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Planet: Frk'Tarlvr

Star System: Vendala

City: Platform F459VX

He didn't want this job. He really, really didn't. He needed money, sure, but he didn't need money this badly. The terms of his current life were clear, though: pay his bills, or stay stuck planet side, and get his organs farmed by that lizard freak Trekvar. And knowing a gecko, he'd eat half of them. But it might have been a better fate than playing guard duty for a princess.

Mark looked around his apartment. Fifteen feet long, five feet wide, eight feet tall. A metal box. A small, metal box. Once he got off the bed, it folded up against the wall, the disposable sheets automatically removed and replaced within the mysterious wall confines of the Tekra Max apartment building. Two hundred floors, each with a thousand apartments, sound proof so you couldn't hear the shit going on in your neighbor's equally depressing metal box. The metal foldout sink, toilet, bed, it was all colored dirty, stained steel, and the delightful smell of sterilizing chemicals managed to sneak in through the faucet and his new bed sheets, despite them still being locked behind the metal wall since he folded the bed away.

He looked in the mirror, and sighed. Beige skin, a little pale since Fuck'Tarl's sun didn't do much for human skin — couldn't get past the clouds, or the canopy of buildings and towers — plus some dark gruff and a shaved head. He could shave his face with the press of a button, but a shaved bald head and a few days worth of gruff was important for the whole imposing bodyguard motif. One eye was normal, dark blue, the other was cybernetic, and looked mostly the same until you got in close and saw the green lines that filled the iris. A big scar cut across that eye, eyebrow to cheek, legitimizing the need for the cybernetic eye, and painting a very obvious 'I'm a badass' sign on his head.

He didn't tell people he got the scar and lost the eye from a hover car accident. That wouldn't help get clients.

So he had the grizzly look, and he had the muscles to go with. Strong, big shoulders that bulged against his black bulletproof vest, biceps with a hint of vein fighting against the tight confines of the white t-shirt he wore underneath it. He wasn't tall, though. Actually, he was a bit short compared to

most human males, but he made up for it with shoulder width and solid beef. Cause he had to make up for it, to get a god damn fucking client.

He looked down at his pants. Armor plating, sections of morasteel covering the front and back of each leg, silver against the black pants. Black boots with the same morasteel sections, just like his vest.

“You survive this fucking job, and you’re out of this shithole.” He reached out for his reflection, and rested his palm against it. Hard hands, calloused. Another way to add to the image of the badass bodyguard. They were calloused from all the weights he lifted, that he had to lift, so he could look dangerous, so he could do this job, so he could pay his fucking bills.

But not anymore. Back to the dream, just get back to the dream. Some day, he’d be back to the dream.

He looked at the slip in his hand.

Client: Valamakala Vatalalarama. Species: Pracalavala

Position: Bodyguard, eight required.

Danger Rating: Extreme.

Bodyguards like Mark weren’t paid by the client, they were paid by the Vargenth company that outsourced them. They were paid based upon three things: whether the job was a success, the amount of time they’d been employed with the company, and the danger rating of the job.

Danger Rating Extreme was a suicide mission. Survival rates were typically half; sometimes more, sometimes less, but always a low enough number to come with a giant commission. He’d been with the company long enough and had earned a high enough rank, that this mission would make him a small fortune, enough to buy a runner ship, and get back to the dream. That’s all that matters, think of the dream.

Why the fuck was he working as a bodyguard then? Dream didn’t mean anything if he died before reaching it. He frowned at the mirror, and rubbed some water on his face, beads of it catching on his gruff. Because you’re an idiot, Mark. Idiots take this sort of mission grade. Idiots and desperate people.

Was he desperate? Yes. Yes he was fucking desperate to get the fuck out of this shithole before it killed him, before some gecko ate his kidney, before some praca drained his bank account, before a million other things brought him to a screaming end.

With a groan, he grabbed his rifle, and stepped out of the apartment box. The stained metal didn’t end with his home, but continued through the halls of the massive apartment complex. People sat

around, talking, chatting, drinking, injecting heroin and poora into their veins. A few of them glanced his way, but when they noticed the body armor and rifle, they backed off. If he'd been anyone else, they'd have looked for a cheap mugging. Sometimes they tried anyway.

How many of these punks had he killed in self defense in the past ten years? Seven? Eight? Not like anyone on Fuck'Tarl cared. No one on this damn planet cared about anything, except for credits.

What a wonderful life.

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"I hear this praca is a pretty attractive stickwoman," one of the grunts said.

Mark rolled his eyes, and waited.

Him and six other grunts, all standing around on the street, near an escort stinger-class transport vehicle, parked. High tech, heavily armored, with two praca inside in the front seats. They wore fancy armor, silver colored, with sleek lines combining everything into flowing shapes. Nine feet tall and skinny as fuck. Stickmen. And, like the cannon fodder bodyguards they'd hired, they were wearing helmets with masks.

Mark analyzed his colleagues. Mostly humans, one gecko, and one dermite — a walking talking beetle — were the sad group of them. They didn't look sad; hell, they looked professional. But the truth of the matter was that Vargenth wasn't military. Bodyguards ranked up based on how many missions they completed, and the client's evaluation. And Vargenth accepted anyone who could carry a gun. You got paid based on how high your rank was, which was a borderline useless metric; lots of people failed upwards. The ones who managed to get a lot of missions done with high evaluations quickly moved onto private sector work for mega corporations, or were taken in by government branches, like military or special ops.

No one with any real skill stayed a bodyguard, not on this planet, which meant his partners in this stupidity were unreliable at best. Hell, he was unreliable. He was good at the job, but not special ops grade, not suicide mission grade. He was one of the people that failed upwards, failed upwards enough times that he'd managed to stumble onto what things would keep him from getting killed; not enough skill to justify this desperate attempt at a good paycheck, though.

He didn't know the ranks of the other guards, and they didn't know his. If they found out he was GR Alpha, they'd probably start asking him questions, hoping he could get them through this alive. Fuck them, just survive the mission. Survive this one mission and keep the fucking stickwoman alive. Then you'll have enough money to move on, get out of this hell hole, and live a life of moderate peace, moderate quiet, and get to see the stars again.

God, he missed the stars.

"You said she will be attractive?" the dermite said, voice gravely to the point Mark doubted dermites had vocal cords at all, but rock grinders.

One of the human bodyguards looked at him, only mouth and jaw exposed from under his helmet, but it was enough to see the disgust.

"You into soft skins, dermite?" the man said.

"Accurate." No one could see the dermite's features with how his armor of metal plates covered him, head to toe, but everyone knew what a beetle looked like.

One of the other guards came over, rifle across her chest in each hand. "Got a friend who says she's fucked a dermite. Says it's like fucking a couple of really huge, hard dildos, like solid plastic sorta hard."

The dermite chuckled, a deep, clicking sound. "Yes. Accurate."

"... wait, couple?" the other guy said.

"Yes. Accurate."

Everyone broke into laughter. Mark knew that laughter, nervous laughter, the sort of laughter soldiers did before a drop or raid. He didn't like that laughter. But it was better than quiet nervousness, where everyone would eventually snap and become a liability. Ideally, everyone would be quiet and relaxed, saving mental energy for the mission. Rookies.

Fuck, he was going to die on this mission, protecting some fucking stickwoman princess. If the bullets started flying, the others were going to panic, and the two praca escorts weren't going to do a damn to keep him or them alive. But, if he didn't stick his head out, he might come out of this still breathing; not that hiding behind the corpses of his colleagues was his idea of doing his job well, but it was better than dying.

It didn't used to be like that. He used to try and work with his colleagues, keep them alive. It never worked. Fucking Fuck'Tarl had turned him into a bitter fucking asshole.

The two praca stepped out of the vehicle. So damn tall, and skinny. Their torsos were more or less human shaped, but smaller, thinner, and their legs and arms were much longer. The details of their features were hidden in the armor, but he knew they had similar hands and feet to their arms and legs: long and thin. They had long, thin tails too, prehensile, but hidden inside the armor; made sense, with how delicate those tails were.

The strangest thing though, was their bone masks that hid their eyes and mouths; hidden inside their helmets on the two escorts, but everyone knew what praca looked like. They ran the damn planet. Their helmets had to be unique shaped to fit the bone layer, a Y shape visor to match the Y shape bone mask that they sensed through.

It was hard to trust someone if you could never look them in the eye. He knew they had two eyes and a mouth, supposedly not all that different from human eyes and mouths, by alien standards at least, forever hidden behind the irremovable bone mask. It didn't make trusting them any easier.

One of the passenger doors opened, and out-stepped the princess herself. Unlike her companions, she wasn't wearing body armor, instead wearing long black boots that reached up to her skinny thighs. Like all praca boots, they fit their feet like gloves, showing how the stick people walked around on feet not too dissimilar to their hands. She wore a reflective, partly see-through dress, showing off her cleavage and small breasts, her thin waist, and her curvy hips. On her shoulders she wore a black jacket, similar to the boots, reaching her elbows before exposing how the dress became sleeves that reached her wrists. Black gloves, too, as if she was afraid to get any of the planet's grime on her fingers.

It's your planet, you stupid stick. If it's too dirty to touch, try fixing it. She even walked like she was royalty. For fuck's sake.

A slender neck rose to a smooth head, all very human shaped. The praca never had hair, but the bone mask did have antennae-like protrusions at the forehead, kinda filling in for that role. Her skin was tinted light blue, almost gray, like most pracas, and the bone layer of her face covered her eyes and mouth completely with its large Y shape.

Probably the most noticeable feature of the praca, was how their eyes, hidden behind the bone mask, glowed. Whatever kind of light it was that their eyes emitted, it went through the mask enough for other people to see them. And right now they were glowing maroon. No idea what that meant.

"Vargenth bodyguards," she said. "I am Valamakala Vatalalarama, but you may call me Vala." Her voice was soft and lovely, and there was a subtle whistle behind her words and after them, as if someone was playing a flute in her throat. "I will do everything in my power to insure these

negotiations go smoothly, but, as you know, Merka R56 Industries engages in predatory business tactics. This has included direct assaults, and there have been fatalities.”

The PR speak almost had Mark gagging. Merka killed people by the droves, if it got them a better business position. Everyone who signed onto the mission knew the risks, too, so the PR speak was wasted. Maybe she was trying to paint herself in a better light, so they’d feel compelled to die to save her life. Yeah right.

“I’m Cody,” one of the guards said.

“Erica.”

“Mark,” he said. Might as well get it over with.

“Danver.”

“Clarence.”

“Tallia.”

“Mitch.”

“Drvrtertvr.”

The group of them looked at the dermite, and laughed. More of that same, nervous laughter.

He laughed too.

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Merka was going to kill them all.

Why’d he leave Earth? Should have stayed on Earth, stayed where the government made the laws, and enforced them. On Fuck’Tarl, there were no laws, and the corporations had free run of the planet. They had ‘police’, in the sense that they had security staff that patrolled all of their buildings, enforcing guidelines and keeping peace, because it meant they kept making profits off saps like him. It also meant any corporation with enough weight could kill this praca princess he was supposed to protect if they decided to send her employers a message.

It was like animals, ravenous, endlessly ravenous, trying to come to a truce over territory. One mistake, one false step, one moment of exposing the neck, and one animal was going to take a chomp out of the other, go for the kill.

De-fucking-lightful.

The front door, nothing but black-tinted morasteel sliding apart. Mark gulped, and stepped in ahead of the group, with the beetle beside him, and the three pracas behind him. The building was typical company HQ material, with lots of high tech gadgetry and clean walls of dark metal, shining with the TFR lighting. Hallways, lots of hallways. No secretaries or anything like that, no civilians sitting around desks with AR or holo setups, just hallways with scanning tech, cameras and whatnot. If there was any weaponry waiting to pop out of holes in the walls, his scanners didn't pick it up, but that didn't mean it wasn't there, just that it was well hidden.

"Calm your stance," the princess said, to him apparently, when he looked back. Hard to tell where her glowing eyes were looking, with the bone mask hiding pupils and whatnot, but her head was pointed at him. Fucking bone mask.

"I'm sorry?"

"Calm your stance. Your human body language is blatant and loud. They will know you are anxious."

"Good for them." He shrugged off her bullshit, and kept walking. His posture was irrelevant. What was relevant was the body armor, the weapons; good posture and a calming stance didn't mean shit when the bullets started flying.

But, a hand on his shoulder stopped him, and he turned to look up at the damn stickwoman. Nine feet tall wasn't that intimidating when he was sure she'd crack in half from a stiff breeze. And from so close, he couldn't help but look her up and down a little more closely. He couldn't ignore the fancy black jacket and reflective dress that exposed a lot of her chest, or ignore the shape of her body, thin waist and flat stomach. Pretty, for a praca. Which of course made it easier to hate her guts.

"Calm yourself or I will report your ineptitude to your employers."

And she loved to add to that growing mountain of reasons to hate her worthless innards.

"Fine." He shrugged hard enough to dislodge her long-fingered grip, and got back to walking. Calm down, stop being anxious, don't worry about Merka R56 putting a bullet through your torso. Yeah, ok, he'd get right on that.

And of course, the princess grumbled. A praca grumble sounded like a purr from a quiet, but dying high-pitched motor. Off putting, to say the least.

The hallway eventually came to a living entity, a delightful change from the unending walls of lifelessness. A gecko sat behind what was probably quartglass, wearing heavy layers of fabric that fell over each other like rain on shingles. Couldn't see what their hands were doing, behind a display monitor that reached end to end of its desk. But, knowing gecko, they probably had a gun or two or three behind it, waiting to draw. Not that they'd be able to shoot him through the quartglass, but he fully expected some sort of ambush possibility to exist.

Vala walked up to the glass, beside Mark, and made a small bow of the head. "Greetings. I am Valamakala Vatalalarama, from Taralavra Industries. I've come to speak with Kalara Vatalrmlara."

The gecko nodded, and looked down at their monitor, one hand tapping away at the digital interface, the other reaching up to pick at their teeth with a claw.

"Yes, Taralavra Industries." The lizard-face fucker chuckled. Guy or girl, Mark couldn't tell, no one could at face value, so they always just referred to geckos as 'they'. Or 'it', depending on how mean they felt like being. "Go right ahead. The CEO is expecting you."

Vala nodded again, and as they started walking, smacked Mark upside the back of the head with her hand. Subtle, quick, and from an angle the gecko didn't notice. The rest of the group did though, and they chuckled. Guess he wasn't being relaxed enough.

Getting a smack in the back of his helmet wasn't going to make him any more relaxed. It did put him deep into the hate spectrum for this fucking praca princess though. Christ he hated her. Every word she said got under his skin. The way she walked beside him, standing tall, strutting, when she should be behind him and being protected, was like metal scraping vacalk siding. He had to protect her, but ten minutes into this mission and he wanted to make sure she died in it.

Remember the stars, Mark. Remember the stars.

They continued along, thud thud of heavy, armored boots against the hard metal of the floor. No music. They passed some doors, each locked down, and showing off some imposing barriers, solid walls of morasteel. Knowing Merka R56, they were performing research on chemicals, or testing new weaponry. Not like any of that shit was illegal on Frk'Tarlvr. Illegal on other planets, sure, but all was fair game here, including killing a negotiator and her bodyguards.

The door to the CEO's office was blatant. The hallway opened up into a room, with ten geckos, six humans, and two beetles standing around, many behind work platforms with monitors in front of them. Fingers tapping, almost silent against the digital interfaces, they glanced up at the entering troupe, before they returned to their work, whatever that was. Every one of them was in armor though, with

rifles on their backs, and helmets disengaged to hide inside their armors' necks and backs. Ready to go at a moment's notice then, lovely.

Vala kept walking, as if they didn't exist. Ballsy, confident, or just really full of herself. Latter, probably the latter.

Ahead of them was a dual glass door. Quartglass probably, lined with black metal he didn't recognize. Something fancy, imposing, made to look cool while providing structural integrity. The sort of room where you could look into the next room, see the target, and wave. Beyond the glass was an enormous desk, some sort of wood, probably from an extinct plant from a different planet. Behind the desk sat another praca, wearing an elegant reflective suite, small spots of shining purple mixed with greens. Fucking pracas loved to dress shiny.

Bastard was sitting behind another wall of quartglass, one that ran from the ceiling to the floor around his desk, probably with some windows he could walk through on the sides. Paranoid, or justly prepared. Mark had never been in a Merka building, let alone their HQ, but he knew they had a habit of killing people who disagreed with them. Hence, the danger rating on the job. Hence, the pay.

Relax, fucking relax Mark. Princess wanted you to relax, and it was important you stay focused when this all went to shit. Think of the stars, instead. Remember the stars, endless, beautiful stars, against the inviting obsidian of the gentle void.

"Taralavra Industries to see you, Kalar," the gecko beside them said.

The praca on the other side of the glass prison waved them in, and the gecko pressed something behind his console, opening the doors into the deadliest place on Fuck'Tarl.

"Greetings, Valamakala Vatalalarama," the praca said. Now that he was this close, Mark could see the subtle curves of the hip and waist highlighted by the reflective suit. A woman. Funny, he'd figured man, considering the reputation of pracas, but apparently that was a stupid guess. Her bone mask hid her emotions, her face, but her bone antennae were rising and falling slowly, and her eyes were blue. Cold, calm, and calculating mood, far as he knew according to praca physiology.

"Kalara Vatalrmlara." The princess made a small bow as she came up to the quartglass-protected desk, while her ensemble of bodyguards stood in various places around the room, facing different directions. "Well protected, I see."

"You can never be too careful." The praca gestured to the bodyguards surrounding the princess. "Expecting violence?"

"Merely a deterrent."

“Come now, we’re not humans. No need for such peacocking.”

Now where did a royal fuck like this Kalara praca learn what a peacock even fucking was.

“I am here to discuss your unjustly acquisition of the Taralavra Industries West Bay 5.”

“Unjust? Do tell.”

Vala stepped closer to the glass, and her fellow praca bodyguards came up beside her. “Your troops marched into the building, and, at gunpoint, removed our workers. Sent them home, on threat of death if they did not comply.”

“Of course. You did not keep your precious Bay 5 defended.”

“We had a truce.”

“Did we? I remember no such contract.”

“It was a verbal contract between you and the great Travkala.”

“Ah yes, Travkala, may he rest peacefully above the clouds.”

“... he would have wanted peace between our companies, Kalara.” The princess started to pace, slowly, hands folded across her chest, one arm up at the elbow so she could gesture with her hand as she talked. Very ambassadorial, in a way. This girl knew the body language for negotiation; it was similar enough to humans, considering how similar they were to humans, relatively speaking.

And he could see that she was calling out that she knew Kalara was responsible for Travkala’s death. Shit. Shit shit. He did his best to not reach for the safety on his weapon.

“Perhaps, but he is gone. Your company’s juvenile antics will not go unexploited. It was an opportunity, a business opportunity, and we took it.” The bitch waved a hand, dismissing her argument. “This is Frk’Tarlvr, Vala. Money makes the rules here. Understand that we had every reason to kill all that worked at Bay 5, and yet we did not, to avoid this very confrontation you are instigating.”

“You disregard the lives of the people you affect in your pursuit of profit and patents.”

“Is Taralavra Industries any different? People die due to resources devoured. The fact they die indirectly, rather than directly, does not change that you caused them.” Kalar shrugged, folded her arms across her chest, same as Vala, and stared at her. The bone mask of her face didn’t hide the glowing of her eyes shining through it, and the hardening color, hints of red coming through what were blue before. “Do not judge us.”

Vala walked up to the glass, and slammed a palm against it. Long fingers, thin hands, three fingers and a thumb, wrapped in black gloves. She shouldn't have done that.

A loud siren went off, invisible source but loud enough to pierce helmets. It lasted only a moment, but it was enough to have every member of Merka R56 Industries drawing their rifles or pistols. Same for Vala's troupe, who all pulled their weapons out. Panic mode.

Vala slowly stepped back from the glass, and looked around. There were twice as many Merka mercs in the room as there were her bodyguards, her praca included. In a gunfight, it probably meant she'd die, and all her bodyguards would die, but not before taking down a lot of the enemy with her. Except, they wouldn't be able to take down Kalar, not with that fucking quartglass in the way.

"You have a temper, Vala," Kalar said.

"And you are a ruthless murderer."

"Come now. I've spared your Bay 5, no one died."

"That was Bay 5. What of Dock Gamma 4?"

"That was an unfortunate accident."

Vala's fingers twitched at her side. "Seventy-five praca, five dermites, twenty-two humans, and four trekvar died, because of your itchy trigger finger, Kalara."

"Seventy-five? I am sure it was seventy-six."

"Partakava survived."

"I do not know who that is," Kalar said. Mark didn't believe it though. Fucker's glowing eyes, shining through the bone mask, squinted. Slits.

"Of course you do not." Tweeting a strange, shrill sound, typical angry praca noise, Vala looked back at her bodyguards. Her red eyes brightened into amber, like fire.

He didn't like that.

"He sends his regards." Vala raised her hand, and slammed it against the glass again. When she lowered her hand, a small black disc was stuck to the wall. There was a single second where Vala turned around, putting her back to Kalar, before the world disappeared.

The shockwave rippled the glass like a stone dropping into water. Mark had enough time to realize something was wrong, before the glass shattered, and the force of the explosion sent debris and smoke in all directions. Whatever it was Vala had planted against the quartglass, it caused the explosive

force to shoot in a specific direction, Kalara's direction. A hurricane in a room maybe fifty by fifty feet, all thrown Kalara's way. Air, bits of glass, torn metal and ripped up, probably extinct-plant-species desk, all churned into the air, and sent everywhere.

Everything went to hell. Vision, gone. Hearing, almost gone. Reflexes, stunned.

"What the fuck!?" Mark grabbed Vala's arm, and threw her to the ground. Smoke, noise, hollers and screams and chaos. A contained war, with all the misery and death and ear-splitting mayhem to go with it, confined to a single room.

Whatever bomb she used, it let off spectral smoke filled with tiny bits of morasteel, destroying sensors, and making AR worthless, including his. It also wrecked the lungs of anyone unlucky enough to breathe it. Everyone's helmets were equipped with auto breathers, a tube that came down to fit snug along the teeth between the lips, complete with a faceguard. Keep the mouth closed, lips sealed, and breathe through that and you're fine. Vala didn't have shit.

He reached down, and threw Vala a second time, toward the door of the room. Praca were light, and he had little trouble getting her some air time, out of the center of the cloud of death dust, and out of the direct line of fire. Much as the smoke blocked much of the light, it didn't block it all, and the muzzle fire of lasers or slugs dotted the smoke, like mini explosions in rapid succession. But hopefully she'd be safe for a few seconds while he tried to save his own fucking life.

When no one can see anything, the first thing they do is start firing blindly at anything moving. Trained soldiers didn't, trained assassins didn't, but bodyguards and security? Poor sods didn't have the training. They hesitated, fired blindly, and made no attempts to move their own bodies to better positions.

Hesitation is defeat.

He threw himself to the floor, and bullets and lasers and everything under the stars flew overhead, tearing through armor, flesh, walls, everything. But not him. On the floor, he had a moment to recognize the different muzzle flashes, and take aim. Ignore the screams of pain and death cries of your fellow idiots-at-arms, and take a second to line up the shots. The geckos and others working for Merka were using weaponry issued by Merka. Seemed Merka had a thing for morasteel chambers and trintilium fuel; made their weapons have a blue tint to the muzzle flash or vent discharge, depending on bullet or laser.

He looked over at Vala beside him. This fucking bitch. She knew this was going to happen. She knew this would turn into a shit show. She knew this was a suicide mission. No wonder she could afford eight fucking D.R.Es.. Fucking damn it.

The door to the room burst open, and four more Merka stormed in, before they were swallowed up by the bomb's spectral smoke. That shit was practically alive with how pervasive it was, and it flooded out into the hall with speed, lured by the metal beyond. As it buried them, the four soldiers opened fire.

None of them noticed the two people on the floor, too busy shooting at the other cuts of color in the spreading smoke.

Lucky him.

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“Can you breathe?” he said. The shadow of colossal buildings buried them in darkness. That was what Platform F459VX was known for, its dark alleys, deep down near the gutter where the poor struggled to survive. It did make it easier to hide from shit, though.

“Y... Yes.” Coughing and sputtering, she started tweeting and whistling — quietly as least — hoarse sounds. “My lungs will recover quickly. Prava lungs are smaller, with smaller alveoli, and—”

“Uh huh. Got it.” Mark's wouldn't have, you bitch. Either she knew all the guards she hired had breathers in their armor, or she didn't care. “You got a safe haven we can get to?”

“From here? No. And the streets will... will be crawling with Merka for four weeks.”

“Four weeks specifically?”

“It's... praca business. Rule 143.vii of the Business Conflicts manual.”

“You have rules about assassinations?”

“Rules, as in, guidelines that maximize profit. If after four weeks, the assailant is not captured and forced to compensate damages within that time, inter-business relationships can—”

“Yeah yeah, whatever. More stupid Fuck'Tarl shit.”

“... Frk'Tarlvr.”

He groaned into his breather, and turned to stare at the stupid princess. She was bleeding blue blood from some scrapes, but she'd be fine. He was covered in blood; none of it was his.

“Four weeks? I have a hideout we can get to, but it’ll be a week-long trek through the sewers from here.”

“Seven days?” She forced herself to stand, and walked over to him, glaring down at him, the glow of her eyes cutting through the bone mask. Red. “You cannot be serious.”

“I am, princess. Seven days, underground, old sewers.”

“The sewers are dangerous! Many have been overrun by scum for centuries.”

Shrugging, he reached down, and started working on an entrance gate, a flat, square of stained metal on the alley street. Entrances into the sewers were used by people on the ground floor all the time; not much surveillance down there made it a great place to sell drugs, or steal them from dealers. Not a place for a praca princess.

“Yeah, just stay near me and I’ll keep you alive until we get to the hideout. Merka will follow us down here, no doubt, but I know the sewers well enough. Lot of places to hide. And when we get to my hideaway, we can bide our time, wait out the four weeks, before we stick our nose out.” He walked up to her, looked up at her, and removed his breather for the express purpose of exposing his mouth so he could frown at her. “Got a problem with that, princess?”

“I am not a princess.”

“Then stop acting like one.”

“I... do not act like a princess, mongrel.”

Oh this was going to be a lovely vacation.

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~~One week later~~

“God I hate you,” he said.

“I hate you more.”

“You don’t understand. I don’t think your species understands the way humans hate. I hate you with a human’s passion.”

“I hate you so much, I would dip you into acid and piss on you as you dissolved.”

“I hate you so much, I’d hang your skeleton up as a shrine, that I could spit on it every morning, for good luck!” He kicked at a bit of metal, a random pipe or something, and sent it careening down the sewer tunnels. It slammed into some of the pipe tanks that ran along the old, dirty walls of metal, sending ringing echoes through the halls. Bad idea to make noise, but he did not give a shit anymore. “And this stupid fucking planet! What the fuck is this!?” He gestured to the tunnels, the massive pipes of stained metals that lined the walls, and the railing to the side that showed the water flow where sewage was being dumped. “Earth figured out ways to use shit for fertilizer, why the fuck—”

“There are no plants on Frk’Tarlv! And the recyclers will clean the water—”

“It’s fucking disgusting! I can taste—”

“You cannot taste the shit in the water! It has been filtered out!”

God damn it this woman. This fucking, god damn... fucking... woman! Oh he was going to break her neck, break it in twenty places, and throw her into the shit water.

A week. A fucking week, surviving on emergency food pills. A week running around and hiding inside the old tunnel system. A week of having to hide inside fucking maintenance closets together. At this point, he was intimately familiar with the patterns of this pampered rich princess’s breathing; half as fast as him. And her breaths didn’t have the same wind in a tunnel sound like a human’s, but more like, wind against grass, just quiet. Why the fuck did her breathing sound like wind on grass? That made no sense!

You’re just fucking annoyed because it’s been seven days of hiding inside closets with this woman. Calm down. Her breathing is fine. You’re fine. Hell, she’s probably fine, you’re just upset that—

“Mark, is it possible for you to walk any louder? Your footsteps can wake the dead, and that is impressive, considering Frk’Tarlv cremates its dead.”

Kill her. Oh fucking god kill her. Just shoot her, accept that you won’t get paid, and shoot her. No one will know it was you. You can toss the body into the shit stream right beside you, it’ll get caught in the water recycler, so damaged that the evidence can’t be used to blame you. Do it!

He sighed, grit his teeth, gave her the finger, and kept walking. Or, marching, according to her. And he started putting an little extra weight into each step, so the sound echoed through the tunnels a little louder. Juvenile, but deserved.

“I can’t believe you tricked us,” he said.

“Trick? It was no trick! Kalara needed to die.”

“You hired us to protect you during a deal, not a fucking suicide mission.”

The damn stick woman slapped him in the back of his head. With his helmet off, he felt the gloves of her fingers more than he'd like, and this was the fourth time she'd slapped him. Fucking princess.

“You did protect me during a deal. The deal did not go well.”

“You knew it wouldn't.”

“Of course I knew it wouldn't, but her accepting the deal was not an impossibility. I simply planned for the likelihood that she'd disagree.”

“You started a fire!”

“You agreed to such a possibility, hence the danger rating on your contract.”

“People's lives are worth more than a credit!”

“The contract contained the danger rating! I have no guilt for the folly of you and your comrades.”

This god damn fucking alien bitch. Kill her, just kill her. But he needed her alive to get paid. Mission successful, if she lived, and that was the only success criteria. She had to live. Maybe it'd be worth it to kill her anyway.

No. Remember the stars. Remember the stars.

“You better fucking pay.”

“I am praca. We always settle our debts.” She stopped, and put a hand to her chest, above where the reflective dress exposed her sternum.

“You treat money like a religion.”

“Do not jest, Mark. I know a little of human history. Your hilariously shortsighted capitalism was your entire planet's religion for thousands of years.”

He rolled his eyes, and shoved her. Tall, light, she had to step over quickly to catch her weight under her hand-like feet. Her boots were up to her thigh, but they weren't really boots, more like gloves with long sleeves, for the feet. Ugh, like some sort of monkey with long fingers and long toes.

“The praca economy is so much better? Your fucking ridiculous money practices encourage murder. There are no laws here, literally!”

“Murder is a risk, like all business.” She brushed off the shoulders of her jacket that sat open, showing off her long, lithe figure, and the revealing dress underneath it. Christ, he hated that he thought she was hot; for a praca. It’d be so much easier to yell at her if she wasn’t wearing a reflective, almost see-through dress with plunging cleavage! What a bitch. “And those who take risks too often end up getting destroyed. I believe humans call it the circle of life?”

“Economics and the circle of life, in the same fucking sentence. Christ.”

“Who or what is this Christ you keep mentioning? Ever since we took the sewers, Christ this, Christ this. And sometimes, Christ Almighty. What madness is this that haunts you?”

He choked on a laugh. No, don’t laugh, you’re too angry to laugh.

“Nevermind, it’s just a human phrase.”

“You have many.”

“More like you have none.”

She tweeted a strange, shrill sound, almost a shrieking whistle, before she stomped her foot, and started walking. “Just because you do not understand the pracalavala, does not mean we are without culture, Mark.”

“Stop calling me Mark! Name’s Mark Tarver. You can call me Tarver, or Mister Tarver! Otherwise, fuck off.”

She tweeted another shriek at him; such a weird juxtaposition of tonal quality, and delicate volume. “Then you are to call me by my full name only, Vatalalarama.”

“... lala?”

“Vata. Lala. Rama. Philistine.”

“Vatalalarama Philistine. Alright.”

“No, it is not my last name! No no, you...” She paused, and the color of her eyes changed. Praca eyes were normally pink, red when upset, and blue when being cold, far as he could tell. A few tweets came out of her, tiny, quiet, but without any shrill to them, and her eyes flashed green for a few moments. And he recognized that sound from other praca. That was laughter.

Maybe she found dad humor funny? He was no dad, but dad humor came naturally to any man his age. He’d said it automatically, not because he wanted to.

Did he care if she was laughing? No, fucking course not. But it was a far better sound than those weird, shrill, harsh whistle sounds she made when upset, like some sort of angry parrot. Her laughter was so much nicer on the ears, like a singing cockatiel. He'd never owned the bird, but he had a passing interest in old Earth, so he watched some nature holovids every so often.

If he could keep this god damn woman alive until they found a secure escape point, he'd have to money to visit Earth again. Maybe even meet an agent, start doing trips for people, or shuttle—

“You're doing it again,” she said.

“What? Doing what?”

“Staring off into nothing.”

“I'm daydreaming.”

“About?”

“About a world without you.”

She tweeted a laugh, and shook her head, tail flicking left and right behind her a little faster than before. “I doubt it. Come, Mark Tarver, tell me what you are thinking about.”

Maybe he shouldn't have tried to be funny for that one split moment, if she was going to get nosy and buddy with him now.

“No one likes living on this planet. Many are trying to get off it, me included.” The praca owned the planet. Maybe a few more digs at it would hurt her feelings, too. Good. “Excuse me for wishing for a better life.”

She threw a harsh whistle his way. “Not everyone on Frk'Tarlvr is poor, Mark.” Yeap, ignoring his request about the name, just to piss him off. Saw that coming, after insulting her planet. “Those with money get to enjoy many of the splendors of the planet, at the higher levels.”

“And the fuck are the poor supposed to do about their circumstance?”

“Capitalism, as you humans call it, is a predatory system, Mark. Given time, it favors the strong.”

“Corporations aren't people. Corporations might grow strong, but whether actual people get fucked or funded by this economic system is all luck! Luck! And we're talking about the people, not the companies!” He leaned in toward her, and sneered up at her stupid bone face. This was worth emphasizing. “Corporations are not people. Your entire view on life treats them like people, as if the

people inside them are them. That's not how it works, at all, and the rich making money on their corporations don't deserve to own a million fold what the poor do."

"It was never a question of deserve. Life is horrible for everyone except those at the top. We pracaalavala accept this. What was the human expression? Life's not fair, get used to it?"

"Fuck that. The moment I get your ass back to your corp alive, and I get paid for this idiotic D.R.E., I'm gone! Gonna live on my own ship, shipping people and things, cozy and slow and—"

"D.R.E.? Ah, yes, the danger rating for your contract. You will be well paid, you have no reason to—"

"The only reason any fucking grunt working for Vargenth would agree to this suicide mission is the pay. Cause, like me, the pay means they can either get off this fucking shithole, or they can put a huge dent in their debt that they—surprise!—earned on this planet with its fucking predatory economy. Fuck this planet, fuck you, fuck me, I want out. Every fucking bit of that cash is going to getting me a ship, so I can leave!"

She didn't respond, head slowly turning downward, and eyes glowing soft purple, whatever that meant. Good. Some fucking quiet.

The two of them came to the end of a massive pipe on the metal, dirty wall, and Mark reached out to press against a discolored seam. A quiet beep, and then, the wall opened. With a groan, he brought up his sidearm, and scanned the room before stepping in.

A tiny, empty room.

"You cannot be serious," she said.

"You bet I am."

"There is nothing here!"

"Sorry princess, but it's the best you're getting for now."

It really was a hole, but secret hideaways generally were. It wasn't like in the stories, a beautiful cave behind a waterfall or luxurious getaway air-complex on Platform Z39AA. No, all he had to work with was a small room that was literally smaller than his apartment. Seven feet long, by six feet wide, but at least it was taller, high enough for Vala to stand up straight, and whistle a groan.

He gestured to the auto-toilet in the corner of the room; shitty arrangement, losing the small amount of space to a toilet, but at least it was walled off so they could have some privacy.

“It took me five years to get this set up. No one knows about it except for some good friends, the ones I trusted to set up the plumbing.” He gestured to the hanging shower head on the other side of the room, and the drain on the floor. “You’re not the first person I’ve had to take care of for a little while, while things cool down.” Hell, the room was covered in the same tiling as his apartment. It wouldn’t get mold or catch stains for decades. Ugly as all fuck, but function over fashion.

“Great, wonderful! We can defecate in each other’s company! Lovely.” She stood up straight, and tilted her head to look at the ceiling that nearly touched her antennae. “At least it’s tall enough.”

“We got water, we got a place we can shit in privacy; auto-toilet will keep the smell in, walls will keep the sound in, so calm the fuck down your highness. And look at this.” He leaned down, and picked up some blankets off the floor. Water resistant, perfect for hiding out in a hole like this. “So, you could start, by fucking showing some gratitude that we have a place—”

“We? Why are you saying we? I will remain here, where it is supposedly safe, and you can go elsewhere!”

“Fuck you! I have no other place I can go! Merka probably has my ID, and will be waiting at my place, anyway!”

“So—”

“So sit the fuck down, and get cozy, cause we’re not going anywhere until those four weeks are up like you said. We’re past curfew, so I’ll do some recon tomorrow and see what’s up.” The white light above was steady, and the tiling was taupe. He was damn fucking proud of this little hole, clean and secure. Fuck her.

“Fine!” The princess threw her hands up, and sat in the corner once she gathered up the blankets. She set them down, spread them out, folded them up, and arranged them in the perfect way for her precious little heiny.

He almost argued about one of those blankets being for him, but whatever, he didn’t need it to sleep. Groaning, rotating a shoulder, he started undoing his armor. Clunk. Clunk. Heavy pieces of metal, each he set into the other corner of the room, away from the corner Vala was in. Then shirt, boots, pants, he discarded them all, and took some time to look at the small nicks and cuts on his body.

Praca stared at him, her eyes glowing through the bone visor. The tint changed as well, to... pink?

“What are you doing?”

“We’ve been walking through a recycling sewer for a week. The fuck do you think I’m doing? I’m taking a fucking shower.”

“... but—”

“I reek, and you don’t smell very good yourself, princess. Smell like metal cleaner.”

“That is! ... normal for prascalavala who haven’t bathed in so long.”

“Exactly.” He threw off his underwear and socks — they didn’t smell much better, but the water-resistant clothing would prevent any nasty smells — and got under the shower head. Above it, he reached up to turn on the hot water, and from a nozzle beside the shower head, he squirted a load of the cleaner onto his scalp. Everything streamlined, just like his apartment. “Sorry we don’t have any fancy perfumes or vintage soaps for the pretty lady. All we got here at Mark’s Hole is basic cleaner.”

He sighed up into the hot water, and let it and the cleaner wash his woes away. Nothing quite like hot water to sooth aching muscles. The cleaner stung on the wounds, but, like everything nowadays, it was multipurpose along with being streamlined, so it would help disinfect the wounds. Course, after a week, the wounds were mostly healed anyway; some nasty gashes were problematic though, and they stirred some hard groans out of him as he washed them, the cleaner building more and more foam as he rubbed himself down.

“You are... you are... um...”

“What?” He raised a brow, and looked at the princess. The glow of her eyes was getting bright red now, closer to pink, and she had her knees pulled up to her chest, wrapped in her arms, as she stared at him. At least, until she realized he was looking at her, and she made a strange, squeaky kinda flute sound, before looking away.

“You are... muscular.”

“Is that a compliment? Holy shit I think I’ve been complimented by the princess. Be still my beating heart.” He rolled his eyes, but as he resumed washing himself, he took glances her way through the corner of his eye. Five seconds later, she was looking at him again, though she was trying to hide the fact. “Never seen a naked human before?”

“... only for biology studies. And, um, you are... much... larger, than the humans we were allowed to inspect.”

Yeah, bodybuilding as part of a career will do that to you. He laughed as he washed down his body. He didn’t care she was watching, too damn tired to care. If he had to guess, the bright reddish

pink color of her eyes meant she was feeling embarrassed, and shy. And hell, the embarrassed princess was actually not insulting him for once, so maybe being embarrassed made her less of a pain in the ass.

The water didn't get very far, as the drain was directly underneath him, and the floor slanted so the water would fall into it. And there was a vent above, cycling the air to keep it somewhat dry; and to keep them from asphyxiating due to the sealed door. So, Vala didn't have to move the blankets or anything to keep them dry. And, hell, if watching him shower got her to shut up and stop complaining for five minutes, then he'd do it every damn day.

"You... really do not care... that I see you naked?"

"Course not. This a praca thing? You guys don't like getting naked around each other?"

"... it is... private, yes." Perhaps overcoming her embarrassment, though her eyes were still glowing a softer red than usual, she gestured toward the middle of him. "Humans... shave that area?"

He looked down, and shrugged. And then, grinned. Vala was uncomfortable. Vala didn't like the fact he was naked. Perfect. He reached down, and nudged his cock downward to show how his pubic hair was trimmed to almost nothing.

"Humans here on Fuck'Tarl generally prefer trimmed or shaved, so yeah."

The princess visibly drew her head back at the sight of him touching his junk. Heh. New way to get back at her. Maybe if he made her embarrassed enough, she'd not say anything for the next three weeks.

"... why? Pracalavala are smooth, and humans have hair. Why... shave it?"

"Fashionable. But also, smooth skin is hot. Hell, lot of humans out there who think you praca are sexy as hell, considering the smooth skin." He resumed showering, and spent maybe a little more time than he needed under the water, but it was just too damn hilarious, how touching himself stirred more strange behavior from Vala.

Or, at least, that was the plan. But after a while, Vala wasn't even trying to hide the fact she was staring, and as he washed his cock a few times more than necessary, her hidden, glowing eyes locked onto his hand. If he didn't know any better, he'd think she was intrigued.

The moment he felt a small pulse of blood begin to flow into his shaft, he let it go, and quickly finished wiping the cleaner off of him. Ok, yeah, heading into some weird territory here. She's a client. She's paying you. Stop fucking around.

“Your turn. Don’t want the place smelling like Drolox cleaner from your BO.” Maybe some insults would reset the weird atmosphere.

“My turn? You cannot be serious.”

“I reeked, and you reek too.”

“I... I will clean myself tomorrow, when you are gone.”

“Fucking coward.” Laughing, he grabbed his underwear and shirt, and created a soft-ish place for him to sit. The clothes weren’t clean, but the material meant they wouldn’t get filthy or absorb liquid; god bless the dude who invented panmer fabric. He could sit on them while he air dried. “Poor baby princess too afraid to be naked in front of the lowly human.”

“... lowly?”

“Ha, what, you going to deny that you look down on me?”

“I... never said such a thing. We were only trading barbs.” Her voice was quieter, lacked its usual bite, and her eyes wavered to a pink once more.

“Not that. It was before then. The way you looked down on your non-praca troops, the grunts you hired from Vargenth? I’ve seen it in plenty of praca. Whatever.” He shrugged, tilted his head to the side until it released a satisfying crack, and leaned his head back to set it against the tile behind him. “Bunch of rich, prissy wimps. Can’t do any heavy lifting yourself, so you get humans to do it, or geckos.” Venom entered his voice. He tried to stop it, to pull it back, but it rolled off his tongue like a speech he’d rehearsed a thousand times. And he had, over the past week, rehearsed a speech a thousand times. “Too pathetic to do anything yourselves, high class garbage, who just hire other people to do things for you. Worthless without your wallets.”

He regretted it the moment he said it. But, apologizing wasn’t in the cards. So, he sighed, and looked down at his legs instead, one of them out straight in front of him, the other bent at the knee, knee up, so he could hang his forearm along it. Classic pensive pose. Just, let him sit like this, and let what he said fade away.

Lovely plan, but a flying jacket hit him in the face instead. “The fuck?”

“Pracalavala are not all that way, Mark. I apologize if my demeanor made you feel as if I... felt that way. I do not.” Off came the fancy gloves, each with its double straps off the wrist. Off came the ridiculously tall boots that reached her thigh, exposing her ridiculously long, smooth, thin legs, and the smooth, light blue skin of her legs and hand-like feet. Three fingers, one toe, long and slender.

And, looking straight at him, she unhooked the neck strap of her reflective dress with her fingers, and pulled it up over her antennae, before dropping it. It landed on the blankets around her feet, and Mark gulped as he looked the nine-foot naked woman up and down.

She was fucking gorgeous. Such a tiny waist, and tiny torso, thin like her limbs. Her breasts were small as well, but holy shit, he stared at them openly, the pale blue color of them, and the navy tint of her small nipples. Naked, there was nothing to stop him from seeing how she didn't have a hair on her body, and her sex was nothing more than a little slit with tiny, puffy labia.

He knew some basics about praca physiology, just as she knew the basics of human physiology. 93% sexual compatibility, among the highest of the 2,743 races in the Grand Charter. But the last stickwoman he'd worked with didn't look nearly as good as Vala.

She walked over to the shower head, and grabbed it. She was too tall, so it hung toward her neck, and she had to aim it at her body as she turned it on. Her eyes were glowing such a bright pink, it was making her cheeks blush. Her tail slithered around in a weird pattern, a figure eight; and he hadn't the slightest fucking clue what that meant.

"... I'm sorry, I really didn't mean it," he said. "Just... stressed and tired." He tried to sound more formal, but his voice was coming out as a quiet thing, no power to it, strength ripped away by the sight of her tall, tall tall tall, smooth, lean body. Her little waist and torso made her hips look large, even though they were only normal by human standards. Her shoulders were elegant, beautiful, highlighting the small, almost frail looking torso.

She was embarrassed, that was easy to tell. Embarrassed as all hell, from the way she was squirming. But despite that, she guided the water onto her body, and glared at him as she did. Her other hand fetched some of the cleaner as well, and she began to lather her body with it, coating her small torso and long arms with it, before her thin, long-fingered hands guided the bubbles and foam down her long, long legs.

He probably shouldn't have been staring, but she was determined to prove she wasn't what he said she was, and hell, he was barely in control of himself anymore. The tail, one of the bigger differences in their biology, flowed around until it was front of her, and she took special care and time to gently caress it with the cleaner. Her hidden, glowing eyes caught his again, and she narrowed them, squinting, or glaring, as she started to clean between her legs.

He'd read about praca physiology as part of standard interplanetary education packets. Very similar to humans, sexually, except for minor differences, hence the 93% compatibility rating. A female praca's vagina was similar to a human's in shape and design, just no lips, and instead of a clitoris, those

nerve endings were streamlined into the entrance of the hole. And, supposedly, it was a very, very small hole.

Not. The fucking time. To be thinking. About sex!

He gulped, audibly, and tried to find his breath. “Uh, sorry, I’m staring like a jackass.”

“... I was staring... at you... earlier.”

“I thought you were just examining the monkey.”

“... I was examining you.” She looked at him, stared at him, just like before, and her eyes drifted down his body. “... you are aroused.”

“I—shit.” Yeap. In the middle of all this, full on erection. He grabbed his chest armor, and put it between his thighs, hiding his dick. “Sorry.”

“I bathe naked before you to prove a point, and now you cover yourself?”

“Well you—”

“You... should... you should not... cover yourself. That is not fair.”

Unless his ears were deceiving him, that sounded very much like a sexual flirtation. A shy, timid, wavering flirt, but a flirt nonetheless. She was flirting with him? The fuck? He could understand how he could be attracted to her, with the fashion runway body and the praca legs as long as streets. But her, him? He was a beat up grunt with a fake eye and a bunch of scars. Not exactly praca normalcy.

And, not fair?

Well, do what the princess says. He put the body armor aside, one leg still out flat, the other with his knee up. Everything on display, cock resting along his lower abs.

“Not fair? I’m feeling pretty exposed here. You can see I’m horny, and that’s—”

“You... cannot see?”

“See what?”

She tilted her head to the side, one eye widening. She was confused. But, something clicked in her head, and she tapped her bone visor a couple times before nodding.

“I forgot, your eyes do not see what mine can. I... I will show you. But you must not laugh!”

He put his hands up. “No laughing.”

She giggled, and he blinked, dumbfounded. And it was a beautiful sound, like a tweeting bird, and it made him smile. She reached out to the light panel, and turned the light off.

He could still see, except, now everything was bathed in a subtle green. He put his hands out in front of him, and turned them around slightly; yeah he could still see them, but where was the green light coming from? He lowered the hand, and looked at Vala. Oh.

Subtle pulses of green light were coming from her body. Very subtle, gentle, and in time with her natural slower heart rate and breathing. It was almost like the subtle blue veins on a human's body, except hers were a gentle glowing green. But, it was the tiny slit between her thin legs that caused his jaw to drop. Her little hole was leaking a glowing green fluid. She moved the shower head a little until the water was hitting her leg, so it didn't wash away the thick droplets of green that coated the small hole, and occasionally dripped out of her.

He'd never seen a horny praca in the dark. The info packet he'd read fucking ages ago had mentioned a colored fluid indicating arousal, but, fuck him, he'd completely forgotten; and it made no mention of needing it to be dark to see it. Humans and their shitty eyes.

“So... now you can see, that I am... just as susceptible to... to you, as you me. We are both living beings, after all. I... I hope you understand, that I do not look down at you.”

She didn't look down at him. At least, not so far that she couldn't be attracted to him. The prim and proper princess, was attracted to him? This god damn pain in his ass, this beautiful, infuriating woman, was attracted to him. He gulped as he stared at the green, vibrant juice dripping down her thighs, and he felt his cock pulse hard against his body, standing off his abs as it swelled.

He got up.

“... Mark?”

He walked up to her, and looked up at her. The bone visor covered her nose and mouth, but the glow of her eyes was powerful in the darkness, and it pushed through the bone so he could clearly see the glowing pink of them. She stepped back, putting her back to the wall in the corner with the shower head, and he stepped in closer again, eyes looking her body up and down. The subtle green pulsing in her soft blue skin started to beat faster.

He got down onto a knee, in front of her, nice and close, trapping her in the corner of the room.

“Mark... w-what are you doing?”

He reached out, and set his hands on her shins. Her long legs were thin enough he could almost encircle them in his grip, and he groaned quietly as he felt the total smoothness and softness of them in his hand. And, his hands drifted higher, caressing each inch of her skin on the way up where they grew thicker. Skinny as a praca's legs were, they still had a human-ish shape, with thighs and an ass, and he groaned, as his fingers squeezed the softness of her thighs on the way up.

"M-Mark! Stop this at once." She raised her arms, one to cover her breasts, and the other to cover her sex, but once his hands reached up to her pelvis, it took only the smallest effort to pull her hand aside; she barely resisted. From so close, he could see the small slit glowing blatantly, as each slow, thick droplet of her juices glowed a bright green that lit the room enough for him to see by.

She tried to cover herself again. He didn't let her. She squirmed and wriggled, and did her best to hide her smooth, bare sex. He didn't let her. He reached up, and pressed his middle and ring finger against her slit, gently, palm up, and slowly spread open the vulva of the small entrance. Her juices spilled from her a little faster, now that her pussy was opened slightly, and he groaned, almost growled, at how warm it felt on his fingers. Far warmer than a human's, almost hot. Like a sauna.

"Mark! You... please, w-wait... you cannot..." Her voice wavered, and with one of her hands trapped in his, her other reached out to press against his head. No power to her motions, no strength, and he knew she had plenty; he'd felt it the multiple times she'd slapped and hit him on their trek. If she really wanted to, she could push him away easily enough, but instead, the glow of her eyes increased, drifting between red and pink.

He smiled up at her, and eased in both... one of his fingers into her insides. He tried both, but god damn, she was clenching like a vise. One for now.

"Mark! You... animal..." She squeaked, tweeted like a bird, and once he let go of her hand, she set it on his shoulder like the other. Her hands were soft, the thin shape and long palm of them allowing her three, long fingers to reach far across his shoulders. "Please... stop..." Despite her words, she squeezed on his finger, and stared down at him, leaning back slightly so her back was pressed to the wall, hips forward, putting what he was doing on display.

She was so damn small inside, tight, fitting one finger into her was trouble enough. And when he pushed the finger forward, curling it and pressing it toward the lower abdomen, she made a wavering whistle sound. She made the same sound twice more, when he forced in the second finger, stretching her apart until her slit was taut around them.

"Please... Mark, you are... this is... please stop. Please, you will... if..."

He might have bought it, if the hands on his shoulder and head were pushing against him, instead of gently holding him. And her bird tweets had become panting, quiet things between her words, fluttering and weak. He never knew bird tweeting sounds could be so fucking arousing.

Curling the two fingers forward, and pressing toward her abdomen, was difficult. She may have been a frail creature on the outside, but inside, her silky flesh was clenching hard enough to almost hurt, leaking more and more of her thick, glowing juices into his palm. Soon, it was overflowing his hand, and dripping off of his knuckles.

He had no idea a praca could ooze juices like this; even the most sexual human didn't leak like this. He'd literally be able to drink her, if he wanted to. Poor girl was going to dehydrate at this rate.

Vala squeezed his shoulders, hard, and started to shake. And started to fall. Mark blinked up at the girl, and did his best to keep her standing, but he only had the one hand on her thigh, below the ass, to try and keep her upright. She sank, sliding down the smooth tile of the wall, trembling, little bird tweets growing quiet and panicked, as she gently fell to the floor. Eventually she was on her butt, her legs around him, bent at the knee, and her hands now on the floor. The shower head was now aimed over her tiny torso, and bathed her beautiful breasts, stomach, slender neck, and shoulders in the hot water, as her cunt clenched on his fingers. A few more clenches, and she squirted onto his palm, a couple streams of a thinner version of her juices gushing over his hand.

Damn, that was fast.

He groaned as he watched how her inner flesh exposed itself slightly, as he eased his fingers out of her a couple inches. Her insides were purple. He hadn't noticed that, never knew that, but the inside of her body, her pussy, was purple. Beautiful against the pale blue of her outer skin, and terribly beautiful, almost like art, against the glowing green of her juices. In the darkness of the room, it looked amazing.

"Mark... you... you... you are mean."

Mean, heh. He smiled at the princess, chuckled a little, and grinned his most evil, most devious grin. It earned a tweet of annoyance from her, and a couple more fluttery tweets as he slid his fingers out of her, only to look at his fingers and press them together to admire the sight of her juices trickling down his arm. The glowing juices made his hand look like it was at a night rave.

"I have to say princess, I really didn't see it at first. I kind of thought you were beautiful the moment I saw you, but now? You are... fucking hot." He wanted to say that in a less cheesy way, but, yeah.

“... really?”

God, this praca. Always so prim and proper, and based on the conversation, praca must have been that way with each other. To give in to arousal, and just fuck someone, was probably not something Vala had ever considered in her life.

His evil grin returned, and he leaned down over the small pelvis of the tall creature's body.

“... wh... what are you doing, Mark?”

He smiled at her, that evil smile of his coming back. A playful smile. Christ, when was the last time he used that smile. He pulled on her legs, until she was lying flat on the floor, staring up at him, water splashing along her breasts, the pink glow of her eyes wide. He set his two fingers upon her clenching entrance once again, forced them into her clenching pussy, palm up, and sank them in to the last knuckle.

“Wait! I... need a break! Please, stop, you—nng!” Her voice broke into more bird tweets, high pitched, whistles upon whistles, as he started to finger her harder. With her lying down, there was no reason he had to be gentle with her. And, god damn, he wanted to feel more of her juices. He wanted to hear her tweets flutter. He wanted to see her squirt again.

So, he sank his fingers into her, until his two final knuckles were struggling to get into her as well, and he pressed up against the wall of squeezing, hot muscle inside her.

“W-Wait, please? I... I cannot...” Her hands fumbled with his wrists, trying to stop him, but he continued to finger her, slapping his fingers up against her insides hard enough to make her shapely little butt bounce against the floor.

Something about seeing the uptight princess, tweeting and whistling as she started to cum in mere moments, was intoxicating. Something about the way she looked at him with begging eyes — he assumed, based on how huge the glowing red and pink aura had grown — and managed to whisper a few ‘nos’ and ‘stop’ sounds, as she started to leak more of her cum onto his hand, was setting his blood on fire. More, he needed more.

“You really have a sexual body, Vala. It doesn't take much for you to cum, does it?”

“F... F... uck... yo—nng!” She squeezed her hands on his shoulders, and her hidden, glowing eyes fell to look at where her tiny slit was spread open on his fingers. No longer just leaking out of her, a tiny squirt of her juices landed on his palm again, before the liquid slid down the sides of his hand to drip off of his knuckles, and onto her ass. Another squirt of her cum landed on his hand, and another,

and another, almost sizzling hot as it coated him. Lines of beautiful, vibrant, glowing green in the dark, overflowing his palm as he continued to finger her, until her grip loosened, and eventually, fell.

Her tweets and whistles became quiet, and her head slouched back, but still propped up by the wall behind her. Her eyes were still on him, on where he was opening her up, on the juices his rough fingering was causing to splash on her thighs. From the shaking pink glow of her eyes through the bone mask, he could tell she wasn't used to this, to cumming this hard, to running out of breath, to being reduced to a quivering mess with curling toes, limp arms, and trembling thighs. She was shocked.

Finally, he stopped, gently slid his hand out of her, and held it over her pelvis. Droplets of her bright juices fell onto her flat stomach and mons, highlighting how much brighter it was compared to the subtle green glow beneath her blue skin.

Ok, maybe that went a bit far. Maybe it went way too far. He set his hands down, tilted his head to the side a bit, and looked her up and down. Still lying there, still shaking and trembling, now with her legs spread, tail weakly wagging along the wet floor, and her hands limp at her sides, while the shower water continued to splash down over her. A few more tweets escaped her, each causing her to tremble a little, and when he looked down, he groaned as he watched another droplet of the glowing liquid leak from her shivering slit.

He stood up, and turned off the shower. She needed a shower, and he needed another one too, but it was hard to talk with it constantly landing on them.

“You ok?”

“You... you...”

“Sorry, I crossed a line. Just, seeing you naked, and knowing you were aroused? I... yeah, that's like, biggest turn on for a guy. Couldn't help myself.” Mark, you fucking animal. If she tells the company about this, you're screwed. Or, you know, maybe you should feel bad about forcing that on her without her permission? Fucking hell. Just because she was into it doesn't mean you can go fingering women without asking, you stupid fu—

“... I...” She pressed her hands down against the wet tile, and forced herself to sit up higher, back to the wall now. “I have... never...” Her beautiful eyes drifted around, before sliding up his body, up to his waist, and then onto his abs. Or his dick. Was he hoping for too much? It was hard to tell, considering all he could see was the glow of her eyes through the bone. “... I... I um...”

He squatted down in front of her, eyebrow raised. “Yeah?” He almost insulted her too. Maybe an ‘out with it princess’ or something. But, no, didn't fit the mood anymore.

“I...” Sighing, breath coming out with a long, low blowing sound, like blowing on an empty bottle, she reached out for him with both hands. Her limbs, much longer than his, had no trouble reaching his shoulders, and her hands slid down his arms to find his, before slipping around his wrists. “... I... want to continue.”

“... wait, what? You do?”

“Yes. That was... very... pleasurable.” Blushing pink eyes so bright he was afraid her bone mask would melt, she gestured down to the mess around her legs. “... but... perhaps... gentler? Gentler... sex.”

She wanted him to have sex with him. The beautiful praca wanted to have sex with the human bodyguard. Something about her saying it, expressing it, instead of being the typical stubborn, standoffish princess she'd been up until this point, was endearing, and arousing. He smiled at her, and rubbed a finger along hers.

“For a fox like you? I can do that.” Ugh, so cheesy. He couldn't stop with the cheese for some reason.

She groaned, a whistle mixed in, as she reached out and pushed away his face with her large hand. Laughing, he rolled with it, and moved over to lay on the blankets. The two of them were soaked, but the material would be fine. It'd dry quickly when they were done, which made it perfect for him to lay his soaked body on, while pulling her toward him.

“Y... you want me to... be on top?”

“You wanted gentle, right? I'll lie here, and watch the beautiful princess fuck me for a while.”

“You're incorrigible!” Her glowing eyes squinted at him, but they were also looking him up and down, especially as he slid his hand down to his cock, and began to masturbate. God damn, something about those glowing eyes hidden behind the bone mask made her look so mysterious and sexy, and the way they locked onto what his hand was doing made it intoxicating. So of course, he spread his legs, set his head against the wall behind him so he could watch her, and masturbated for her, squeezing his cock and spreading her glowing juices up and down his girth until it was dripping down his testicles. The fluid was still hot.

She came up to him, and sat on her butt and knees between his legs, and stared.

“You are... um, harder, than pracalavalas. Thicker.”

“You're taller than humans.”

“Me being tall does not affect... the prospect of sex, though. I... do not know if I can fit this,” she said. Yeap, that was a very ego-stroking thing to hear, even from a stickwoman, and he had to slow down his masturbating to keep from cumming. She slid in closer, staring down at what he was doing, her knees between his thighs. Eventually, she leaned in closer, and set her hands onto the blankets around him, as she stared down at his cock. “It is... different... May I... inspect?”

He slid his hand away, chuckling, grinning, and gestured for her to do whatever she wanted. It wasn't that he was this casual about sex; he rarely got laid as it was. Just, something about her attitude made her so god damn fun to tease and toy with. And, something about how she stared down at his body like he was some sort of forbidden fruit pracas weren't supposed to taste, was getting his blood pumping like he couldn't believe.

“Humans are... harder... and... wider... and...” Her three fingers and thumb wrapped around his cock, and squeezed, gently, as if she was caressing a flower. It wet her hands with her cum, still on his cock. “Does... that... hurt?”

“You can get pretty rough with it, lot rougher than that.” This was oddly fun, something about her genuine interest that added an edge of innocence to her, like it was her first time. It was both their first time, for having a sex with another species, he suspected. “This skin here is pretty sensitive, like your insides.” He reached down, and ran a finger along his swollen glans. Fuck, that was sensitive. Any harder and he was going to explode.

She copied him, running a finger along its wet sin. Her skin was so much softer than his, soft by human standards, let alone someone with rough, calloused hands like him. That was enough to send a jolt of pleasure through his system, and summon the familiar warmth of cum building between his legs. It also summoned a drop of his precum, and she let out a quiet, gentle whistling sound, as she touched the tip, and spread the small drop of fluid around his glans.

“I'm very close. Much more and I'm gonna pop.”

“Already? I barely touched you!”

“Well excuse me, princess. Human guys have this thing where, you get them horny enough, and it doesn't take much to make them pop. Kinda like a certain praca who just happened to gush all over my arm. A bunch of times.”

She whistled hoarsely at him. “Will you... be able... to cum... multiple times?”

“Heh, I'm not a kid anymore.” He tilted his head to the side as he looked at the beautiful, blue creature, the glowing red of her eyes behind her thin bone mask, subtle green under her skin, and the

blatant green of her cum that coated his cock. It was still hot for some reason. “But, given present circumstance, I think I might be able to go twice.”

“Present circumstance?” She let go of him, and with slow, careful movements, she climbed forward. It was easy for her to straddle him considering how tall she was, and she set her knees under his armpits, as she lowered herself down to sit where his thighs met his pelvis. He groaned at the sight of his cock getting pressed down against his stomach, squished under her slit, and spreading her small, puffy mounds around it. Damn that felt hot on his cock, like he was in a hot tub or something.

“Not gonna lie. Been a long time since I’ve... been this... turned on.”

“You... you are that... attracted to me?”

“I guess. Never thought I would be,” he said, shrugging up at the insanely tall woman.

“Rude barbarian. So uncouth.” With another annoyed tweet, she reached down, and slid her fingers around his cock again. Leaning forward, she raised her hands, guided his cock up between her thighs, and began to lower herself. Or at least, that was the plan, but he managed a groan and wince as she pressed her very, very, very small hole onto his glans. She made a quiet, high-pitched whistle, and stopped, keeping his glans pressed to her slit and clenching hole, but unable to get it in.

“Not sure we’re... going to be able to fit that,” he said.

“Are all humans this well endowed?” With yet another annoyed tweeting sound, she pressed down a little harder, and again he winced. So extremely tight. If it was anything other than her soft inner flesh, and soaked at that, it’d have been way too painful.

“Sorry to say, I have a perfectly average-sized junk.” He knew praca had longer dicks, but piecing together from what Vala said, they were softer and thinner. Whether that was a good or bad thing, he had no idea yet.

“Junk?”

“Just slang for dick.”

“So many words for a single organ. You are all sex-obsessed barbarians.” She planted one hand against the mat by his head while leaning forward, burying him under her thin, lanky frame, as she pressed her ass down toward his pelvis. “If... if I relax... I can... perhaps...”

Much as he tried to keep quiet, he couldn’t help but let out a moan, as her little slit slowly enveloped the swollen head of his cock. Hot hot, almost too hot. Tingling warm hot, like taking a steamy, stinging hot shower hot. Holy fucking shit. He very much wanted to reach out and slam her

down onto him, but considering how much she was struggling to fit him into her, rough sex was off the menu. Control yourself, and let her lead.

She let out a few annoyed tweets. “The... the head is in. I can... go... all the way, I believe. I—” He reached up, and set his hands onto her breasts. With her leaning her weight on a hand by his head, and the other keeping his cock in its grip, she couldn’t stop him. “Hey!”

“These are really soft, you know. Like, really soft.” He cupped her breasts, and let the silkiness of them fill his palms. Small breasts on her small torso, and he licked his lips as he groaned at the sensation of her nipples pressing into his palms. Like little buttons, so much tinier than human nipples.

“Y... you... you said you would watch.”

“It’s a time-honored tradition that, when a girl takes cowgirl, if she’s facing you, you play with her breasts.”

“And... if she’s facing away?” Surprising, that she didn’t ask what cowgirl meant.

“Play with her ass.”

“Savages.” Tweeting again, she started to lower herself down onto him, slowly. Thank god slowly, cause he was doing everything in his power to not cum right there. The heat of her juices, of her insides, was powerful and stimulating. The tightness was almost to the point of painful, and he winced more than once as she eased in an inch, and another inch, and another. How could something so soft be so tight?

When she finally got every inch of him inside her, she set both her hands onto his chest, and got comfortable. She wriggled left and right, tweeting quietly with each shift of her weight, as she found a good position to sit, and where to put the weight of her ass and body against him. Shifting back and forth, and side to side, she squeezed on him with each motion, tweeting panting sounds, the soaked flesh of her insides constricting every inch of him and sending powerful sparks of pleasure down his length as she eventually found a comfortable way to sit.

Too late. He made another small moan, and smiled up at the tall creature as he reached out, and set his hands on her hips.

“Sorry,” he said.

“What? I... oh?” She looked down, and watched him, pink glowing eyes behind her bone mask growing bigger, as he wiggled under her a little.

Every single motion he made, just the tiny bit of motion, was bliss on his cock, shocking it with pleasure waves that caused his pelvic floor to flex hard, pushing his length toward the front wall inside her. Each flex earned a gush of his cum, but the heat of his own fluids was nothing compared to hers. He could feel it, coating her insides and his cock, but it was quickly lost to the sensation of her squeezing flesh leaking more of her juices onto him. She was milking him with the tightest grip, and he was thankful she wasn't moving. Any movement right then would have been painful, with how hard she was wringing the cum out of him.

"A human... just orgasmed inside me." She reached up with a hand and touched her bone mask, like a shocked human holding their cheek. Her eyes flashed pinked as well, before switching to red once again. Maybe she was getting less embarrassed? "I have so many friends who would... never believe this."

He set his hands onto her thighs near her hips, and finally managed to go still, as his insides stopped flexing and stopped trying to fill her with as much cum as possible.

"I don't have any friends anymore, personally."

"No?"

"Nah." Shrugging, he smiled up at the beautiful creature, and eased his fingers along her thin legs. "Comes with the territory."

"I see." Her voice wasn't wavering so much anymore, though it was quiet. Being on top was helping her be a bit more bold, if only a little. "And... what do I do now?"

"Heh, honestly? Whatever makes you feel good. With humans and sex, the goal isn't to make the guy cum, it's to see if the girl can cum before he does. I'll enjoy whatever you do." To a point. If she pinched off his dick, and that was half likely with how tight she was, he wasn't going to enjoy that, or enjoy bleeding to death.

"I... I do not know what... will feel good. You are so thick, I... am about to burst." She tightened her hands on his shoulders, and tried lifting her butt a little. She managed a single inch before she gave up, tweeting a whine as she sank back down onto him.

"Talk like that and I won't last much longer."

"Crude... brute."

The feel of boiling insides soaking his cock from tip to balls in her cum and juices, and constricting on every inch of him, was heaven. He closed his eyes for a moment as he enjoyed the tight

rings of her inner muscles clenching and squeezing, her inner skin somehow able to be the softest thing he'd ever touched, while able to squeeze him hard enough he was worried she might pop one of his dick's veins.

But she tried again, working her hips forward this time, and she let out a long, quiet whistle, as she forced his cock to press toward her stomach, while rubbing the front of her slit down against his pelvis. He managed to keep from moaning this time, but god damn, he could feel her insides milking and massaging him as she moved. His glans was swollen to bursting, and so damn sensitive at this point, that each tiny motion she made sent sparks down his length until it reached between his legs. Try to last longer than five seconds this time, Mark.

She leaned back, while still keeping her hips a bit forward, and she reached down to touch her pelvis above where he was spreading her open. Her long fingers slid down, and began massaging her small, puffy labia, and the front of her spread-taut entrance, as she let out another, long, quiet whistle.

"Praca bodies are... too soft... for this." She tried again, leaning back, and setting her hands onto his legs. Back, and forth, slowly but surely.

"For rough sex, definitely. But... you seem to be enjoying this." He reached down, and set both of his thumbs onto the tiny, puffy mounds around her pussy, and spread them a little. He touched her taut opening the way she had seconds before, and smiled as her body shuddered. She whistled a squeak as she looked down her body at him, but didn't remove his hands. Good, because she was leaking more, and more of her juices, and he wanted it to keep trickling out of her, coating his cock in the sizzling heat of it, and its beautiful, glowing green color.

"It... does... feel good." She started moving again, keeping her head down so she could watch herself, and leaning back so her tiny slit was on display. Each subtle motion created friction that had him struggling to not moan like a cat in heat, but it seemed to be the back-and-forth grinding causing his cock to put pressure against different parts of her insides, that had the princess tweeting tiny pants again.

They both stared at the connection, and watched her cream over his length as he played with her stretched flesh, his fingers rubbing and massaging the small, swollen softness that surrounded her entrance. Like a sauna on his fingers. His fingers pressed into the spot where her clitoris would be, if she was human, and immediately, she stopped moving. Her head rolled back, and her tweets turned into airy, desperate, quiet things, as she trembled. Her insides clenched, and a wave of her cum flowed down over his cock, trickling off of his testicles, and flowing out onto his abs.

He slid his hands around her hips, and started to move her back and forth on his own.

“Mark! W-Wait, it... it is... sensitive,” she said, a few tweets breaking through her wavering voice. “And... I am... still....” Still cumming, she almost said. Damn, that would have been nice to hear.

“You weigh nothing, and I’ll keep it nice and slow.”

“B-But... I... I am... it...” She put her hands on his, and made a half-hearted attempt to remove them. He didn’t let go. He didn’t want to. He wanted to see her cum again, feel her cum again. And, after what happened under the shower, it seemed like Vala really enjoyed it when he ignored her pleas, and forced pleasure on her. He wanted more of that, hear more of those begging little tweets, see her cum more, and feel her juices soak him.

He pushed her back, a little further than she had done on her own, and pulled her toward him, a little further again. Each shift of her body dragged an inch of his girth in and out of her, soaked insides wringing on his length and bathing it in delicious friction. Each shift caused her swollen opening to rub against his pelvis. Each shift made his cock press into her at different angles, coming toward her belly when he pulled her forward, and pressing toward her spine when he pushed her further back. The feel of her cunt fighting back against the movement bathed his ripe, swollen cock head in her squeezing softness, and he let a quiet groan slip out, as he felt the heat build underneath his length.

She came again. Most sensitive, sexual creature he’d ever known, Vala the prim and proper princess, and he smiled up at the trembling creature as she squeezed on his hands. She was still trying to get him to stop, hands plucking at his, but she’d given up on words, and managed only airy little tweets, matched to her quivering body. He stopped rocking her for a little bit, pressing down on her hips instead, and his eyes rolled upward as he basked in the milking tightness of her insides around every single inch of his length. Once Vala had managed a couple breaths, he started again, and continued rocking her back and forth, going just a little faster, and earning the same tweeting pants from her.

Again, she squirted, gushing over his pelvis, but he didn’t stop. Close now, he could feel the tingling warmth underneath his testicles build, demanding he keep going. Took a lot of willpower to keep things smooth and controlled, to not shove up into the praca and hurt her. But he found a decent rhythm, a gentle but consistent speed that wasn’t too slow, and fast enough to cause her clenching insides to send jolts of pleasure down his cock. It was like being edged to orgasm, taking its sweet time, but any faster and he was going to hurt Vala. Any faster and he was liable to hurt himself, with how tight she was squeezing him. Despite how much she was coating his cock in her juices, even squirting more until the glowing cum was spilling up over his abs and navel, he had to keep it at a medium pace.

The darkness of the room shifted along the walls in sync with their rocking motions, as Vala's beautiful, copious amounts of cum bathed everything in the vibrant, green light.

His flexed his pelvic floor, causing his cock to jump inside the praca, and he stopped rocking her as he felt a gush of his cum squirt into her depths. Instead, he pushed his hips up into her, gently enough to keep from hurting her, but he was desperate for more friction on his cock's head. He sank her balls deep onto him as he flooded her snatch with another wave, and eased himself down and out of her an inch, before he sank himself deep again, and again gushed cum into her. He stared at her spread slit, and gulped at the sight of her coating him with more trickling waves of vibrant, glowing green, as the panting, tweeting praca soaked him.

As the last waves of pleasure died down, he relaxed his body, and let his hands slide down to her thighs.

"God damn, I haven't cum that hard in... ever, probably."

"You... you... brute." Trembling like a leaf, she leaned forward, and put her hands onto the mat, around his head again. But she didn't last long, and fell onto her elbows, planting them to the mat instead. Tall as she was, he was left staring up at her breasts and stomach.

"You always cum this hard?" he said.

"I... I..." She shivered again, and eventually, the muscle spasms of her depths forced out his softening cock. Free of her, a flood of her juices, and his own cum, splashed down over his length. God damn. "I... d... d... do not... no."

With a quiet whistle, she rolled off of him and onto her back, lying next to him, arm against his. He looked down at his body, leaned up on his elbows for a moment, and stared at the enormous mess. She really had soaked him, his abs, his thighs, his cock, all of it, and it continued to glow vibrant green in the darkness of the room. And for some reason, it was still very warm. Maybe it was the chemical composition of it?

"I am... so embarrassed," she said.

"You should be. Slut."

"I beg your pardon!"

He laughed. She glared at him, but eventually, she started to laugh, too.

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They sat in silence for a while. They turned on the light, too, so the glowing arousal of Vala wasn't so blatant; least he could do, considering how embarrassing the moment had been for her. Thankfully the panmer clothes and blankets were all water proof; he'd wash them all down with the shower head in a bit.

"I... I'm sorry," he said. Another 'least he could do' was apologize for being so aggressive.

"Why?"

"For, you know... being a horny guy."

She tweeted a laugh, and shook her head as she brought her tail around her onto her lap. "A human's impulsiveness is... an... attractive feature. Taboo to praca, but alluring."

"Is it? We hate it, most of the time."

"Praca analyze everything, turn it into statistics. Humans are rash and shortsighted."

"Not all of us are."

"By praca standards, even your most diligent engineer with an eye for the future, is at best on par with praca. But, such diligence is... frustrating."

He laughed, and leaned in to poke the stickwoman in the sternum. "You blew up Kalara. That was most definitely not a diligent, well-thought-out plan. That was impulsive."

"It... it was."

Laughing again, he got in a little closer to her. She squeaked a tweet, and leaned back a little more. He recognized the sound now, after all the sex. It was her surprised and excited sound. It made him chuckle, reach out, grab her thighs, and pull her toward him, earning more high-pitched tweets from her. So very light, despite her height.

"You aren't like other praca."

"And you are like all the stories about humans!"

"Stories?"

"Stories. You know... novel stories. About humans." Some fluttering whistles in her voice marked her embarrassment, along with the pink hue in the glow of her eyes.

"What sort of novels?"

“... things... about humans... being... impulsive... with the target of their desire.”

Ah, romance novels. Perfect way to get a very warped view on human romance and sex, and lead to idealized fantasies. But then again, if it led to more sexual people like Vala, who was he to judge?

“Fabio on any of the covers?”

“Who?”

“Nevermind.” Grinning, he crawled toward her, and with his hands on her thighs, she had no choice but to fall onto her back. He knelt over her, knees outside her hips, hands down around her shoulders. “I had no idea praca could be so sexual.”

“You are hopeless! Brute.”

This was turning into a classic princess and the scoundrel fantasy. And that was great, because he loved that fantasy.

“How... how do praca kiss?” he said.

“Kiss? We do not kiss.”

“You don’t kiss? Well no wonder you’re all sexually repressed. Kissing is the first step to letting loose and fucking.”

“Mongrel.” She whistled at him, but it didn’t have the same shrill her old insults did. “I... I know of human kissing, and it is disgusting. You eat with your mouths. The bacteria alone... disgusting.”

Laughing, he leaned down, and looked closer at the bone mask that covered her features. So smooth, lacking any features except that it left the corners of her jaw exposed.

“Humans do a lot with our mouths.” He went lower, and set his lips onto one of her nipples.

Instant tweeting, like a surprised bird. She pushed against his shoulders a few times, but he didn’t move, and eventually she gave up, setting her hands onto the back of his shoulders.

“Praca... we like to entwine... our tails... when... we start being... interested in each other.” Small tweets in her voice interrupted each few words, and with a little more time, her hands slid up his shoulders, and slid along the back of his neck and head, cradling.

“I don’t have a tail.” Shrugging, he reached out for her tail, and wrapped it around his bicep a couple times. “Good enough?”

She bopped him on the head. “It is not the same.”

“Well, you have no lips I can kiss, so—”



“I have lips. They are behind this bone.”

“I can’t kiss them!”

“Good! Savage.”

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Three weeks later. Three weeks of hiding in a hole. Three weeks of stealth, sneaking out to get rations, before returning to the hideout. Three weeks of just sitting around.

Three weeks of non-stop sex. Three weeks of getting to know more about the prim and proper princess praca, Valamakala Vatalalarama of Taralavra Industries. Three weeks of chatting about stupid stories of his life as a bodyguard, doing crazy shit for insane clients, stupid stories she laughed at. Stupid stories she enjoyed, for some crazy reason.

She was raised for nobility; which in the praca world, meant the rich. He learned she was well educated, she had a family history of importance with Taralavra Industries, and she was one of the more successful business women on Fuck’Tarl. She had two sisters, who had all enjoyed grand adventures, going out and spreading Taralavra’s influence to other systems, while having sex with other alien races and sharing the stories with Vala. No wonder she’d been such a hornball.

Funniest three weeks of his life.

But like every good thing in his life, it came to an end.

“Well, this is it,” he said.

“Yes, it is.”

The two of them stood inside her office. He didn’t understand the strange ways praca did business, except that it was ruthless and cold. All he knew was what he told her. After a certain amount of time, a praca business would call off a hunt after a certain amount of time; cutting their losses, he supposed.

“As per the agreement with Vargenth, you will be awarded the money for a... D.R.E. mission.” She managed a quiet tweet, weak, before she leaned back in her chair. Massive chair, for not only her nine-foot height, but probably for power play negotiations. “In the end, I made a lot of money in hiring Vargenth, with only the one survivor, I suppose. Your fees were large, but I only had to pay yours.”

“Cold.”

“Yes. I apologize. I did not respect their sacrifice. I do not feel guilty for employing them knowing they were likely to die, such is the praca way. But I... do feel sad, that the situation resolved as it did.”

Nah, don't apologize, Vala. He wasn't sad for them. Grunts and idiots like him knew what they were in for when signing up for a D.R.E.. Their attitude was cold, though they hid that with humor, like cowards. At least praca were upfront about the coldness of their brutal system.

“It's ok. D.R.E. payout, and I'm GR Alpha. Gets me enough credits for a decent ship, fuel, food, some border and trade licenses, and a little bribe money.” He wasn't wearing his armor anymore, just some simple reflective black pants and a gray shirt with a Raka III ship on the back. The most boring, average street-wear. It did not fit the extravagant and very professional building. Taralavra industries was a huge company, and unlike Merka R56, enjoyed the presentation of being a nice company.

They weren't a nice company. Maybe by praca standards they were, and better than Merka, at least. But they weren't nice.

“I... wanted to thank you,” she said.

“Payment is thanks.” He said it colder than he wanted to.

“No. I mean... I had fun, Mark.”

“Had fun blowing up Kalara?” Why was he poking at her like this? Trying to piss her off? It'd make leaving easier if she hated him, he supposed.

“No,” she said. He expected to get an annoyed tweet out of her, but she denied him. “I had fun with you for company, Mark. A lot.”

“... me too.” So much for that idea. Weak, Mark.

“What will you do now?”

“Gonna buy the ship and start a delivery service, like I said. Sail the stars, take people and goods around. Maybe smuggle some more innocent stuff.”

“Smuggle and innocent in the same sentence?” She leaned forward, set her elbows on the table, and rested her chin on her netted fingers. Purple glowing eyes.

“Lot of contraband out there that's government controlled when it shouldn't be. You know the deal.”

“That I do.” Sighing, she got up, and walked around her giant office desk. She was wearing a silver reflective skirt that reached her feet, with a split reaching up to her thigh. She wore a jacket too, same color, and he smiled at how it hugged her tiny torso compared to her long limbs. It had nice cleavage that showed off her figure, and slender, beautiful neck. “I... I worry about you, Mark.” Slithering movement drew his eye, before making its appearance, long, thin tail rising up to curl around her and sit in her hands.

“I’ll be fine.”

“I wonder.”

“Why’s that?”

“... you’re alone, Mark.”

“Always been alone.” Not like that was anything to get upset over.

“You... don’t have to be, Mark.” She leaned back against the desk, a few feet from him, and gestured to the enormous window behind her. “You could... come work for Taralavra? You are skilled, Mark, far more skilled than you realize. Few could have survived the circumstance I put us in, but you not only managed to eliminate a dozen guards and save yourself, you saved me, too.”

He sighed and shook his head. “Sorry. I... I can’t. I need to get off this world, Vala. I’ve been working at this for years, trying to get off world, trying to get back to space. Fuck’T—Frk’Tarlvr is done for me, nothing here for me.”

“... nothing?” Her head lowered, and the red glow of her eyes faded. Shit, now they were blue.

“Come on, you know that’s not what I mean.”

“You must hate the praca, and this planet we’ve crafted.”

“Hate the planet, but I don’t hate the praca.” He could go at length about his problems with the planet, but it was all shit he’d already said, shit she’d countered, shit they’d argued about plenty already. He walked over and leaned his ass against the desk as well. She had three feet in height on him, making the desk a bit too high for him to lean his actual butt against; hip worked. “But I can’t stay here.”

“I see.”

“I... yeah.” Groaning, he looked up at her, and touched her hand. She didn’t move it. “I’m gonna miss you.”

She looked ready to say something. Her throat tensed a little, muscles preparing to speak through the hidden mouth behind her bone mask, but she stopped, and let her tail slip away, falling flat to the floor. “I’ll miss you too.”

He winced. Yeah, this hurt. How long had it been since he felt this way about a girl? Forever. For-fucking-ever. But four weeks was not long enough to develop these feelings. He just needed to get a grip, get his head out of his ass, and start thinking clearly. And he was way too stubborn about starting this new life to let a little thing like an overwhelming urge to be with her stop that.

“... good luck, Vala.” Sighing, his hand fell away from hers, and he walked toward the door.

“I wish you good luck, Mark. Goodbye.”

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He stared up at the sky. The fucking sky. He was high enough to actually see the sky, and not have to squint to peer past the canopy of buildings. Shitty, cloudy sky, but a sky nonetheless.

He should have been happy, and he wasn’t.

Stare at the ship some more, that’ll perk your mood up. And it was a good ship, with a captain’s room, ten spare rooms, and a cargo hold big enough to store some heavy shit, or large shit. He smiled at it as he paced around the docking pad, its gray metal surface making a resounding clack with each step of his black boots. It was a beat up old ship, but a good ship, with a fat body and a small nose for a cockpit, with two seats.

If you knew where to go, knew what to say in different systems, knew where to cut corners and knew how to dodge red tape, there was a decent living to make as a delivery pilot. And he’d be among the stars again, drifting around from place to place, with no one to answer to but himself; and whoever was paying his fee. No one he had to worry about. No one at all.

“... fuck!” He kicked his new baby’s landing strut, and groaned as it kicked back, metal unmoving but hitting his foot with enough force to nearly send him to his knees. Ow. “Come on, she... she’s a fucking praca man. She’s fucking rich, has a family name to worry about, a giant business to worry about, and... and you have fuck all.” Fuck all. Absolutely fuck all. Nothing to offer her. Nothing.

If that wasn’t a slap in the face about how he thought of himself, he didn’t know what was. Nothing. He was nothing. Just a moron who’d been trapped in debt from past mistakes, sold his body as

a bodyguard, and managed to get out alive when everyone else in his situation died. Second chance for a worthless nobody like him. He couldn't waste it. Do not waste it.

He reached up over the landing strut, dialed in the passcode, and stepped back as the loading ramp opened up. Clearance to leave: check. Fueled up: check. All debts paid: check. So get on the ship, jump to the Rendosh system, leave this shithole behind, and start your new life.

He got halfway up the ramp, before he turned around, and sat down. He was dressed in some of his morasteel armor, half convinced someone was either going to show up, and try and steal his ship, or just shoot him because he didn't deserve what was happening. A good thing was happening to him. Hard to believe, but it was.

Didn't feel good.

"Mark."

He jumped up. "Shit! Shit, Vala, fucking scared me. Thought maybe some fucking loan shark was after me for a second."

She tweeted a laugh, and walked up to him, each step silent. Her glove-like shoes and her hand-like feet were perfect for sneaking up and scaring someone like him shitless. "I... I came to... to see you go."

He walked down the ramp to her, and smiled up at the gorgeous creature. But the glow of her eyes through the bone mask was barely there, mostly purple and blue, and subtle, muted. Sad.

"Thanks, I... yeah."

"It... it is a nice ship." From how she looked it over, and the way she tilted her head, he could see she didn't believe it.

"Heh, it is. You just need to know what to look for in a ship like this." He sat down on the ramp, and motioned for her to do the same. She did, which surprised him, considering she was still wearing the suit she wore in the company building. Suit was probably worth ten times the armor he was wearing.

"I... I... wish you... luck, Mark."

She'd already wished him good luck. Double wishing was strange.

"... you know I won't forget those four weeks, Vala."

"Even the first one?"

“Especially the first one. I was ready to choke you to death. No forgetting that.”

They laughed, for a lot longer than the joke warranted, before going silent again. Neither of them moved.

Except her. She slid in a little closer, and leaned her head down to the side, so she could put the side of her head on top of his. Back to silence. Back to stillness. Back to absolutely nothing but the dread in his stomach, telling him he was leaving behind the best thing that had ever happened to him. The ship was nice. The girl beside him was better. So much better.

He gulped, and turned his head a bit, so he could look her way. “Do... I mean, I... I don’t know, do you... want... to come with me?” He said it. Yeap, he said it. This was going to make a painful goodbye a hundred times worse when she said no.

“With you?”

“Yeah, with me. With little, worthless me.” Groaning, he got up, stepped off the ramp, and started pacing around. “I got no money, and I’m guessing you can’t take your fortunes with you if you came with me.”

“I could not. They are bound to Taralavra Industries.”

“Exactly. So, yeah, it’s a stupid question. You got a life here, a royal one, and—”

She stood up, and walked down the ramp to meet him. Her eyes were glowing bright red and pink through the beautiful bone hiding her features, and she tweeted a few, gentle, fluttery noises, before her tail reached out, and wrapped around his forearm. He froze. Tweeting another chuckle, she lowered her mask, and pressed it to his forehead; closest thing she could do to a kiss, he supposed.

“I would love to.”

“... what? Are you fucking serious? You’re rich! Don’t be stupid. I know praca can’t just leave the corporations they work in, and—”

“Shhh. I’m no fool. I have money hidden in many accounts Taralavra Industries knows nothing about. More than enough to help this new business of yours succeed. Our business.” Shrugging at him, with her tail still wrapped around his arm, she started dragging him up the ramp. “Come on, show me my room. Our room.”

Well. Hot damn. Praca for a girlfriend? Amazing. Praca for a business partner? Even better.