans. Later, she would go back to their apartment and do her thing—go deep into the Networks and find out who they were.

"Who the fuck *are* you people?" The blue-haired man whispered, even though his own gun was pressed to his belly.

"I'm just a fan," Riana said innocently. "And he's... well, if you knew who he was, he'd probably have to kill you for real, so please don't go there. You're not going to get your payday out of this, okay?" She glanced at Kail, who was as still as a gargoyle. "And I think he's starting to lose patience."

Actually, he wasn't, but they didn't need to know that.

The woman in the black coat turned away. "We're going," she said coldly. "Reeve, Tyler, let's go."

Clearly, she was the boss. These guys were just her lackeys. Riana wondered how much money they would have made out of everything in this cart. Were they part of some sort of illegal scalping ring?

Never mind; she'd find out later.

Blue-hair held up his hands in surrender. "Fine. We're going. Now can you please get your gun out of my abs, dude?"

Kail lowered the gun. "Leave," he growled.

"Fine. But can I, uh... at least have my gun back?"

Kail didn't even bother to reply. He just regarded the human with the iciest expression ever.

"I'll take that as a no."

"Bye," Riana said sweetly as the trio departed, their stiff body language betraying their anger as they disappeared through the endless maze of stuff that was Eukia.

She looked down at all the hundreds of shiny boxes of biodegradable plastic in her cart. Then she looked up at Kail, who was smiling ever so slightly.

"You're just going to let them go?" he asked.

"You're asking me? *You're* the one with the gun."

Kail glanced at the bolt-gun in his hand, a look of disdain crossing his elegant features. "*Tch.*" He quickly put the safety off and tucked it away in his waistband, concealing it. "You're the one that knows how to deal with these types of humans."

"Well, I think you dealt with them just fine, but you're right. I'm not letting them go yet. I'm going to track them down on the Networks and see if they're into any really dodgy shit. If they are, I'll get the authorities onto them."

"Very well." Kail dubiously eyed the goods in Riana's trolley. "Now, you only need two, yes? You will leave the rest?"

Riana looked over her shoulder. She'd barely noticed, but people had descended upon them from everywhere, forming a large crowd around her, Kail, and the precious cart.

So many of them had that look she knew all too well.

That slightly rabid look.

This could turn into a shitstorm at any moment.

Right now, the only thing holding them back was Kail.

Nobody wanted to mess with him. Not even the security bots, which were lurking uselessly around the entrance.

"Um," Riana's expression became slightly pained. "One last thing, Kail. *Please.* I think we'd better stay here and make sure everyone gets their fair share. We humans... we can get a little bit irrational when there's low supply and high demand. It doesn't take much."

"You're that committed to justice?"

"Well, yeah. I can afford to be, now that I've got you on my side."

He frowned, taking a step back until he was beside her. Then he leaned over until his lips were almost touching her ear. “Very well. I’ll do this for you, but in exchange, you will do something for me.”

She tipped her head and looked up at him, her eyes narrowing. *What are you up to, Kail?*

His serious expression turned into a wicked smile. Good *Lord*, this man had such a terrible habit of turning her on in the most inappropriate of places. “What is it, Kail?”

He gently kissed the tip of her ear in front of *everyone*, immediately sending heat into her cheeks. “I’ve been good for your sake, my love. I would gladly tolerate the most excruciating irritations just to make you happy. So now it’s my turn to make a request.”

“Huh?” Her insides turned to jelly, in a pleasant way.

Kail chuckled softly. “I’ve played nice for your little human games, but that’s only because I’m in love with you, my Riana. And when we get home, you are going to do *exactly* as I say.”

With the feeling of his warm kiss lingering on her skin and the memory his deep, growly voice ringing in her soul, Riana stood frozen on the spot, completely oblivious to the bright lights and the pulsing music and the frenetic buzz of the crowd around her.

God-*damn*-it. Now how was she supposed to keep it together long enough to distribute these figurines, prevent chaos, and stop this place from erupting into an all-out shopper war?

Maybe next time, she should drag Kail along to the Boxing Day Sales.

She gave him a dirty look.

He returned it with a healthy dose of heat.

And just like that, her yearning for him blossomed, and she turned into a hot mess beneath her fluffy pink sweater-dress.

Taking her Kordolian shopping had turned out to be a lot more rewarding than she thought.

FIVE

THEY WALKED AWAY from the scene of destruction; Kail with his dark grumpy-intense-dangerous aura, and Riana with her post-shopping afterglow as she happily clutched her lime-green Eukia paper bag.

In just a single morning, they'd scoped out a brand new mall-complex, prevented a gross miscarriage of justice, and distributed highly rare limited-edition *Merpipis* to hundreds of rabid fans, all without Kail ending up killing anybody.

He was getting better at this sort of thing; mingling with humans, tolerating all her obsessions and quirks and human customs, which must seem so strange to him.

And *she* was getting better at just letting him be.

Actually, it was pretty fun walking around with him. He was so big and striking and dangerous-looking that people couldn't help but stare—and then they quickly looked away when it seemed like Kail was *about* to glance in their direction. Even when disguised as a human, he was crazy handsome, and Riana couldn't help but feel extra proud of her man.

Not only because he was a snack, but because she knew exactly who he was and where he'd come from.

Kail never said much about his terrible past. He was impenetrable like that. But Riana knew what he'd been through to get to this point, and the fact that he could peacefully stroll around with her by his side in the midst of all these humans was nothing short of a miracle.

It meant a lot to her that he'd come out here with her; that he'd allowed her to lead and benevolently followed along.

They passed a frozen yoghurt store, with ninety-nine different flavors of yoghurt and a dazzling array of toppings. Riana's attention was momentarily diverted, but the proposition wasn't tempting enough.

She was in a hurry to get home.

Kail had hinted about something, murmuring in her ear.

You are going to do exactly as I say.

Ninety-nine flavors of frozen yoghurt were immediately forgotten about as heat surged through her body.

There was no mistaking that deep, devious growl of his.

And she had every intention of giving Kail his rewards.

She *loved* that he'd become so free with her.

When they'd first encountered one another—when he'd blown into her chaotic life with all the force of an icy winter gale—he'd gone after her with unrelenting intensity.

It was a Kordolian *male* thing; a First Division thing, a Darkstar thing, and those that had followed Tarak al Akkadian out of the shadow of the Kythian Empire and into the light of Earth had no reservations about going after what they wanted.

The *Mating Fever*, as she now understood it, was an instinct that they couldn't suppress, and when it hit, they just went with the flow.

That's what had happened to Kail.

And *her*.

Little by little, big, stoic Kail was starting to be more expressive about his wants and needs, but even though he'd wasted no time in claiming her, sometimes she sensed that he was still holding back... almost as if he was afraid of breaking her.

They passed an inviting looking coffee shop called *Apogee*, where intimate tables were arranged along a vast window that looked out onto the grand tapestry of the stars.

The thought of sitting there with Kail over a slow coffee was highly tempting, but when she glanced up at him, she saw naked hunger in his color-altered eyes.

And just when she thought nothing at all could put the brakes on her impatience, she caught sight of something highly unusual from the corner of her eye.

This one, she *had* to investigate. It would only take a minute.

“Hey, just a second.” Riana did a sharp u-turn, pulling Kail in her direction. He snorted softly but obliged nonetheless, one hand resting possessively on her waist. “I just want to make sure I’m not seeing things.”

She made a beeline toward a customer who was sitting at a table inside *Apogee*, quietly sipping her coffee.

She released Kail, disentangling her fingers from his. He hung back, content to quietly observe his surroundings.

He was so patient with her; so peaceful. How could he be like this when his wicked intentions simmered just beneath the surface?

Damn Kail. His outward stillness could be so deceptive.

She forced herself to focus on the anomaly she’d just spotted. It lay on the woman’s table. Made of glossy cardboard and shiny transparent plastic, the long rectangular box gleamed under the warm lights.

“Excuse me,” Riana said sweetly, unable to contain her curiosity any longer. “I’m sorry to bother you, but I couldn’t help but notice your figurine. It’s just that... I’m a bit of a collector, and I’ve never seen that one before. Do you mind telling me where you got him from?”

“Oh... I’m kinda not surprised he’s drawing attention.” The woman looked up. Her candy-pink hair and large glasses with transparent frames popped against her olive complexion. Although it was easy enough to get corrective eye surgery these days, a lot of people still preferred glasses. “I should have kept him tucked away in the bag, but I just couldn’t help but stare at him over coffee.” She laughed. “He’s part of a new series. I have no idea where they came from or who’s behind them, but I couldn’t resist. Pretty neat, huh? There’s a little shop around the corner, just behind Eukia. It’s called *The Universe*. They sell all kinds of quirky little things.”

Riana stared at the box in disbelief.

Behind a window of transparent plastic lay a familiar looking figure. He had snow-white hair and gleaming red eyes and silver skin that caught the light. He wore sleek obsidian armor and wielded a pair of curved obsidian swords.

How is this even a thing?

In gleaming silver and rainbow holo-print, the name of the damn thing was printed across the front of the box.

Mighty SpaceDrow (TM).

Seriously?

Trust humans to do this.

She glanced at Kail, who was now looking out the window at the stars, his expression completely impassive.

Did they have one of *him*, too?

“So, who’s this guy supposed to be?” Riana tried not to laugh. The dude’s expression was so stiff and serious. A perfect caricature of the intimidating Kordolians she knew so very well.

“Oh, he’s Commander Darek,” the woman replied nonchalantly. “There were others too, but he’s my favorite. I like his eyes. He looks intense, you know? Like he could be really brutal, but also really protective and caring, if you know what I mean?” She lowered her voice conspiratorially. “Of course, it’s all just a fantasy, you know. I mean, the *reality* is different, but it’s fun to imagine...”

“The reality?”

“They’re lurking just outside Earth’s borders, aren’t they? Everyone’s saying it’s going to happen sooner or later... that they’re going to take over. I don’t know why they haven’t already. And to be honest, I have huge mixed feelings about it. It feels like the next decade could be all about doom and enslavement.” She took another sip of her coffee, giving Riana a wry look. “And all we can do is shop.”

“I wouldn’t worry so much if I were you,” Riana said gently. “I can’t really tell you why, but I get the feeling things aren’t going to go as badly as everyone fears.”

“Well, I like your optimism. I need a bit of that. For now, I’ll just pretend Commander Darek’s a good guy... with a little bit of necessary badness in him. And look, he has removable horns and a long hair attachment... and the armor comes *off*.”

Oh, I know.

“How perfect,” Riana marveled, suppressing a smile. “I have a couple of friends who would be so interested in these. Thanks for the tip. I’ll stop bothering you now. Hope you enjoy the peace and quiet—and the view.”

“Oh, I am. Nice chatting with you.”

Riana waved goodbye and quickly returned to Kail’s side.

“Is your curiosity sated?” he growled, his gaze turning sharp as he took in the coffee-sipping woman and her prize—*Mighty SpaceDrow* Commander-freaking-Darek.

“A little.” Riana shook her head in disbelief. Someone had trademarked her guys.

She feared for whoever that was.

But in the meantime, she would be sending a message to the girls.

After all, who wouldn’t want a stylized figurine imitation of one’s very own intimately-acquainted obsession?

Strangely, she didn’t feel like buying one at all—not even for the novelty factor. Why would she want an imitation when she had her very own big, warm, grumpy, sexy bear of a Kordolian right here beside her?

“Good,” Kail rumbled, a hint of sternness entering his voice. “Because I have reached the *very limits* of my patience. It’s time to go home now, Riana.”

SIX

THEY BOARDED the ship without any fuss or commotion, discreetly exiting through the VIP area.

No androids or bots bothered them.

The other ships had already departed, leaving the sleek Kordolian cruiser the lone vessel in the bay.

Riana felt a little ridiculous carrying a bright green Eukia shopping bag as she walked up the ramp of a highly advanced and technologically superior Kordolian stealth cruiser, but Kail was the one who had insisted on using the damn ship in the first place—for *security* reasons—so she just went with the flow.

They entered the cabin, and Kail motioned toward one of the dark, sculptural passenger seats that Riana had grown so accustomed to.

To think she'd once been utterly terrified of anything Kordolian.

Now, she couldn't imagine her life without them.

Kail watched her as she sat down, his expression unreadable. "I have to do something. Wait here," he said softly.

"Where are you going?"

Kail put a finger to his lips and shook his head. "You'll be perfectly safe here. The pilot is well equipped to deal with any potential threats."

"But *Kail*..." Riana couldn't contain her curiosity. What could he possibly be planning to do on a gigantic floating mega-mall? Last-minute shopping? *Kail*? "What is it?"

He gave her the most Kordolian of looks; cool, cryptic, and yet with an underlying intensity that made her squirm.

What was he *up* to?

He shook his head, giving her a stern look. “Relax. I won’t be long.”

Fine, Riana mouthed. She knew better than to argue when Kail was like this.

Still wearing his human disguise, he disappeared into the darkness.

Riana leaned back and closed her eyes. She reached into her purse and found her audio-buds, which she slipped into her ears. The very last thing she’d listened to—a smooth mix of spacewave jazz—filled her consciousness.

The music was infused with chill beats and warm, mellow electric guitar. Feeling content, she floated off into a state of relaxation, knowing she was safe; knowing that Kail would return.

Funny that the only time she could drift off into this trancelike state was when she was on a Kordolian ship. Something about the impenetrable black walls and the curved cocoon-like cabin made her feel incredibly safe. She didn’t understand how they managed to do it, but she never felt claustrophobic in their ships, even when they were so dark inside, with obsidian curved walls and small windows.

Time passed.

She even snoozed a little.

Then, all of a sudden, big, warm fingers caressed her cheek, sending a pleasant ripple down her spine.

Riana removed her audio-buds.

“*I’m back.*” He whispered in her ear, and Riana wasn’t even surprised, because she’d been expecting this.

She looked up.

There was Kail, standing beside her, and he’d ditched his holo-disguise and human attire.

His silver features gleamed faintly in the dim light. His obsidian exo-suit absorbed everything else, becoming the darkness itself. He looked as fierce and handsome as ever. He also looked rather pleased with himself.

“Did you manage to do what you wanted to do?” Riana couldn’t help the wry note that entered her voice. She couldn’t imagine Kail wandering into some bog-standard shop in a human mega-mall and *buying* something.

“I did,” he growled.

Her big, obsidian-armored Kordolian warrior held up a little pink

shopping bag. It was imprinted with a little silver logo of two interlocking planets—one with a ring around it.

Saturnalian, the shop was called.

Riana's mouth formed a little *O* of surprise. What could he possibly...?
“You *did*?”

A soft snort of amusement escaped him. “You think I don't know my way around a galactic trading market? There are trading centers in some parts of the Nine Galaxies that would make your human *malls* look tiny in comparison.”

“I didn't know you were into shopping, Kail.”

“I'm not *into* it. But sometimes items must be acquired at short notice, and trading centers are good places to gather intelligence. Not all of our work is fighting.”

“Huh.” She tried to imagine Kail wandering around some distant alien trading station, trying to blend in with the locals. Knowing him, he'd pull it off with ruthless efficiency. His intimidation factor alone would make people spill their secrets to him.

And then there was that crazy *truth-sense* of his.

Of course he'd be good at that sort of thing.

Riana shook her head as she stared at the elegant little pink bag dangling from his hand. *Saturnalian*. She'd never heard of that store before. What could it possibly be? The bag was small but it looked sophisticated; high-end. And it was *pink*.

“A gift,” Kail rumbled, as if reading her mind. “For you.”

“A *gift*...” Warmth spread into Riana's cheeks. She was tickled pink. “Kail, you didn't have to! Honestly, just you coming out with me was enough —”

“I wanted to.” There was that pleased-with-himself look again. “Go on. Open it.”

He handed her the bag. Riana took it by its silken handles, gently dropping it in her lap.

She reached inside and retrieved a little box covered in black satin. It was solid and well-made, with a hinged lid.

What could it possibly be?

Jewelry? An accessory of some sort?

She'd never expected such a thing from Kail.

Heart fluttering, she opened the box.

An oval-shaped silver *thing* gleamed inside, nestled in black velvet.

Her insides twisted, in a good way. “Is this... what I think it is?” She picked the thing up and rolled it between her fingers. It was perfectly smooth and slightly warm. A slender little black cord extended from one end. Made of silicone, it was tipped with a delicate molded black orchid. Presumably, it was so it could be easily retrieved.

And the silver orb was just the right size to fit in her...

Oh my.

“*Kail*,” she exclaimed, squirming in anticipation.

He gave her the most infuriatingly deadpan look. “You know what this is, don’t you?”

“Yeah. I *do*.” She swooned as he moved to face her. He crooked his finger beneath her chin and tipped her face upwards, demanding her full attention.

Not that it was particularly hard to pay attention to him in the first place. She gazed at his powerful, sculpted body, every inch of him cut and honed and enhanced by his sleek, form-fitting exo-suit.

Riana knew very well that he had no reservations about cruising around in his birthday suit. But out of consideration for her human customs—and probably for the sake of saving their sanity, otherwise they’d be jumping each other’s bones all the time—he usually donned his second skin.

That was what he seemed to be most comfortable with, even though he *did* wear normal clothes from time to time.

She didn’t have any complaints. He was spectacular, and she could look at him all day long and never grow tired of the sight.

“So. Do you want to try it?” His hand slipped around to the back of her neck, where he caressed her possessively.

“Um, yeah. I’m down for it.” Suddenly, she was feeling coy, trying to hide her excitement. He’d surprised her. She never really could tell what he was thinking, and that was part of the fun of being with him.

There was the slightest feeling of movement as the ship lifted; slowly navigating its way around the dock as it prepared for takeoff. But as with all Kordolian ships, it was so well insulated and dampened that Riana barely felt it.

Of *course* she was down for it.

She was turning into a quivering mess just thinking about it. And now she was so damn horny.

She was in the passenger seat, strapped in for takeoff—for safety reasons—and unable to move. He was standing, unrestrained and perfectly fine about it, because his kind didn't have to worry about the possibility of space turbulence or flight accidents.

He was practically invincible, anyway.

Kail's mouth curved into a little smirk, as if he knew her exact game. "Humans have created a surprisingly large variety of pleasure devices. This is just the beginning."

What kind of freaking Pandora's box had he just opened?

He pressed his hand against the seat, leaning over her. "Put it in, Riana." He retrieved the little pink shopping bag from her lap and dropped it on the floor. "I want to see what it does to you."

You're the one doing this to me. She pouted as she hiked up the edge of her skirt and slipped one hand down into her tights, then her underwear.

She touched her sex, which was already slick with arousal. Of *course* it was. Here was Kail looming over her, acting all devious and Kordolian—what was a girl supposed to do? And he'd somehow figured out how to tease her with this damn magic egg...

With her other hand, she slipped the device underneath her tights. Finding her entrance, she pushed it between her silken folds. She exhaled; a slow, shuddering expression of delight. It was warm and smooth and perfectly sized, and the feeling of gentle pressure against her sensitive walls was surprisingly pleasurable.

She met Kail's golden eyes.

His intensity threatened to swallow her whole.

He held something in his hand—a little black device of some sort.

Delicious energy rippled through her. She could easily hazard a guess as to what it was for.

Kail's smirk turned into a genuine smile; that miraculous little secret smile he reserved only for her. It was the only time she ever got to see him without all his complex layers and barriers. Who would have thought he could be capable of *that* expression?

"I'm in charge of this," he rumbled. Then he leaned in and planted a soft kiss on her lips.

Riana's tender insides melted. Her clit throbbed with need. "Just do it already. You're killing me."

"Fine." He flicked the switch. The thing inside her came to life; gently pulsating, sending waves of pleasure through her.

She closed her eyes and rode the blissful sensation, growing more and more aroused with every little vibration.

Suddenly, her safety restraints were gone, and Kail's hands were on her waist. Of course, she didn't need them anymore, because they were in space now. He gently lifted her into his arms and sat down, holding her in his lap. His big, powerful arms went around her, cocooning her in warmth and safety. She leaned against his broad chest and inhaled his familiar masculine scent.

And all the while, the little orb vibrated gently, bringing her to near-euphoria. He held her there, closer to climax but not *quite*; just suspended in a steady state of pleasure.

Then he did something, and the vibrations kicked up a notch.

Riana gasped.

Kail chuckled softly, his deep, resonant rumble reverberating right through her. She absorbed every last drop of his presence; constant, warm, reassuring. There was nothing quite like it in all the Universe.

She felt his hardness through the thin layer of his exo-skin.

He placed his hand on the back of her head, running his fingers over her braids, gently guiding her toward him.

Their lips met.

He kissed her; slowly, deeply, probing with his tongue, grazing his fangs across her lower lip.

The vibrations kicked up a notch—*his* doing, no doubt.

Then his fingers slipped beneath her waistband, and he pulled her tights down to her knees, and rather than fiddling around and removing her underwear intact, he simply flicked out a claw and sliced through the thin, stretchy fabric of her panties.

Then they were gone.

He had a habit of doing that.

Gently, he guided her, pulling her up until she was on her knees straddling him. Then he gave the little leash a tiny tug, drawing the orb out just a *little*, and suddenly the vibrating pressure touched different places; *other* highly sensitive places, causing her to moan softly. He pulled again,

and the thing moved a tiny fraction, and all of a sudden, the rumbling extended to her clit.

Oh. Sweet stars.

She pressed her hands against his chest and swayed, involuntarily writhing as his hands came to rest on her hips.

All of a sudden, he was sliding down the chair, bringing himself into a cross-legged sitting position on the damn floor, and he held her there and kissed her gently on her mound, his lips warm and tender.

His tongue flicked out, and suddenly there was an urgency to her euphoria. He tasted her there, just adjacent to her clit. Adding his touch to the gentle rumbling inside her was like throwing high-octane fuel on the flames.

He teased her a little, bringing her so *close*, yet he was somehow able to hold her just on the precipice without tipping her over.

She gripped the armrests of the chair and held on for dear life as he finally found her clit, and she was so wound-up that all it took was a little flick with his tongue, and she came completely undone.

He gripped her thighs and held her there, rising up and reversing their positions in one deft, fluid movement. Suddenly, she was the one sitting in the chair, and he was looming over her.

The orgasm overtook her, making her twist and turn in the seat.

She opened her eyes and shut them again. She couldn't bear to look at him. He was too much.

But...

She couldn't get enough of him.

Her eyelids fluttered open again, and this time, his exo-suit was gone. He was perfectly naked.

She came as she took in every gleaming silver inch of him; as he reached down and retrieved the little vibrating orb. Gently tugging on its lead, he drew it out of her and replaced it with his cock.

Then, as she was coming down from her high, he held her tightly and fucked her into oblivion, quickly bringing on another rush of pure pleasure, and she came again, curling her arms around his neck and holding on for dear life itself as he lifted her up and took her standing, and somehow, her tights had been severed; split in half, and so she was able to wrap her legs around him, big boots and all.

He took her sweetly and savagely, pushing her into pure ecstasy, her body

reaching a state of almost continuous climax.

And then he found his release, and as he climaxed, he whispered something in her ear, speaking in his native tongue, his voice trembling and strained.

She didn't understand the words, but she could hear the profound emotion in his voice; raw, fierce, filled with longing.

Still inside her, he lowered himself into the seat and let her sit astride him. She leaned against him, her hands resting against his bare chest, feeling languorous and completely satisfied.

And for a while, they were both silent. He just stroked her hair with great tenderness, and she closed her eyes and basked in his warmth; in his big, solid, unwavering presence.

She could stay like this for an eternity. It—*he*—felt so damn good, like a dream that was too good to be real.

But he *was* real.

Later on, she might ask him what he'd said back then, sounding so fervent and intense, but for now, she was content just to be held by him as they started to make their descent back to Earth.

SEVEN

THE NEXT MORNING, Riana woke to find Kail nuzzling her ear. He was already awake, his bare arms wrapped around her naked body, the two of them tangled in the silken sheets.

Yesterday, after they'd returned from space, Kail had left her and gone off to attend some official First Division business—his actual *work*.

Riana had enjoyed a light lunch with Mari and Sienna, who had been super interested to learn about the existence of the *Mighty SpaceDrow* figurines. So much so that they were planning a trip to the New World Orbital Mall today.

She'd politely declined their invitation to join. She was all shopped out, and a little preoccupied—she'd spent the rest of the afternoon doing her *own* work; researching top-secret information on Federation infrastructure for the benefit of the Darkstar Mercenary Corporation.

She had no issues whatsoever about giving such important data to Tarak and the First Division. She knew what they were about, and she trusted them implicitly.

Some humans, on the other hand, weren't trustworthy at all.

She kept her eyes closed and arched her back, pressing herself against Kail's warm body.

"Mmm." He made a low, rumbling sound and kissed her behind her ear, before trailing soft kisses down her neck. He gently bit her, pressing his fangs into her skin but never breaking it.

He reminded her of a lion affectionately nipping its mate.

"Riana," he murmured, sliding his arm around her waist, pulling her

closer. “Let’s have a child.”

“*Kail...*” Not for the first time since she’d met him, Riana was completely floored.

A child?

The possibility of having a baby had always been on her mind, but she’d kept her contraceptive implant in, because there was always something that came up.

Firstly, the damn reaction. Kail had given her his nanites once, saving her life when she’d almost died from a serious illness. They were inside her body. She knew that Abbey had received the same thing from Tarak—only in a much larger quantity. After she’d given birth to Ami, an immunological reaction had caused Abbey’s nanites to turn rogue, nearly killing her in the process. Apparently, pregnancy and breastfeeding were triggers.

Zharek was working on a fix so Riana wouldn’t have to go through the same thing. Until he figured it out, she was advised to wait, so she hadn’t really allowed herself to think about it all too much.

There was part of her that wanted it *so badly* that she didn’t want to get disappointed.

Then there was the other small matter of the Universe falling apart.

“You know why we haven’t talked about this much,” she said quietly, melting a little as Kail pressed his lips against the back of her neck. “There’s so much uncertainty around it. And we’re effectively at war.”

“There are always going to be wars in the Universe. And I’ll always protect you no matter what. Besides, I’ve been reliably informed that Zharek has solved the problem of my nanites existing in your body.”

“He has?” Riana’s heart trembled. “Since when?”

“Since yesterday.”

“And you didn’t tell me then?”

“You were very tired.” He let out a soft snort of amusement. “Don’t you recall? Sitting against me, watching your holo-entertainment, your eyelids drooping. I carried you off to bed as if you were a child. You were out before you hit the bed.”

“Well, I *was* pretty tired.” She twined her legs through his and slipped her fingers into his hands. “And that was all *your* fault.”

After they’d eaten dinner, Kail had gotten into her pants yet again. And then they’d watched a movie—Return to Lost Earth—or at least Riana had

watched, resting against Kail's broad, bare torso as he studied an old Kordolian text that was written on actual parchment.

It was something about wormholes and time travel, apparently. Ashrael had lent it to him—the Silent One had rescued a whole bunch of ancient texts from the ruins of the Kordolian Empire.

Time travel? Why was he even interested in that? Was it even actually possible?

With these guys, anything was possible.

Riana forcefully stopped herself from traveling down a rabbit-hole of possibilities.

Their time together was precious.

These simple days—lazy mornings and cozy evenings—were pure bliss. The luxury of just hanging out as if everything was normal—before their universe was turned upside-down once again—it was as precious to her as oxygen itself.

Because soon Kail would be sent off on some dangerous mission, and even though she knew he was tough as nails and one of the most lethal things to walk the earth, she couldn't help but worry about him.

The danger wasn't over yet.

"Can you blame me?" he asked, sounding as innocent as he possibly could—which wasn't very convincing at all. "When you're just within my grasp... *always* tempting me?"

She couldn't resist his advances either. No matter how cranky or tired she felt, he always managed to make her feel good.

"Zharek says we can go to his labs any time," Kail continued. "The fix is simple—an inoculation made from my own genetic material. You won't even notice."

"That's... it?" Considering the hell that Abbey had been through, Riana had been expecting something a little more dramatic.

"That's it. The best solutions are always the simplest."

"Wow." Still held within his embrace, she slowly turned around until she turned around until she was facing him. "This is really happening?"

Kail smiled. In that moment, he looked so damn *sweet*. If Riana hadn't seen it with her own two eyes, she wouldn't have thought it possible. "You don't need to hold any fears in your heart. And if they linger, you must tell me, Riana. I will take care of everything."

“I know you will.” She leaned in and kissed him. “It’s just a pleasant surprise, that’s all. Of *course* I want to have a child with you, Kail—*our* child. I want it so much I haven’t even dared to think about it.”

He didn’t say anything. He just kissed her back and tenderly stroked her hair. His golden eyes were a revelation. She’d seen him at his most terrifying—not to her, of course; *never* to her—and that made the contrast all the more astonishing, because now he was completely open.

Her heart swelled as she imagined him as a father. How protective he’d be; how caring—in his own quiet, intense way.

“You don’t have to want for anything,” he whispered. “I’ll do everything in my power to keep you safe. To give you everything you could ever desire.”

“You already do that, Kail.” Delicious warmth seeped through her as Riana leaned forward and pressed her forehead against his chest. “I can’t wait to see what you’ll be like as a daddy.”

“Hm,” he rumbled. “It’s *you* that I want to see...” His big hand pressed against her lower belly, and Riana couldn’t deny that his touch made her more than a little aroused. “Like *that*. Utterly beautiful, as you always are. And mine only.”

She took a deep breath and inhaled his warm, comforting scent. The Universe could be imploding around her, but as long as she was here, close to him, all would be well.

And that was how it should be.

EXCERPT: EMBERS IN THE SNOW

SOMETHING MUST BE AFOOT, because I've been summoned.

The dining room of Ruen Castle is a study in contrasts.

The tall, arched windows are filled with colorful stained glass mosaics depicting the ancestors, perpetually frozen in the midst of heroic deeds. Once the deepest shade of peacock blue, the heavy drapes are now faded like the winter sky outside.

Dust gathers in the corners. Cobwebs adorn the ceilings.

Lunch is served in the most elegant ware; the plates and bowls adorned with gilded rims, the cutlery wrought of sterling silver, the glasses made from the finest etched crystal.

It's too bad the food doesn't quite match the grandeur of the setting.

We're served hard rolls of bread and a stew of ham and winter vegetables. The sauce is flavored with dried herbs and stretched with flour; more soup than meaty stew. Beside it is a concoction made from root vegetables and onions fried in lard and spoiled red wine, seasoned with copious amounts of pepper.

I can't blame the cooks. They try their best with what they've been given.

My father, Baron Lucar Eravus Solisar the Third, sits at the head of the table. My stepmother, Lady Dorava Solisar, is at the other end, quietly sipping wine from a long-stemmed glass.

I'm in the middle, uncomfortable in my stiff formal gown.

My brothers are absent; they're probably eating lunch down in the mess-hall with the knights.

I envy them. Compared to me, they have so much freedom.

Dorava wears a fur-trimmed gown of pale, greyish-blue, the hue matching her eyes. Her gaze is trained upon my father; eyes taut at the edges, mouth pressed into a thin line, expectantly waiting for him to speak.

Not once does she acknowledge me.

She's more avoidant than usual.

Something's *definitely* afoot.

I taste a spoonful of my lukewarm stew, which has the consistency of warm glue.

At least it's somewhat tasty. The poor cooks must be sorcerers to be able to conjure this kind of food with the few ingredients they have.

Father lays down his fork with an impatient *clink*. "How are your deportment lessons progressing, Finley?"

"Fine," I say carefully, not liking where this is going. The truth is, the lessons are terribly boring. I find them ridiculous and unnecessary. But apparently, I must learn to conduct myself like a *lady* so I can attract the attention of a worthy suitor. Someone higher in rank than my father, with all the benefits that entails. That's what he's hoping for. It doesn't matter how old or decrepit my prospective husband might be. "This afternoon, I will be revising the correct etiquette for when one is in the company of the Imperial Family."

"Lady Majurie gives me a somewhat different impression," father says drily, idly running one finger over the edge of his mustache—an annoying habit of his. "That you lack perseverance and are easily distracted by trivial things. As is *always* the case." He lets out a thin sigh, as if I'm somehow the cause of all his woes. "I should have paid more attention to those frivolous activities of yours when you were a child." He smiles thinly; ominously. "But it matters not, because I have managed to secure an arrangement that will change everything."

He looks terribly pleased with himself.

I don't *like* that.

Not at all.

I look him in the eye. "Father, what are you talking about?"

This time, even my directness isn't enough to spoil his good mood.

"You are betrothed, Finley."

"E-excuse me?" I force myself to slow down; to take another spoonful of stew and not give my father the satisfaction of seeing my distress.

His expression is infuriatingly smug. “When I was in the capital, I managed to gain an audience with the Emperor. I *did* mention to him that I have a daughter, comely in looks, healthy of body and mind, and fortunately, still of child-bearing years. A maiden, at that. I mentioned it *specifically* because Emperor Duthriss is a consummate politician, and has been known to influence strategic matches between the children of Rahava’s most powerful families. Cunning old wolf. Perchance that he might know of a lord in need of heirs; one that has done him favors, whom he could reward with a suitable noble woman of good breeding and decent looks.”

I’m overcome with the sudden urge to pick up my glass of water and splash it in his face.

I don’t, of course.

I don’t want to be beaten to within an inch of my life. Inwardly, I can’t help but feel bitterly smug.

I’m *not* a bloody maiden, but father doesn’t know that.

My stepmother is silent. Of course. She’s *always* quiet when father speaks.

Father is looking more and more pleased with himself.

Dread pools in the pit of my stomach.

“He made a suggestion.” My father’s tone is insufferably smug. “No, it was more than a suggestion. It was a proposal. Of course, I deliberated upon it, and after giving it careful thought, I accepted on your behalf.”

No! My heart feels like it’s about to explode out of my ribcage. *I can’t believe this is happening!*

But I always knew this day would come. Father has been waiting for such an opportunity. He’d been planning that trip to the capital for months.

I take a deep, shuddering breath. Close my eyes for a moment. Curse my stepmother for being incapable of saying a single word, but then again, why would she, when she herself was married off in exactly the same fashion?

Poor Lady Dorava.

“Who is he?” I barely recognize the sound of my own voice. It sounds like death warmed up.

My father doesn’t answer straight away. He allows the silence to stretch out, enjoying my fraught anticipation. “Finley Solisar, you must be grateful that I am a good negotiator, because the man you will marry is far above your station. Most would consider him *far* too good for someone of your rank and

temperament, but considering his approval of the match, Emperor Duthriss seems to look favorably upon our family.”

“*Who, father?*” My impatience spills through the brittle cracks in my composure.

“After lunch, you will arrange for the maidservants to pack your belongings. Make sure you take your thickest coats, because I hear the winters in Tyron are brutal. Although I’m sure the Archduke will have plenty of resources at his disposal to ensure that you are outfitted with garments befitting of his station, it is best to be prepared.”

My insufferable father pauses, savoring my shocked silence.

Tyron.

I blink.

The silver fork handle digs into my palm as my grip tightens.

Tyron.

That inhospitable, mountainous region to the south.

The biggest of Rahava’s territories.

It widely considered untamable... that is, until the Archduke took over the Mountain Fortress.

No. This isn’t possible.

I stare at my father, my anger momentarily swept away by sheer disbelief.

“I... I am to be betrothed to Corvan Duthriss?”

My future husband is not some old geezer, as I’d feared.

In many ways, this is worse.

I’ve heard the rumors; the stories. They talk about him in the village square, in the halls of the castle, in the kitchens and the stables. My own family speaks of him at the dinner table.

The Emperor’s firstborn, Corvan, was once regarded as the obvious heir to the Rahavan Throne.

But everyone knows the story of the crown prince; the former Imperial Commander who waged a brutal campaign in the north to defeat the barbarian hordes.

Everyone knows he was a changed man when he returned from the war. Once highly respected; a swordsman without peer and the most eligible bachelor in all of Rahava, he refused to present himself to the Court.

Without warning, without giving reason, he relinquished his claim to the throne and became a recluse, accepting the dukedom of Tyron—the territory

that nobody wanted.

It's a vast and inhospitable land. Cold and barren. Crawling with monsters and terrifying beasts.

Rumors swirl around the capital. That the ravages of war drove him mad; that he was cursed by some barbarian witch.

What kind of horrors does a man have to endure to make him give up the entire world that once lay in the palm of his hand?

They say he did terrible things during the war.

They say he is even more ruthless than his father.

Some even say that he has succumbed to the temptations of the arcane.

That he drinks the blood of his enemies.

Not that I believe *that*.

Since he returned from battle, Corvan Duthriss hasn't returned to Lukiria once; not even for the Midwinter Ball.

It's as if he just wants the world to forget about him.

"Y-you can't send me to Tyron." The words fly from my lips before I even realize what I'm saying. "Corvan Duthriss is a brutal man... a madman. And Tyron..."

It's as remote and forbidding a place as I've ever heard of. If I set foot in Tyron Castle, I'll never escape.

Baron Solisar sees my distress. I can tell that it satisfies him. My father, I think, always resented the fact that, I, his firstborn, turned out to be a girl.

And he hates the fact that I can do all the things my brothers can.

I can ride a horse. Shoot a bow. Read and write.

As well, if not better than them.

My brothers were the ones that taught me when my father wouldn't allow it; when he was off on one of his many *business trips*.

My dear brothers, Aderick and Kastel.

Now I understand why they weren't summoned here for lunch.

They would be livid.

Father's gaze crystallizes. "No matter what state of mind he is in nowadays, he's still the *crown prince*. Do you understand what it means for our family to marry into *that* family? Do you know what we gain in exchange for *you* gaining such a powerful husband? Emperor Duthriss has agreed to admit Kastel and Aderick to the Imperial Knights' Academy in Lukiria. When each of them graduates as a Knight of the Empire, they are to be

granted their own lands and titles. They are to be given the rank of Viscount.”

My eyes widen in surprise.

My brothers don't care about Imperial Academies and titles. They've said so themselves. But they are young and naive, and even I can't deny the magnitude of the emperor's offer. In Rahava, it's almost unheard of to cross ranks.

It's a once-in-a-century opportunity.

A life-changing opportunity.

But not for me.

Bitterness rises in the back of my throat. “And what about you, father? What do *you* gain from all of this?” I should bite my tongue right now, but I can't. “Did Duthriss agree to pay off your mountain of debts?”

Baron Solisar is already out of his chair. He crosses the floor, his boots ringing loudly on the cold stone.

His hand connects with my cheek, *hard*.

Stinging pain rips through my face. I cradle my cheek, staring up at him in disbelief.

Bloody bastard. Maybe living with the Cursed Archduke of Tyron will be better than staying with you.

“Lucar, *enough*,” my stepmother says softly.

As always, father ignores her. “You do not get to question my authority, child. *Ever*. I will not hear another word of dissent from your impudent little mouth. If you wish to survive in Tyron Castle, then you will do your best to learn to hold your tongue. For your own benefit, Finley, I would strongly suggest that now is the time for you to develop a shred of common sense and learn to act like a proper fucking *lady*. The Archduke is not kind to those that disobey him.”

Why do I feel like throwing up all of a sudden?

“And do not say a word of protest to your brothers, Finley. Do you want to lay waste to their futures; to burden them with unnecessary guilt? As far as they're concerned, you have *agreed* to this union.”

My insides twist. Tears prick my eyes. I want to scream, but I can't.

Hold your tongue.

I *hate* that I have to heed father's words.

If not for this betrothal, Aderick, the eldest of the two, would inherit a disaster; a barony in ruins, crippling debt that will take a generation to pay

off, and the wrath of the Duthriss family.

Kastel would have nothing.

Just a dire future.

All because of my father's pride and stupidity. The extension to the castle he commissioned lies in half-finished ruins, marble columns cracked and exposed to the elements, water and mud and snow pooling on the crumbling stone floors.

"At least let me stay a little longer," I plead, my voice cracking. "Just a few weeks... until spring."

Father stares down at me, his expression cold. "No. The Emperor has made it clear that you must reach Tyron before winter's end. After you finish eating, you may go down to the stables and say your goodbyes to the boys. Then you will go to your mother's chambers and allow her to choose attire that is a little more appropriate for your station. I will *not* have you presenting yourself to the Archduke in trousers and a fucking tunic." He shoots my mother a stern look. "I don't know how you raised such an unladylike daughter."

"I don't know, either," Dorava says softly. "But I will ensure that she is dressed in a manner that His Imperial Highness should find pleasing, at the very least."

I glare at her, but she refuses to meet my gaze. Dorava has never said anything nasty to me. She's never raised her hand in anger or been blatantly cruel. But she never stands up to father, either.

"Good." My father returns to his seat. He picks up his silver fork and starts to eat.

Silence hangs over the dinner table like a cold, damp fog.

I force myself to eat. The food sticks in my throat. I can't taste anything anymore.

I knew this day would come.

I just didn't think it would come so *soon*.

But I suppose all things must end sooner or later, and people like me, who have no power, will always be at the mercy of the ones that rule.

I can only hope that Archduke Corvan Duthriss isn't as terrible as the stories make him out to be.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

It's been a little while, hasn't it? I hope you've enjoyed this short novella!

I have to apologize for the slowdown in my publications. Moving halfway across the country has completely discombobulated me, but the chaos is finally starting to settle down. Darkstar Mercenaries Book 8, *The Edge of Dawn*, is currently in the works, along with a fantasy novel, *Embers in the Snow*. I hope to get into a more regular publishing schedule for the remainder of 2023.

To be notified of my releases as soon as they're available, you can tune into my Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/annacarvenauthor> or join my mailing list <http://eepurl.com/bQaHP5>.

And lastly (but it's completely optional), I have a Patreon. <https://www.patreon.com/annacarven> Never fear, everything that's posted on the Patreon will eventually make it to eBook format, to be published on Amazon.

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