



Alien in the Depths (Thryal Mates #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: She went looking for adventure...and found the biggest one yet—love.

While exploring ancient catacombs on the alien planet Thryal, Sofia crosses paths with Zaraq, an alien fugitive hiding in the depths. While their meeting might have been odd... it also seemed like fate, especially when sparks instantly flew between them.

When Zaraq is accused of a murder he didn't commit, Sofia puts her own life at risk to prove his innocence. She's willing to do anything to prove Zaraq is innocent—no matter the cost.

To clear his name, they must stop a killer who enjoys framing others and targeting those Zaraq loves most.

To save each other, Sofia and Zaraq must risk everything.

But can their newfound love survive this trial by fire? Or will the murderer extinguish their future before it's begun?

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Sofia

The Thryal sun was beating down on Sofia as she crested a hill. She paused, taking in the sight before her. Her nose was slightly scrunched from the smell as she turned to her guide.

“Seriously, Blitto? This is what you’ve been raving about?”

The alien laughed, his typical ethereal-looking Thryal skin glimmering in the sunlight. Sofia offered the older man a hand up, and they stood staring at the swamplands in front of them.

“Tell me the story again,” Sofia demanded. Blitto groaned good-naturedly and sat down on a nearby rock.

“Let an old man catch his breath, yeah? Then I’ll tell you the story again. For the hundredth time.” Blitto winked at her and grabbed his water canteen. Sofia scoffed but obediently sat down on a patch of dry grass near him. She tilted her head back to feel the sun on her face.

When she was sitting like this, it was almost as if she was back on Earth, relaxing in her grandparents’ garden. She could pretend that her grandparents had never disappeared and that her grandma would be calling her in for lemonade at any moment.

Well, besides the stench of the wetland stretched out before them.

Reaching for her own canteen, Sofia smiled as she thought of the past few months. After discovering an alien in their inherited house, her and her two sisters' lives were completely upturned.

Blitto caught her eye, raising a dark gray eyebrow to her strange expression. Her smile widened.

"I was just thinking how our lives have changed," she told Blitto. "Finding Arccoo in the mansion was strange, to say the least. And we sure didn't expect Carmen to fall for the alien prince! What a rush."

Blitto smiled. "I'm sure it was a shock."

Sofia sighed and leaned back on her arms. "Carmen's always been the strongest of us. She took on the mantle like a champ when our parents died. When Arccoo left, she was a wreck. I'd never seen her like that."

"That must have been hard for you and Elena," Blitto replied thoughtfully.

Sofia shrugged.

"It was good for us, I think. It made us step up and made her understand that she doesn't always have to be the strong older sister." She smiled at the memory. "She had made her peace with him leaving, and then we found the crystal core that had burned out on his ship. Elena figured it all out, smart cookie that she is, and boom, here we are."

"I sense a bit of abbreviation in the story, but I'll allow it." Blitto laughed when she rolled her eyes.

"Your turn. And no abbreviation!"

Blitto leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and staring out at the sun glinting on the puddles of purply green water. He squinted for a second and then pointed ahead to their left.

“See that column there? It’s covered in moss, but you should be able to see the tall shape between those yellow bushes.”

Sofia sat up, mirroring his expression. “I see it! Is that the memorial building?” she asked excitedly.

Blitto nodded.

“The old legends say that a celebrated war hero was buried here, thousands of years ago. The memorial marks where the catacombs start. Rumors say that the old general’s ghost still wanders around them. Explorers who come across him either get granted a wish, or they disappear, never to be seen again.”

An exhilarating thrill went through Sofia at the thought. She was obsessed with ghost stories—anything paranormal, really. Part of the reason she so easily agreed to travel through space with her sisters was because she was running from a failed paranormal investigation career. She smirked. Why is it that once you stop looking, things start happening?

Sofia jumped up, brushing off her black cargo pants. Blitto handed her a map of the catacombs, holding it fast when she tried to take it.

“You sure about this, lovely? Your brother-in-law would have my ass if something happened to you.”

Sofia laughed, pulling the map from his hand. “I’ve never been surer. Trust me, I’ve explored weirder, and smellier, places back on Earth.”

Blitto shrugged. “All right then. I’ll meet you back here in two days when the sun is highest.”

Sofia grinned and waved over her shoulder as she started descending into the marsh. A cobblestone path led between the puddles and steaming pits along with strange orange weeds threatening to trip her up. From what she’d read, the path was a relic from when Thryal soldiers would pay their respects to the fallen general. It was clear no one had been around clearing the path for centuries.

As she walked, kicking loose stones out of her way, she reflected on the past few weeks. After Arccoo and Carmen’s wedding, the four of them set off on an adventure to explore Thryal, the alien planet that Arccoo was the prince of. Arccoo had acted as the perfect tour guide. A few weeks had gone by of Arccoo showing the three sisters his home planet when Sofia and Elena called it.

They had seen the effect that Arccoo leaving Earth had had on Carmen, and they felt the two deserved a real honeymoon. So the two younger sisters had made excuses to go on their own adventures.

Sofia still wasn’t entirely sure what Elena was up to, but she knew her youngest sister would be blowing the local engineers away with her engineering brain.

A sudden wind whipped her ponytail into her face and she brushed it aside before pausing to peer around her. The entrance to the catacombs lay just ahead. A foreboding feeling ran through her. Instead of deterring her, she grinned excitedly and moved forward.

“Time to meet the old general,” she mumbled to herself. What would she even wish for if the rumors were true? “Probably something to do with my abysmal love life.” She laughed to herself.

Being a ghost hunter didn't leave much time for dating. When that career option failed, her confidence had taken a huge hit, and she didn't feel up to dating at all. Then her grandparents disappeared, and the sisters traveled to Thryal... It had been ages since she'd even felt an attraction to anyone, never mind getting involved with someone.

The catacombs were cold as she entered. Sofia paused for a second to grab her trench coat and flashlight from her trusty explorer's backpack. She never went anywhere without it. After a moment's deliberation, she pulled out her radiation meter as well. It couldn't hurt, could it?

Sofia confidently strode forward, keeping an eye on the map. The warnings were clear. If you got lost here, you would never be found. Her adventurous spirit relished the risk.

The silence was absolute as she reached her first milestone. Her eyes widened at the sight of millions of glowing crystals adorning the cavern walls. She studied the map again.

"The structure and composition of the crystal cavern is so balanced that removing even one crystal will cause a complete collapse, killing all adventurers inside," she read aloud. "Hm, death by a thousand cuts. Poetic." She laughed at herself and then stopped to snap some pictures.

"Amazing," she whispered.

"It really is," a deep, husky voice sounded behind her.

She jumped, spinning around to direct her flashlight to the sound. Her light illuminated a muscled Thryal man with dark eyes that squinted in the sudden brightness.

“Who are you? Wait, are you the general? Do you really grant wishes?” Sofia stammered out, lowering her light to spare his eyes. His ethereal-looking skin shimmered in the light, making him seem almost translucent in the glow of the crystals. He laughed, and Sofia’s face grew warm at the seductive sound.

“Apologies, my lady. I am but an explorer, not an army genie,” he replied.

Sofia huffed. “You scared the shit out of me! And I’m not a lady,” she corrected. “Well, I guess technically I might be, now...” She frowned. “No, not a lady. I’m Sofia. Just another explorer looking for wishes.”

She forcefully closed her mouth, cursing herself for her rambling. Very suave , she thought.

“I’m pleased to meet you, my... Sofia.” Her name on his tongue made her flush. “I’m Zaraq.” He held out a large, callused hand to her. A tingle ran through her fingers as they shook hands.

“I thought shaking hands was a human thing,” Sofia mused as she studied him.

He smiled. It was a beautiful sight to behold, his dimples giving him a youthful visage.

“It is, yes. I guessed you were from Earth.” He seemed pleased with himself.

“Have you come across many people from Earth? I didn’t think many others had traveled through space before...”

Zaraq shook his head. “No, my father used to be a scholar. We traveled a lot growing up, and I used to sneak into his study to read his research. I read about Earth there.”

Sofia laughed. It sounded like something she would have done. “The research didn’t mention how beautiful humans could be, though,” he said with a smirk.

Sofia’s eyes widened, and she gave a startled laugh. “Okay, charmer,” she said, rolling her eyes. Butterflies erupted in her stomach at his answering grin, those dimples once again making an appearance.

She studied him as he did the same to her. His black hair was longer than she was used to, falling to his shoulders, and it was tied back with a leather band. A black polo shirt hugged his masculine figure, giving her a glimpse of his pecs and the outline of his abs. She smirked as she looked at his black cargo pants, which were a perfect match for hers. They had been a gift from Arccoo, and the fabric was strong but impossibly soft and comfortable—perfect for exploring. Upon closer inspection, she could see his eyes were a dark purple. The reflection of the glowing crystals made them look like the night sky.

Sofia grinned as she met his eyes. His brow was furrowed in confusion. He looked back down to her T-shirt, tilting his head slightly as he tried to make out the graphic on it. She held it away from her body to inspect it. It showed a classic outline of a ghost, with the text, Boo unto others as you would have others boo unto you.

“It’s an Earthly saying that’s been changed to, um, ghost-lingo, I guess.”

Zaraq shook his head, and Sofia remembered how she had to explain the concept of ghosts and human beings’ irrational fear of them to Arccoo.

“Never mind, it’s a long story. So, what brings you to the magical catacombs?” she asked.

Zaraq looked uncomfortable for a second and then shook himself. “Same as you, I suppose. Exploring.”

“I assume you’ve heard the stories, then? Have you come for a wish? I call dibs on the first one!” She pointed a finger at him accusingly.

Zaraq laughed. “You believe that stuff?”

“Hey, you never know what could be real. All myths and legends originated somewhere,” Sofia said with a shrug.

Zaraq studied her with new interest. “That’s true, I guess. But no, I just wanted to come see the catacombs. Their beauty is legendary—the real kind.” He winked. “Though no one talks about the smell out there,” he said, pointing a thumb over his shoulder.

“Oh my god, right? I could seriously have done without breathing in fart-smell while huffing and puffing up that hill!” Sofia giggled.

Zaraq snorted at the description. “I was about to break for lunch. Would you like to join me?” he asked.

“Ooh, yes, I’m starving!” They walked to the edge of the cavern, sitting on the hard rock with their backs against the cave wall. Sofia pulled out the lunch that Blitto had prepared for her, and Zaraq rummaged in his backpack for his own. As he dug through it, Sofia thought she spotted the barrel of a blaster. She’d thought the Thryal weapon was only allowed for the royal guard and the army.

She glanced at Zaraq as he pulled out his food and closed his pack. She couldn’t imagine this wide-eyed explorer carrying an illegal weapon, so she shook her head. It must have been something else. She’d used a blaster gun before, but she was by no means an expert.

Sofia settled back, biting into her sandwich. The silence between them was

comfortable as they ate. She stole little glances at Zaraq between bites, catching his gaze on her more than once. It made the butterflies kick up a fuss again in her stomach.

When they finished, Zaraq turned to her.

“How did you end up on Thryal?” he asked, a slight furrow on his brow. She smiled.

“It’s a long story,” she warned.

Zaraq settled back. “Well then, good thing we have nowhere to be.”

Sofia huffed. “Speak for yourself. I’ve only just started exploring the caverns, and I really want to find the hot springs. There’s nothing like a swim in naturally heated water!”

Zaraq’s eyes lit up. “I found them yesterday. They’re amazing, and there are glow worms all over the walls.”

The thought made Sofia’s nose scrunch in disgust, and Zaraq smirked at her.

“Don’t worry, they barely move. And they don’t bite... I think.” He burst out laughing at her expression and jumped up. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

Sofia bit her lip, looking up at him through her lashes as he offered a hand. She could hear Carmen’s voice in her head, warning her about trusting strangers. She had her own map, though, and she’d know if he was leading her astray.

With a shrug to her inner trepidations, she grabbed his hand and let him pull her up. They tidied their packs. Sofia felt herself growing more and more curious about this handsome alien.

Zaraq grinned at her as they finished up. “Come on, there’s a shortcut this way,” he said, pointing toward an ominous-looking tunnel. Sofia hesitated, looking down at her map.

“Here, let me show you.” Zaraq leaned close to her and traced the path on her map. She inhaled subtly, picking up a light sulfur smell from the hot spring and a fresh, woodsy smell underneath it. Along the way, her map noted a caved-in tunnel. Zaraq tapped his finger on the spot.

“I went through that a few days ago and cleared up the rocks. It wasn’t as bad as it says on here.”

Sofia looked at him. He seemed genuine. Fuck it , she decided.

“Okay, let’s go.”

The tunnel was narrow, forcing them close together as they navigated through. Sofia’s heart was racing, and she knew she couldn’t fully blame it on the excitement of her adventure. Just like when they ate, they kept stealing glances at each other in the faint lamplight, blushing every time they caught the other in the act.

“So, how did you end up here?” Sofia asked after a while.

“You first,” Zaraq replied cheekily.

She laughed and bumped her shoulder against his. “Well, it started with a ghost in our grandparents’ house...”

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Zaraq

“Do all humans talk this much?” Zaraq teased.

The girl gasped in outrage. “You’re the one who keeps asking questions!” she replied, shoving his shoulder.

He laughed. “I’m just kidding. I love hearing stories about other planets and people.”

Sofia eyed him. “Me, too. I’m obsessed with collecting stories, the wilder the better.” She smiled at him. Her long ponytail swung as she turned forward. “Oh, look, there’s light up ahead!”

Zaraq followed her into the cave, the smell of sulfur heavy in the air. He instantly started sweating from the heat of the steam floating atop the pools in front of them.

Sofia’s eyes were wide as she cataloged the space. She pulled out a device and started clicking on it. Zaraq leaned closer, seeing the tiny image of the cavern on a screen. An image-capturing device, then, he mused.

“This is incredible,” Sofia murmured as she packed the camera away. “It’s definitely safe to swim in. Right?”

“Well, I haven’t died yet, so I’d say so.” Zaraq smiled at her, placed his bag down, and lifted his shirt over his head in a smooth movement. Sofia quickly averted her eyes but not before he saw a glimmer of interest fill them. Interesting .

Sofia plonked her bag down and dug through her things for a moment. She pulled out a two-piece swimsuit, the bright orange fabric almost making his eyes water.

“I’ll just change back in the tunnel,” she said over her shoulder as she walked back to where they’d entered. Zaraq smirked. He waited until she disappeared before toeing off his boots and dropping his pants.

Left only in his briefs, he walked into the nearest pool. The warmth immediately soaked through his skin, and he lay back against the edge with a contented sigh.

He was glad he’d chosen the “haunted” catacombs for his hideout. In the days he’d been here, he hadn’t seen any ghosts—not that he believed in them—and due to the fear associated with this place, few others ventured in to discover him.

Zaraq’s mind drifted to his current company. Usually, he would have avoided strangers like the plague, but something about Sofia drew him in. He’d watched her hike down to the entrance of the caverns, her face lit up with excitement. He couldn’t help but follow her as she made her way through the caves, and when she found the glowing crystals, he had an undeniable urge to share in her amazement.

“Ugh, I don’t know why they make these so difficult to tie! Could you give me a hand?” Zaraq turned slowly, freezing when he saw Sofia. Her lean body was barely covered in the swimsuit, her arm twisted backward to hold the tie behind her back. He stood, clearing his throat before he could speak.

“Sure, what do you need?”

“Just tie this in a bow for me, please. I can’t reach.” She slipped into the pool and splashed over to him, turning her back.

Zaraq studied the ties and gently took them from her grip. He noticed her shiver when

his knuckle brushed against her back, withholding a shiver himself. Her skin was smooth, and he stole small touches as he tied the strings into a bow. Zaraq found himself standing closer to her than strictly necessary, his heart pounding from the sight of her exposed curves.

Sofia dropped the hair she'd been holding up out of his way and turned around. "Oh my god, this water is amazing!" She dropped to a nearby ledge and leaned back against the edge, spreading her arms out. "I could live here," she said wistfully.

Zaraq laughed, grateful the tension had been broken. "And what if General Kotumbir makes an appearance? Do you really want to meet the legend wearing that?"

She huffed, sitting upright and glaring at him. "General Kotumpa or whatever should be so lucky! I don't imagine he's been getting much down here," she added with a laugh.

Zaraq grinned. "Kotumbir," he corrected. "And he would be lucky, indeed." He raised an eyebrow.

Sofia blushed but shook it off quickly. "So that's his name? Do you know his story? The real one, not the legends and rumors," she added, pointing a finger at him.

Zaraq settled back into his spot. "It's not as interesting as the legends make it out to be, just really sad. He was a general in the Orcan War. The catacombs here are where all his enemies were buried. When he died, he wanted to be buried here so he could keep an eye on them in the afterlife."

"Orcan? Like orcs? I didn't know space had orcs!" Sofia exclaimed eagerly.

Zaraq shook his head. "Orcs? No, it was a war fought for the lands of Orcania. The locals were barbarians. Cannibals and the like. They were mostly independent until

they came across a princess and..." He grimaced. "Well, they ate her. Your brother-in-law's ancestors took that as a sign and marched on them with the full force of the army."

Zaraq glanced at Sofia, taking in her wide eyes filled with unmistakable excitement. She bounced slightly with anxious energy, causing a ripple to travel across the pool.

"How did he die? General Kotumbir, I mean. I assume the takeover was successful if most of them are buried here?"

Zaraq nodded. "That's the funniest part of the story. After the war, he went back home to find his wife had collected multiple lovers in his absence. He reciprocated by creating his own harem, and his wife killed him in a jealous rage." He grinned at the shock on Sofia's face.

"That can't be true. Come on, you're bullshitting me!" She splashed water toward him, just missing his face. Zaraq laughed out loud, dodging the second wave directed at him.

"I swear it's true! My father had his son's personal diaries in his study."

Sofia laughed, ceasing the water-warfare. "That's insane. To survive a war and then be murdered by your wife." She held her side, giggling. "How did she even manage that?"

"Apparently, she stabbed him forty-five times in the groin when they were, you know, getting it on." He winced at the thought, instinctively covering his junk. Sofia noticed, because of course she did, and started giggling again.

Zaraq watched her, a smile tugging at his own lips at her glee. Sadistic glee, but adorable all the same.

The day passed slowly, with the two explorers sharing stories about their adventures. They migrated from the pools when it got too hot and were now sitting against the tunnel wall just outside the cave with the natural springs.

They sat across from each other, their legs almost touching in the narrow tunnel. To Zaraq's disappointment, Sofia had thrown on her strange T-shirt over her swimsuit. Probably for the best, because her body had kept him distracted during their swim.

"I told you my story. What's yours?" Sofia asked, tilting her head curiously. Zaraq tensed. This was part of the reason he avoided people. Well, this, and not knowing who was sent by his previous boss or law enforcement.

"There's not much to tell. I traveled a lot with my parents until they died. When I was older, I was able to travel some for work." Technically, he'd been hunting down people who owed his boss money, but that was still traveling. Sort of.

"I'm sorry. My parents are also dead," Sofia said, a sad look crossing her face. "How old were you?"

"It was a long time ago." He couldn't exactly share that they'd been killed when he was seven and how he had to keep himself alive after that. His methods were unsavory, at best. It didn't help that they'd been living on Rikuus at the time of their murder.

Rikuus was known as crime central for this side of the universe. It was mostly run by crooks and mob bosses, and the law enforcement on the planet was as depraved as many of the criminals. As an orphaned child, he couldn't do much except get involved in the mob life. He'd started as a simple messenger boy, but as he grew, things changed.

He was brought from his reverie by a nudge on his leg. His eyes snapped up, finding

Sofia studying him with a slight frown. He shook his head slightly and smiled sadly at her.

“Anyway, I’ve been alone for a while. It’s nice to have some company,” he said to change the topic.

Sofia bit her lip, eyeing him dubiously before clearly deciding to let it go.

“Adventuring is sometimes a lonely sport,” she replied. They shared a smile, and Zaraq marveled at the familiarity between them.

“Speaking of adventuring,” Sofia said as she jumped up. “Want to explore some more?” She offered a hand to Zaraq, and he relished the softness of her hand as he took it. They returned to the cavern to collect their packs. His heart nearly stopped when Sofia gasped loudly.

“Zaraq! Look!”

He turned cautiously, wondering if his doubts of the paranormal were going to be obliterated. He let out a soft laugh when he saw her at a small basin toward the back corner of the cave. He joined her, their arms brushing as they looked at the pile of jade stones just below the surface of the shallow water.

“Do you think it’s bad luck to take one? I can never decide,” Sofia mused.

Zaraq took a deep breath and dipped his hand into the water, grabbing a smooth stone. They both shared a wide-eyed look and then studied the cave anxiously. When nothing happened, Zaraq dropped the stone into her hand.

“Let’s hope the general’s spirit doesn’t live in these,” he joked.

Sofia swatted him at the comment, but the corners of her mouth tilted upward. She consulted her map, showing him the route she wanted to take. They would be able to spend the night in the largest catacomb, where most of the Orcan barbarians were buried.

As they set off, Sofia spoke softly. “Thank you. I love taking little mementos from my travels, but I had to leave most of them back on Earth.”

“Did you do this a lot back there? Chase spirits and other nonexistent creatures?” he asked cheekily.

Sofia shoved him and laughed. “They do exist! Well, not that I’ve found any documented proof. It’s part of why I was so keen to explore space.”

“What happened?”

“Oh, you know, just a spectacularly failed career in ghost hunting. I bought all this tech, traveled the world, and just got ridiculed by the so-called professionals.” She made a strange movement with two fingers on each hand and rolled her eyes. “It’s a seriously competitive and cruel industry.”

Zaraq’s mouth tightened. He couldn’t imagine anyone disregarding this charming, funny, and gorgeous female. The thought weirdly filled him with anger on her behalf.

“Anyway, I got to see a lot of cool places. I met some amazing people—all living, unfortunately,” she added with a smirk. “And I have a bank of weird and wonderful stories. It’s my party trick.” She tapped her forehead with a finger and grinned at him.

“Well, I could probably give you a run for your money on that one. I’ve collected my own share of stories on my travels.”

Sofia raised an eyebrow and motioned with her hand for him to continue. He shrugged.

“You can’t make a statement like that and not deliver! Come on, tell me the craziest one,” she implored.

“Fine, fine. When I was four, my parents and I visited a planet called Triensi. It was my first off-world trip, and I was so excited. I might have thrown up on the trip there,” he said, laughing at himself. “My father wanted to visit the old libraries there, so we stayed in the librarian’s house. What we didn’t know was that it had been deserted because of ‘rogue spirits’ that were causing havoc.”

“Ooh, a poltergeist! Fun!”

“That’s what you call vengeful spirits?” Zaraq frowned. It sounded like something you could eat. “Anyway, so one night, I couldn’t sleep, and I wandered around the halls. The clock struck midnight, and the next second I was back in my room.”

Sofia frowned. “That’s it? That’s your best story?”

Zaraq shrugged, mildly offended. He’d thought she’d like a “ghost” story.

“Bah, you were probably just sleepwalking! Come on, tell me another. What’s the best place you’ve visited?”

Zaraq stared at her for a few seconds, taking in the glint in her eyes and the tilt of her head. He felt lucky to be the sole owner of her attention, despite his apparently shit story.

“Best place... It would have to be Yordii. The whole planet is just wild nature, and the inhabitants are so interesting. They have skin that changes color according to their

moods. It's fascinating."

"Mood ring skin? That seems invasive. It's bad enough that I can never control my face." Sofia laughed.

Zaraq joined her. He'd noticed that whatever she was thinking was broadcast on her face, and he found that refreshing. For most of his life, he'd been surrounded by people who hid every thought and emotion behind a steel door.

"I think it's good. Hiding your thoughts and emotions just leads to it being bottled up, and that's not good for anyone," he mused.

"If you say so, Mr. Poker Face," Sofia replied with a cheeky grin. Zaraq assumed it was a teasing insult, though he didn't know what a poker face was. He playfully scowled at her.

"Ooh, watch out, you're showing emotion!" Sofia smirked, extremely amused at her own joke. Zaraq couldn't help but grin back. She was unlike anyone he'd ever met... and he really liked it.

As they walked, Zaraq and Sofia shared stories of their adventures. Zaraq had to work hard to keep his story vague enough to hide his sordid history, but he found himself wanting to share everything with her.

After exploring the cave and reading the inscriptions on the graves, they set up their bedrolls in a warm corner. Zaraq shared some of the liquor he'd taken from Rikuus before his escape, and they spoke until late in the night. When they woke, Sofia seemed thoughtful.

"Are you staying here much longer? What do you have planned?"

Zaraq frowned, not sure where she was going with this. In all honesty, he didn't have any plans beyond staying out of reach of anyone who may be looking for him. "I'm not sure, really. Why do you ask?"

Sofia seemed shy. In the short time he'd known her, even though it felt like they'd known each other for years, it was very uncharacteristic.

She bit her lip. "Well, you mentioned last night that you haven't been to the capital before. I was wondering if you wanted to join me when I go back to the annex?" She said the last part in a rush.

Zaraq stayed silent as he considered. He couldn't explain it, but he wanted to spend more time with her. And, though he was born to Thryal parents, he had never been to the capital. And the annex was protected by royal guards. If he could keep his history secret, what could it hurt?

Sofia spoke before he could reply. "I'm hoping to go on more explorations around the planet, and like I said yesterday... Adventuring can get lonely. Maybe you could come back with me, meet my family, and then we go on some adventures?" She smiled hopefully at him.

He couldn't say no to that beautiful face.

"I'd like that."

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Sofia

Sofia squinted through the sunlight, trying to gauge how much further it would be to the palace where Arccoo and her sisters lived. Zaraq sat next to her, fidgeting. They had spent two incredible days getting to know each other and exploring the catacombs. Being around him felt so natural, despite the fuss her insides kicked up every time he looked at her with those smoldering purple eyes.

“Don’t worry. My family’s great. They’ll love you!” she said, beaming at him. When he agreed to come back with her, she’d been over the moon. She couldn’t wait to introduce him to her sisters.

“I’m not worried,” Zaraq replied, looking very worried.

Sofia huffed and turned back. “Oh, look, there it is! Blitto, can’t we go any faster?”

Blitto snorted, throwing a glare over his shoulder. “First you want to stay away forever. Now you can’t wait to get back?” he asked, his rough voice raised over the hum of the transport vehicle.

Sofia laughed. She’d dragged Blitto place after place, begging him for stories about the most haunted locations she could find.

“You loved it,” she said with a cheeky smile. She only got a grunt in reply, which she definitely took as a yes

They finally docked at the annex. After some quick introductions, Carmen insisted

that the sisters catch up. She waved Zaraq over, introducing him to the Thryal equivalent of a butler.

“Could you set him up in a room near Sofia?” she asked. The butler nodded, leading Zaraq away.

“Z, I’ll meet up with you a bit later!” Sofia waved over her shoulder as Carmen dragged her along.

“Tell me everything. Have you eaten?” Carmen waved Arccoo over. “Could you get us some snacks and coffee and meet us in our bedroom?”

Sofia stifled a laugh at the way Carmen blinked up at Arccoo innocently. She’d been on the receiving end of that look, and she knew it was impossible to say no to her sister.

Arccoo rolled his eyes and nodded. He gave Carmen a quick kiss and winked at Sofia.

“Only you could boss around the literal prince of this place,” Sofia said. They made their way through the halls to Carmen’s bedroom. Elena was waiting, and Sofia hugged her awkward little sister tightly.

Before Sofia could say anything, Carmen nudged Elena. “Guess who brought home a friend ?”

Sofia groaned, but she couldn’t hold back a smile. Elena raised an eyebrow, her keen eyes catching Sofia’s expression.

She dropped onto her bed, her hair fanning out around her. Her sisters followed, facing her on their sides.

“Well?” Elena asked, never one for beating around the bush.

“Ugh, well... His name is Zaraq. I was exploring the catacombs by the marsh, and there was this beautiful cave, and boom, there he was.” Sofia sighed dreamily. “He’s gorgeous and funny, and we talked for like two days straight.”

“I can vouch for him being gorgeous,” Carmen said with a cheeky grin.

Elena shoved her lightly on the shoulder. “How come I didn’t get to meet him?” she asked, put out.

“Because you weren’t the wonderful, amazing sister who went to meet their transport as they arrived,” Carmen replied smugly.

Elena rolled her eyes. “I’m sorry that I haven’t been keeping watch for her to come back every second of the day.” Elena’s voice was thick with sarcasm, and Carmen scoffed.

Sofia’s head swung between them like a tennis match. She knew this could go on for ages if she didn’t put a stop to it, and she had a lot to tell them.

“Geez, calm it, sisters!” She held up her hands. “Can we focus on me again, please?”

For one terrifying second, she was on the receiving end of two matching glares. Carmen’s face softened first.

“Let’s all have dinner together tonight, and we can get to know him.”

The sky had just started to darken when the five of them walked down to Arccoo’s chosen restaurant. After spending the day with her sisters, Sofia was excited to talk to Zaraq and have her family get to know him better.

“Whoa,” Sofia muttered as they walked into the small restaurant. The interior was a mixture of marble and velvet fabrics, creating a luxurious feel. A musician sat in the corner of the room, playing on a dark green instrument that resembled a piano.

No one else was in the restaurant, and Sofia wondered for a second if Arccoo had booked the whole place for them. Her question was answered when she saw the lone made-up table in the center of the dining area. She shared a wide-eyed look with Elena. Fancy.

A waiter decked in technology walked over. “Right this way, Your Highness,” he said, leading them to the table.

“What’s all this?” Elena asked, pointing to the waiter’s tech ensemble. Sofia and Carmen exchanged exasperated looks. Their youngest sister was obsessed with the advanced technology of Thryal.

The waiter shared a look with Arccoo, and he nodded. With the prince’s permission given, he started describing each of the cutting-edge gizmos.

“Come sit next to me,” Sofia whispered to Zaraq, leading him to a chair. He’d barely said two words since they’d arrived. “I’m sorry. I know they’re a bit much...” She bit her lip. She hadn’t really thought of how intimidating it could be to meet her whole family.

Zaraq smiled and tugged on her ponytail. “They’re great. I just feel bad imposing.”

“Don’t be silly. I want you to get to know them,” Sofia replied with a shy smile. Carmen graciously sat down on her other side with Arccoo at the head of the table. Elena eventually dragged herself away from the waiter and plonked down next to Arccoo.

“I’ve taken the liberty of preordering some of our best dishes,” Arccoo said. “I hope that’s fine with everyone?” A chorus of yesses followed and he gestured to the waiter. Shortly after, the first course arrived with a melody of scents and a large bottle of Thryal wine.

Arccoo turned to Zaraq. “We’d better watch these three with the Thryal wine. Their tolerance is still building,” he said with a laugh.

Zaraq smiled. “More for us,” he replied, immediately earning three identical glares. He held his hands up in surrender, and everyone laughed. They all tucked in, and Elena turned to Zaraq.

“So, you’re Thryal, right? Or am I being ignorant in assuming that because of your skin?” She pulled a piece of bluish flatbread from a platter and popped a piece in her mouth. “Oh my god, that’s good.”

Zaraq laughed, grabbing a piece for himself. “Not at all. We’re quite unique with our glittering gray skin,” he said with a nod to Arccoo. “My parents were Thryal, yes.”

Sofia butted in. “His dad was a scholar. How cool is that? They traveled lots when he was young.”

“Oh, yeah? What kind of research did he do?” Arccoo asked.

Zaraq shifted uncomfortably. “A variety of things, really. He mostly focused on paranormal and supernatural events. That’s where I got my fascination from, even though I’m undecided on whether Sofia’s ghosts really exist.”

He winked at Sofia, who gave him a playful glare in response. They paused as the waiter removed their empty plates and brought an array of dishes for the main course. Sofia breathed in the delicious aromas. She was slowly getting used to the weird

colors in Thryal food. It was worth it for the amazing culinary experience.

Carmen snorted as she dished up a serving for Arccoo. “You’d have thought differently if you’d been in our house with Arccoo around,” she said.

“Sofia told me a bit about that,” Zaraq said with a laugh. “Though I’m still confused as to how you were invisible?” His dark violet eyes focused on Arccoo.

Arccoo looked confused. “It’s basic light-emission tech,” he replied, frowning. “It’s part of the Thryal schooling system.”

Zaraq cleared his throat. “Oh, right, of course,” he stammered. “I guess I must have skipped that class.”

Sofia laughed. “Ooh, we have a rebel in our midst!”

Zaraq shot her a grateful smile and took a large bite of the meaty skewer-like dish. Sofia followed suit, her taste buds exploding with flavor.

It’s cute that he’s this nervous, she thought.

As they ate, Elena and Arccoo got involved in a detailed discussion of the serving tech of the restaurant. Sofia leaned closer to Zaraq.

“What’s this dish?” she asked, hoping to distract him.

He frowned. “I’m not sure. I think it’s tuddo?”

Arccoo looked up from his discussion with Elena. “Oh, it’s called strolli. The meat comes from an animal similar to a cow on Earth, and it’s cooked with local spices and vinegar.”

“Oh-kay, thank you...” Sofia said, frowning at Arccoo. Couldn’t he let Zaraq answer for himself?

Carmen picked up on the tension and leaned forward to change the subject. “So, Zaraq, Sofia told us you’ve done a lot of traveling for work. What do you do?”

Zaraq shifted again, and Sofia bit her lip. Was he really this uncomfortable around her family? This didn’t bode well.

“I, uh, I’m actually between jobs at the moment,” he answered evasively.

Carmen frowned. “What did you do before, then?”

Zaraq took a deep breath. “Mostly security work,” he replied.

Sofia kicked Carmen under the table. Carmen shot her a wide-eyed look, and Sofia frowned at her. Luckily, Elena jumped in.

“How did you guys meet? Sofia was very secretive,” she said with a wink.

Zaraq’s shoulders eased slightly, and he smiled. “Well, I was wandering around the catacombs, hoping to find the famed general and make a wish,” he started.

“Oh, stop, you were not!” Sofia interrupted, and they both laughed.

“No, I wasn’t, but I did get what I would’ve wished for,” Zaraq replied, smirking. “Your sister looks good in a swimsuit.”

Carmen, Elena, and Arccoo immediately groaned. “TMI!” Elena shouted. Sofia felt her face warming and swatted Zaraq’s arm. Zaraq grinned. Sofia bit her lip to hide a smile, the crinkles at the corners of Zaraq’s eyes making her heart flutter.

“He stalked me like a weirdo and then snuck up on me in a cave. It was very romantic,” Sofia quipped. “Then he offered to show me a shortcut, and I was sure I was going to be brutally murdered.” Laughter mixed with the clinking of plates as the waiter cleared up again.

“Had you been to the catacombs before?” Elena asked, gulping a large sip of Thryal wine. She scoffed at Arccoo’s raised eyebrow.

“No, but I got there before Sofia arrived, so I had some time to explore,” Zaraq replied. He rested his arm on the back of Sofia’s chair. The familiarity of the action sent a burst of heat through her.

“Enough time to clear out a bunch of rocks.” Sofia grinned at him and poked one of his impressive biceps. The rock-hard muscle flexed slightly under her touch, leaving her slightly breathless.

“Oh?” Elena asked. “How long were you there?”

“Uh, not long,” Zaraq replied. “I’ve been traveling for quite some time so it was nice to chill out in one place.”

“Really? Where have you traveled?” Elena asked excitedly.

“Oh, I traveled around the Govian system for a few weeks and other random places.”

Arccoo leaned forward. “The Govian system? They’re our diplomatic allies,” he said for Sofia and Elena’s benefit. “Did you visit the Lopiin temple?”

Zaraq frowned, and Sofia had the sense that Zaraq had never heard of the place.

“I didn’t, no. There were too many other places to visit,” he said, avoiding eye

contact. He grabbed his glass and downed half of it.

“Really?” Arccoo asked, confusion marring his features. “It’s the most notable landmark on this side of the galaxy. I would’ve thought an explorer wouldn’t miss it,” he added, as if to himself.

Zaraq shifted, removing his arm from Sofia’s chair. He crossed his arms almost defensively, visibly uncomfortable. Sofia couldn’t take it anymore.

“Uh, what’s with the cross-examination?” Sofia snapped.

Arccoo flinched back, surprised.

Carmen placed her hand on Sofia’s arm to calm her. “We’re just getting to know him, sis.”

“You’re being weird about it.” Sofia frowned at the three of them accusingly.

Zaraq cleared his throat. “Uh, Elena, your sister told me you’re an engineer on Earth. What does that entail?”

Everyone loosened a tense breath, and Elena glanced at Sofia before answering. Sofia stewed all through dessert while the rest of her family made light conversation. It was hard to hide her disappointment about how uncomfortable the dinner was. On the walk back, she pulled Zaraq aside and apologized endlessly.

Later, when Sofia was lying in bed, she thought back over the evening. Was she too quick to anger? At the moment, it had seemed like her sisters and Arccoo were attacking Zaraq. She ran through the conversation in her head. If she were being honest with herself, he had actually been evasive and secretive. She was all about a mysterious man, but wasn’t he taking it a bit far?

She fell into a restless sleep, for once feeling dread instead of excitement for their exploration the next day.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:25 am

Zaraq

The two-person transport pod landed in a small clearing that seemed to have been designed to accommodate the craft. During their descent, Zaraq marveled at the sprawling woodland below them. Despite the busy lifestyle found in the capital, Thryal was very much a place for exploration.

It was as though the citizens understood that big cities and industrialization were important to furthering a species, but maintaining a connection with the natural world was crucial for the individual. He found that comforting.

Sofia pressed a few icons on the control dash and the door to the pod opened. Fresh, sweet air flooded the cockpit, and Zaraq breathed it in deeply. For the next few hours, they would be wandering the forest together, searching out the site of a ruined Thryal monastery built in the feudal days of the planet's early life. It was said that the souls of the monks who worshiped there could still be seen meditating in the moonlight.

"Do you have your pack?" Sofia asked. Her tone was uncharacteristically business-like.

"I do," Zaraq answered, slinging it over his shoulder. "But you knew that since you're the one who loaded the pod before we left." He smiled, hoping she would recognize the sparkle of humor in his eye and return the expression.

It would be nice to know that she is looking forward to having a good time with me , he thought.

She grabbed her own pack and got out of her seat without even looking at him.

Being ignored felt like the nerves in his chest were being tied into knots. Had he done something wrong? Her demeanor toward him had changed since the uncomfortable dinner with her family. He could have done a better job of masking his discomfort with what even he had to admit were rather harmless questions, but he wasn't ready to discuss his past with anyone yet. He wasn't sure he ever would be.

Following the dinner, Sofia made all kinds of excuses for her sisters and brother-in-law. "They think they have to protect me because I have a habit of committing super hard to things," she said. "I mean, the second the opportunity to leave Earth presented itself, I jumped at the chance, only to panic a bit on the trip here. I bet they think I'm jumping into a thing with you so quickly."

"A thing ?" Zaraq had asked, tickled by the phrase.

She fluttered her hands in the air as if shooing away a bothersome insect. "Never mind. I'm being dumb. They were being dumb." She stopped then, and Zaraq noticed her eyes shift from her feet, to him, and back again.

She wants to ask me something but is too afraid , he worried.

"It was fine," he told her, desperate to put her mind at ease. "They were just curious."

Dodging the questions of two royals and an extraordinarily intelligent woman was difficult enough. He didn't think he'd manage to keep anything from her.

If she asks me , he admitted to himself, I will tell her. Everything.

Now, noticing how she avoided eye contact with him and kept an odd distance between them, he became increasingly concerned that the conversation he desperately

wanted to avoid was soon to be unavoidable.

I'm sorry , he silently apologized. I'm sorry that you're going to have to see me differently.

Sofia's body language changed the moment their eyes found the rocky remains of the small monastery. Instead of being perched atop a cliff, as they'd both imagined, it was built into the bottom of a cliff face itself. The overall structure of the place was crumbling and pocked with decay, but the spirit of what the building was remained.

"Oh my god," Sofia said in a stunned whisper. She gently gripped Zaraq's right biceps. Her touch sent ease through his entire body. "Can you believe it?" she asked, her mouth hanging open. "It was built thousands of years ago, and here we are, stepping into history."

"It's smaller than I expected," Zaraq said. "But still beautiful."

"Beautiful?" Sofia chided. "The place is creepy as shit. I love it! Let's go inside."

Laughing, Zaraq followed her to the entrance of the ruined holy place. The tunnels beyond the deteriorated entrance were deep, dark, and cavernous. The air slowly flowing from it was damp and sour.

"Feels like we're peering into a dead thing's mouth," Zaraq said.

"Yeah, that's what blows about haunted places. They always stink."

Sofia was, of course, the first to cross the threshold. The beam of her flashlight served as a beacon, chasing away shadows just enough for them to avoid getting surprised by some sleeping predator. It did not, however, protect them from unsteady ground.

A few feet into the main entryway, Sofia's foot snagged on a stone and she almost went face-first into a boulder, but Zaraq was able to hook his arm around her midsection in time. He held her tightly with both arms to help lift her out of the divot. Placing her on a more even surface, he felt her shiver.

"Are you cold?" he asked. "I can give you the jacket from my pack."

"No," she said, almost breathless. "I'm fine. Thank you."

He smirked in the dark. She wasn't being cold and distant like before. That was the tone of excited nervousness. Holding her like that, with her form fitting perfectly against his own, had been a thrill for him as well. It was comforting to think she was affected by it.

There were etchings on the walls that neither of them understood. Zaraq tried to find corresponding diagrams in the guide they brought with them, but the carvings were far too weathered to match them with anything on the pages. Instead, they made up their own stories.

"That is Puroo the lazy," Sofia said, pointing at what could have been a woman lounging on a piece of furniture. "She thinks she's better than everyone else just because her husband is a god and people have to do whatever they say. Typical god-wife complex."

"And this," Zaraq said, approaching markings that suggested a very skinny person with long limbs. "This is Skirak the lanky."

"What's his story?" Sofia asked.

Zaraq thought about it. "He stole food from the gods and was punished by never being allowed to eat anything ever again."

“Jeepers,” Sofia said. “Gods are such dicks. Aren’t they?”

As the monastery caverns grew even darker with the setting sun, Sofia suggested they make their way back to camp for the night.

“You want to sleep here?” he asked, assuming they would be flying back to the annex.

“Of course!” Sofia replied. “How else are we going to know if the stories about the ghost monks are true if we don’t stick around?”

Her pack had a pair of sleeping bags, a fire starter, and cans of rations. Watching her light the small bundle of wood beneath the stars triggered a memory of his younger days.

A cold hand pulled at his heart. Despite how much time he spent on his own, he knew that people who care about each other share things. Sofia had told him all about her failed career as a ghost hunter, about the loss of her parents, and the trip across an endless sea of blackness. Wasn’t it wrong to keep his own past a secret?

Not if I want to keep her safe , he decided.

They ate, laughed, and shared more stories about other haunted spots around Thryal. Seeing the joy with which she discussed such things made him want to spend as much time as he could exploring them with her. She had an infectious enthusiasm, and he’d been bitten by the paranormal bug.

They slept beneath the Thryal sky. Zaraq dreamed of his childhood and his life moving from place to place. He saw blood and heard screams echoing through eternity.

Jolting awake, he noticed that it was still dark. Sofia slept peacefully beside him, her breathing easy and rhythmic. He moved to reach over and caress her hair.

His hand dripped with blood.

“Look what you did, Z-boy,” a deep, craggy voice said from the darkness of the trees surrounding them. “I guess that beast inside you got out.”

Zaraq clamped his eyes closed and counted to ten. When he opened them again, the blood was gone. He scanned the trees. No one was there.

As he lay back down and turned on his side, he realized these ruins were haunted but not by peaceful monks. The only ghosts around here were the ones he brought with him.

The flight back to the capital was an uncomfortable one. The roles between Zaraq and Sofia had completely flipped. She was her usual talkative, comedic, and bubbly self while he remained quiet and introspective. A pit had been growing deeper and deeper in his stomach, and if he wanted to keep himself from falling into it, he needed to come clean about his past.

“You good?” Sofia asked as they approached the landing platforms bordering the city.

The question startled him, and he couldn’t hide it. “Uh...yeah,” he said. “Didn’t sleep all that well.”

“Oh, me neither.” She arched her back, stretching. “There must’ve been a root or something digging into my back. Still managed to sleep through the night, though. I guess that’s why Carmen is the princess and I’m not.”

Zaraq tilted his head, confused.

Sofia sighed. “Duh. You don’t have the story of the princess and the pea all the way out here. Never mind.”

They went to Sofia’s quarters upon their return. Both of them were exhausted and didn’t feel much like making conversation with the family. When the door shut behind them, the silence threatened to crush Zaraq.

“You can just throw your stuff in the corner,” she said. “I’ll shower real quick. Then we can get some dinner. Are you hungry?” Her eyes caught his, and he saw that she’d noticed something was wrong.

Instead of acting concerned, Sofia huffed. “Jesus, man. What the hell is up with you?”

Zaraq didn’t answer. He only blinked, trying to find somewhere else to look in the room rather than at her.

“No, cut that shit out. Don’t ignore me.” Sofie stomped into his eyeline. She folded her arms and scowled better than anyone in the history of scowling.

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” she said. “A lot of somethings based on the way you acted at dinner the other night. Spill it. All of it. Now .”

Zaraq’s mind spun in a million different directions, unable to find a proper place to start. Sensing her growing displeasure, he decided to open his mouth and see what came out.

“I like you,” he said. “More than I thought I could like anyone. That... disturbs me.”

“Why?” Sofia asked. “What’s so terrible about me that you’re disturbed by the thought of liking me?”

“No,” Zaraq said. He stepped forward to touch her shoulders, but she stepped out of the way, deciding to sit on the foot of her massive bed. He noticed she did not offer him a place next to her. So, he had a seat in the chair near the balcony window.

“You don’t disturb me,” he continued. “You dazzle and amaze me. Your love for history and folklore, your attachment to your sisters, your bravery. It’s all so incredible to me. You, Sofia from Earth, are a truly spellbinding person.”

She uncrossed her arms and rubbed her legs. “Then what aren’t you telling me?”

He almost stopped right there. He almost got up and left her behind forever just so he could protect himself from the shame he knew he would feel once she saw the real him.

No more running , he thought. It’s time to plant your feet and take root.

“I didn’t grow up the way you did,” he began. “I didn’t have any brothers or sisters to play with. By the time I was old enough to remember them, my parents were already gone, killed because of some gambling debts. I had no one.”

He stopped, deciding that wasn’t quite right. He corrected himself.

“People were looking out for me. But they either bailed when raising a young one got too expensive, or got mixed up with the wrong crowd themselves. You should feel lucky that your sister found the prince. The rest of the galaxy isn’t quite as nice and stable as it is here. Most of us have to take any job we can to make it through the day. And a lot of those jobs aren’t very nice.”

He couldn't make himself meet her gaze as he continued. "During my teenage years, I ran away from a foster couple. They were nice enough, I guess, but I was a wild kid. I couldn't stay in one spot for too long. As you can imagine, the galaxy isn't built to accommodate young people with no money. That meant I needed work. I found a job in a casino."

Sofia didn't say anything, but she made a humming noise that told him she was, at least, still listening.

"The owner was a bastard. He manipulates people by reminding them how nice he was for giving them a job and guilting them into doing more and more for them. For a long time, I didn't care. He was paying me to fix a few tables and run messages. So what if he wasn't the nicest guy in the universe? I could afford clothes and food and my own room."

He could feel her staring at him. He rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably and cleared his throat.

"After a few years, he bumped me up to security. That's when I learned how to hurt people. The boss would suspect someone was cheating the house and he would tell me to make sure they never came back again. That was his way of ordering me to break their legs. Then he'd laugh and say, 'Wow, Z-boy! You got a beast in you!' Like it was my idea to hurt those people."

He sighed. "Another security guy and I wanted to go freelance, start our own security business. Working for someone else wasn't sitting right with me anymore. The boss found out about it, and had my friend killed. He framed me for it. The law has been after me ever since."

Zaraq rubbed his face, drained by the info dump. He'd always known if he ever told anyone, it would come erupting forward like a geyser. What he didn't expect was

how fatigued he would be after.

Still, he had more to say.

“That’s why I couldn’t answer all those questions at dinner,” Zaraq said. “I’m always on the move, and it can be hard to keep my story straight. Well, that’s only part of it. I also worry that knowing what I’m running from might put people in danger. That’s stupid, I know. But it’s true.”

Sofia stared at him, her jaw slack and her eyes glistening. “Get out,” she said.

Those two words slid between his ribs like a sizzling blade. “Sofia...” he started to say, but she cut him off.

“You lied to me,” she said. “You lied, and I don’t want to see you right now.”

He started to protest, but she screamed at him to leave.

Honoring her wishes, he lifted his bag and walked out the door.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:25 am

Sofia

She took her dinner in her quarters. She didn't feel like sitting down at a long, fancy table with her perfect sister and brother-in-law dressed in those ornate and gorgeous dinner clothes they sometimes wore.

Throughout her decades of existence, Sofia had never been able to develop a poker face of any kind. Whatever she happened to be feeling at any given moment got automatically telegraphed through the lines of her forehead, the creases bordering her nose and mouth, and the lights of her eyes. They would notice something was wrong the instant she walked into the room, and the last thing she wanted right then was to answer more of their stupid questions.

Questions got me into this , she thought, glowering at her socked feet.

That wasn't fair. Her family was just making polite conversation. They were getting to know someone new, someone she cared a lot about. Was it their fault the man they were talking to was nothing but a bunch of lies and secrets disguised as an attractive, intelligent, and interesting person?

"No," she answered her mental question out loud and wiggled her toes angrily.

Swinging her legs off of the bed and leaving her dinner to get cold, and probably soggy, next to the spot where she'd been sitting, Sofia stood up and stomped to the balcony like a ticked-off toddler. She swung the doors open and stepped out into another beautiful Thryal night.

Leaning on the banister, she noticed it was one of those bright nights. Just like on Earth, the moon must have been a bit closer to the planet than usual, reflecting the baffling array of stars and other luminescent celestial bodies toward the surface of this alien planet that she was becoming more and more comfortable with calling home.

The sky was deep violet, casting the mountains bordering the capital in an indigo shade. Sofia huffed an annoyed sigh. The shade of the purple sky resembled Zaraq's eyes perfectly. How could she be so mad at him but still miss him?

The lights of the many towers rising from the ground had a golden yellow glow, as if the interiors were lit by candles reflecting off of polished treasure. The engine trail of a transport pod left behind an ethereal lilac trail that evaporated like mist over the emerald lake. Sofia watched as the engines shrank in the distance and blinked out of existence, wondering if Zaraq was on board, exiting from her life as quickly as he'd arrived.

This would have been a perfect night to spend with him—a cozy night in, where they could continue to bond through dumb conversations young couples have when their guards are starting to come down and the embarrassing quirks they keep tucked away in fear of judgment begin leaking out.

In her experience, that was when a fling, or a “thing,” became something real. When you can show someone else what the mirror sees, that is when you know they are special.

Isn't that what Zaraq did? Sofia wondered, tracking a satellite blinking through space. He took off his mask, and you threw him away.

She squeezed the railing until her palms burned.

“It’s not the same,” she said aloud.

Pushing herself back from the edge of the balcony, she went back inside, closing the doors behind her. Locked away from a stunning scene made it easier to let her anger out.

She gave herself permission to feel everything burning its way through her. All of the anger over being lied to, the shock over his violent past, the betrayal for being led to believe he was something he wasn’t, the guilt for not giving him a chance.

“No!” she said, slamming a fist on the dresser. “I have nothing to feel guilty about.”

He kept this from me. He lied to me. If anyone should be feeling guilty right now, it’s him.

So what if she didn’t give him a chance? Zaraq said it himself. Involving her could get her hurt. Not only did he lie to her, but he put her life in danger. If space gangsters work the same way Earth gangsters do in movies, his enemy was likely to go after anyone Zaraq had ever known.

How dare he jeopardize her like that?

How dare he let her get close to him?

How dare —

There was a knock at the door.

Sofia wasn’t aware that she’d been pacing, but the intrusion of the knock stopped her from burning a hole in the floor.

“Sof?” It was Carmen. She was using her gentle, motherly voice.

Sofia snarled. “What?” she yelled. Besides not having a poker face, she didn’t have a poker voice, either. She was pissed and didn’t care who knew it.

“Are you okay?” Carmen asked through the door.

“Yes!” Sofia lied. Her face felt hot. “Why do you ask?”

After a short beat, Carmen replied in that singsong, consoling tone parents use with fussy eaters. “Well, you didn’t come down for dinner, and you’re yelling at me right now.”

“I am not... yelling !” Sofia yelled.

Carmen dropped the matronly act. “Girl, you need to open this door before I have my husband order one of his guards to open it!”

She yanked the door to her quarters open to find both Carmen and Arccoo standing there. Her older sister had a hand on one hip and daggers poised to fly from her eyes. The prince looked frightened, as if he were about to witness Thryal’s first act of sororicide. Carmen held a bottle of wine, and Arccoo had three empty glasses. They were both wearing those robes Sofia was brooding about earlier.

“Both of you?” Sofia exclaimed. “Seriously?”

Giving up, she shambled over to her bed and threw herself down in defeat. “Can this night get any worse?”

“Perhaps I should leave,” Arccoo offered from the hall.

Charging through the door like she owned the place, Carmen answered. “No, you can stay. Isn’t that right, Sof?”

“Yeah. Sure. Whatever and stuff,” Sofia answered from the confines of her comfortable bedspread. “Just pour me a lot of that booze.”

“What’s going on?” Carmen asked. “And why do you have a problem with my husband?”

“Really,” Arccoo said, “I can leave and let you two—”

She rolled over on her back to stare at the ceiling. “No. No,” she said with a huff. She rubbed her face hard enough to scrape away some skin and then sat up straight, ignoring the dizziness caused by the blood rushing from one end of the body to the other. “It’s just that you two are everything I don’t want to see right now.”

Arccoo set the glasses down on the table beside the dresser as Carmen handed him the wine bottle without turning away from her kid sister. “This is my third, and final, offer to leave,” he said, popping the cork.

“Just pour,” Sofia said.

“C’mon, girlie,” Carmen said. “Talk to us.”

When the first glass was filled to the brim, the prince brought it over. “Your medicine, first-sister-in-law.”

Sofia thanked him and downed half the glass. The alcohol started working its magic the instant it reached her stomach. “May the gods bless alien wine,” she said.

“Okay,” Carmen said, accepting her own drink from her husband. “What’s got you so

worked up?”

It was Sofia’s turn for an info dump. She let the wine do the talking, providing as much detail about her time with Zaraq and the story he told her as she could muster. It was like speaking on autopilot. She didn’t censor herself or correct any slight inconsistencies. By the time she was done, Arccoo was pouring her a second drink.

“In conclusion,” Sofia said, a pleasant lightheadedness taking shape. “When you met a sexy alien—sorry, I called your husband sexy—the secret he kept from you was that he was a fucking prince. When I met a sexy alien, the secret he kept from me was that he used to hurt people for a living and was on the run from a bunch of space cops. Mazel tov,” she said, downing the remainder of her wine.

Carmen and Arccoo sat silently at the little table across from the bed, appearing to be mulling over the story. The prince twirled the maroon liquid in his slender glass. “Did he say who this boss was?”

“I didn’t ask,” Sofia answered, cringing at the memory of kicking Zaraq out without any follow-up questions. “What does it matter?”

Arccoo frowned at his drink. “I’ve met my fair share of dangerous businessmen while serving as an ambassador. From what I gather, some hold a tighter grip on their grudges than others.”

“Meaning?” Sofia asked.

“Meaning that he might have been right to keep this from you,” Arccoo told her.

Carmen visibly tensed as if noticing a snake hiding in the corner. She let go of her glass and folded her hands in the ornate lap of that royal wardrobe of hers. “Please let him elaborate before losing your temper,” she said carefully, the words sounding

neutral and flat.

“You know I’m almost drunk. Right?” Sofia said. “That can mean bad things for someone who says the wrong thing.”

Arccoo cleared his throat. “Please do not misunderstand. He was wrong to get involved with you to such an extent. I am, by no means, defending his decision to bring you into—as your sister might say—his drama . But if this boss has a vendetta against him, simply knowing of his existence may make you a target of his wrath.”

Sofia understood what her brother-in-law was trying to say but wasn’t so sure she liked it. By his logic, she and Zaraq never should have gotten to know each other. She’d thought the same thing before they showed up, but hearing it reinforced like that annoyed her. Why couldn’t they be calling her out for not trying to find out more about the situation? Why were they confirming her worst fear?

“Then again,” Carmen began. Sofia turned to her sister with a quiet need to hear a counterpoint that didn’t make her feel quite so bad.

“Then again, you live in the annex of the Thryal capital. You are now related to a prince—a highly regarded ambassador and a gifted keeper of the peace. If some interplanetary law enforcement comes sniffing around, you are in the position to defend Zaraq if he was framed. And if some petty crime lord shows up looking for revenge, you are protected by an entire military.”

Sofia stared at her sister. She had wanted the counterargument, but this was more than she had expected.

Carmen leaned forward, gazing at her sister somberly. “I guess what really matters is... Are you willing to forgive him and fight for him?”

The following morning, Sofia needed to destress. She woke up with the early tremors of a hangover and decided to get ahead of it. After being hit with such a bomb the night before, she was not about to let herself lie in bed feeling bad about herself. She showered, hydrated, and made her way to work out.

Walking through the doors of the recreational gym, she saw warriors sparring, runners dashing from side to side, and her super intelligent baby sister punching and kicking the crap out of a holographic pummel dummy. The hologram was designed to resemble a limbless dummy, similar to the ones found back on Earth, but with a polite smiling face that appeared to love the abuse it was taking.

“Great job!” it exclaimed after a roundhouse to the chin. “Were I a physical object rather than a complex prism system of energy or light, that certainly would have knocked me out. Keep going!”

“How can you stand that thing?” Sofia asked, setting her towel and water bottle beside Elena’s. “It’s so annoying.”

“That’s all part of the workout,” Elena answered, bouncing on the balls of her feet, preparing to strike. “You want to test yourself to see if you can hit it hard enough to shut it up.” She attacked the dummy’s ribs like a striking viper.

“Superb!” the hologram celebrated. “You used enough power to shatter a human ribcage! Keep it up!”

“Give it a go,” Elena said.

Sofia didn’t need to be told twice. She hit the hologram with everything she had, fueling all the angst and confusion she felt toward Zaraq. She found herself only getting more ticked off by having the object of her punishment cheering her on.

“Your punches are weakening,” the hologram informed her. “Perhaps you should take a breather!”

“I think it’s right,” Elena agreed.

The sisters took their towels to sit on a pair of benches along the far wall. Elena confessed that Carmen had given her all of the dirty details of Zaraq’s story. “I won’t lecture you,” she said.

“Thanks.”

“But I will say you’re acting a tad out of character.”

Sofia gulped down her water. “How so?”

“Being mad makes sense,” Elena said, wiping sweat from her brow. “But the Sofia Flores I’ve always known would rip into him for lying and then come up with a way to prove his innocence. You’re not the kind of woman who sits by and lets terrible things happen to good people. You were right there when Arcceo and Carmen needed us to help prevent a massive war his brother was fixing to start. Why are you giving up now?”

Sofia didn’t have an answer she felt like sharing. Since waking up with a pained, if slightly clearer, mind, she had suspected that the reason for her brashness was anger over not noticing the signs earlier. I let myself get close, she thought. I jumped in without really thinking things through, just to regret it later... like I always do.

Instead of answering Elena, Sofia suggested they return to kicking the shit out of that grinning idiot hologram. When the rest of her energy was spent and she imagined that she managed to sweat out all of the alcohol, Sofia decided to head back to her quarters and shower while she considered calling Zaraq.

The call wasn't necessary. As the door to her quarters came into view, Sofia saw Zaraq crouching by her door. Walking up behind him, she couldn't help her inappropriate comment. "Did you come by to kill me because I know too much?"

Zaraq stood and turned. He held a jade rock in his hand. "No," he said, frowning a little. "I came by to drop this off. I meant to give it to you on the way back from the monastery but got distracted."

"This was from the cave?" Sofia asked, accepting the gift. It shimmered in the bronze lights. Seeing it took her back to the incredible moment she saw the ruined holy place.

"Yes," Zaraq answered. "Anyway. I have a transport taking me off-world soon. I just wanted you to have—"

"Knock it off," Sofia said.

Zaraq was as still as the stone.

"One fight and you're ready to run away?" Sofia asked, hoping the light bouncing off of the stone was catching the wickedness of her eyes. "You're gonna have to be made of firmer stuff to date me."

Zaraq's eyes almost fell out of his face. "You want me to stay."

Sofia smiled. "Yes," she said, "but we have got a lot of talking to do."

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:25 am

Zaraq

After Sofia showered and changed, she suggested a walk through the gardens. “If we’re going to talk about dark things, we should probably do it in a beautiful area,” she reasoned.

Zaraq considered replying with something like, “Anywhere you go will be beautiful to me,” but figured that would be too corny for her. Besides, just because she was willing to talk things out with him did not necessarily mean she was ready for flirtatious jokes. At the risk of not appearing to take the situation seriously, he agreed to let her take the lead.

The gardens at the annex were gorgeous. During his travels, he was forced to stick to the seedier areas of the galaxy. He was used to busy places where the world looked like slate and the most water you saw was dripping from busted pipes. Thryal was the first planet he’d been able to visit that didn’t have busted architecture jutting into the sky like broken bones.

Everything was tranquil here. At first, such surroundings made him nervous. It was too quiet.

It took some time to let the jitters pass through him and accept that solitude was better than being surrounded by people because it was easier to tell who you could trust if no one was around. Still, having somewhat adjusted to the serenity of Thryal, he soaked it in with a twinge of regret, knowing he would one day have to leave it all behind.

Sofia brought him to a parterre where lemon flowers towered over them, tall enough to offer shade from the climbing afternoon sun.

“I love this spot,” she said, closing her eyes and pulling in a deep breath. “Smells like I’m living inside a box of Lemonheads.”

“Lemonheads?” Zaraq asked. Sofia was capable of saying the strangest things.

“It’s an Earth thing,” she said.

“Lemons have heads on your world?”

She laughed with a huff, as if the question knocked the wind out of her. “No. It’s the name of a candy. A sour treat. You’re familiar with candy, right?”

“Ah,” Zaraq said, nodding. “These flowers remind you of candy. I just smell sanitation liquid.” It was true. The scent of citrus recalled in his mind the oily substance used to clean spills in the casino. Especially blood. He was glad her memories seemed to be pleasant ones, even if his were not.

“You aliens have such colorful names for things,” Sofia said. “And don’t remind me that I am the alien in this situation. I’ve been through enough of that to last a dozen lifetimes.”

“Were the citizens here reluctant to accept you?” asked Zaraq.

Sofia waved a finger at him. “We’re not here to ask about my past. Let’s cut through the fat and go straight for the bone. Okay?”

He wanted to ask what that was supposed to mean, but he was learning quickly that the best way to find out where Sofia was headed was to remain patient and follow.

“You said someone killed a business partner?”

Zaraq nodded. “Ryka. He was the more business-minded of the two of us. I think that’s why he was killed and I was spared. Without him, I wouldn’t know the first thing about getting clients or negotiating payment.”

“Your boss killed him?” Sofia asked.

“I doubt it. Slikrim never got his hands dirty.” An image flashed in his mind of his former employer watching silent and dead-eyed as two hulking goons stomped a debtor to death in an alley behind the casino. It wasn’t the first time Zaraq had seen someone killed. It wouldn’t be the last, though.

However, it was the first time he’d seen a man watch someone put to death with no reaction whatsoever.

Despite the warm temperatures, a chill gave Zaraq’s shimmering skin terrible goosebumps.

“Slikrim?” Sofia sounded as though the taste of the name offended her. “Is he the big bad?”

Pushing past his desire to ask what a “big bad” was, Zaraq answered what he assumed she was asking. “Slik is a self-made entrepreneur who prides himself on presenting a clean business. Only, you do not build that much wealth and success without amassing a mountain of corpses. Rikuus is rife with crime lords and all kinds of vile people. But he is the worst of them all.”

Anticipating her next question, Zaraq swiftly continued. “Rikuus is the name of the planet where his casino is located. The Constellation Casino and Luxury Hotel.”

“You think one of his guys whacked Ryka?”

“Unquestionably,” Zaraq said.

“Who?”

A few names sprang to the front of his mind, but he didn't voice any of them. The fact of the matter was, it could have been anyone. “Taking out a member of Slik's security promises a great deal of benefits. The opportunity to get in his favor to that degree would be difficult to pass up.”

There was a time when Zaraq could envision himself as being willing to take out one of his own just to advance. It took considerable effort to lock that notion away for the time being.

“You must have theories,” Sofia said. “How else are we going to prove your innocence?”

The question hit Zaraq like a typhoon of ice water. Knowing perfectly well what she just said, he asked her to repeat herself just to have something to say.

“You don't think I'm going to let you live a life of fear. Do you?” Sofia's eyes narrowed, appearing to read Zaraq's face for the most minuscule twitch or quiver. “We can't enjoy our time together if you're constantly looking over your shoulder.”

Zaraq had to step away. He walked through an alley separating a grouping of willow bushes and lavender tails just to catch his breath. Standing next to Sofia and having this conversation was suffocating. His greatest fear, other than being caught, was having someone else ensnared in his mess.

Part of the reason he avoided attachments was this very scenario. Only, in his worst

imaginings, he never expected someone would willingly jump into the mire of crime, corruption, and death. He'd always assumed all of that would simply find him one day and anyone in his vicinity would be collateral damage. He needed to think of a way to dissuade Sofia from involving herself.

"You'd better not be thinking of telling me not to involve myself," Sofia said, coming around the corner.

Are humans capable of reading minds ? Zaraq wondered in his exasperated head. Sofia's method of charging through the bush instead of beating around it was proving difficult for him to operate in the ways he was used to.

Maybe that's a good thing , a rational part of his brain countered.

"You're right," he told Sofia. Watching her blink in surprise was gratifying.

Didn't see that coming. Did you?

"Right about what?" she asked.

"I can't keep running. Not if you and I are going to try and have a life together."

The veneer of Sofia's toughness was starting to fade and soften. She offered him the smallest hint of a smile.

"But you can't get involved."

That toughness wall went right back up as she threw her hands up and rolled her eyes.

"Are you serious? I know we haven't known each other very long, but you must have figured out by now that I don't do anything halfway. When I commit to something, that is it."

“I understand,” Zaraq said, keeping his voice level. “But you don’t know what kind of people you’re dealing with. These people don’t play fair. If they so much as sniff you poking around their business, they will delete you from the universe. Understand?”

“Were you not listening when I told you Carmen and Arccoo’s secret origin story? I literally left my planet just to help her be with someone she loves. Do you think I knew what I was getting myself into then? Fuck, no! I had no idea, but I did it anyway.”

Keeping his composure was becoming increasingly difficult. “This isn’t like traveling through space, Sofia. This is dealing with people who make a living thinking up ways to murder people without getting caught.”

“So?” She seemed genuinely unfazed. “My brother-in-law is a legit prince. He can command an actual army. If this Slik motherfucker tries to pull something, Arccoo can snap his fingers and have that dude’s whole criminal empire torn down.”

“Well, that isn’t exactly true,” Arccoo said.

Instead of standing in the garden arguing, Sofia and Zaraq decided to put a pin in the conversation so they could grab some lunch. While he had been hoping for a private affair so they could discuss this business alone, they were joined in the dining hall by Carmen, the prince, and Elena.

When the others arrived, Zaraq whispered to Sofia. “You said we would be alone.”

She leaned to whisper back in his ear. “I lied. We’re even.”

Arccoo used a silk napkin to dab at nothing at the corner of his mouth. “Rikuus is in open territory. If I were to take military action there, we could be inadvertently

starting a war with more than a dozen worlds.”

“So, when you said it isn’t exactly true,” Sofia responded. “What you meant was, it can’t be done at all?”

“I understand, Your Highness,” Zaraq said, relieved. “Please don’t worry yourself with my troubles.”

“I may not be able to send in the cavalry, but I do have contacts on Rikuus. I could reach out to them. I’m sure they can get sufficient intel on your former employer.”

Carmen turned to her husband. “Have you heard of this guy before?”

“Only in passing,” Arccoo answered. He looked at Zaraq. “In my experience, individuals like Slikrim tend to hide behind their wealth, obscuring them from sight. If anything, the fact that I’ve barely heard of him suggests how truly dangerous he is.”

Zaraq agreed. “The casino is the main attraction. Slik almost never presents himself to the public. People are so enamored with the grandiosity of his business that they never give a thought to the man running it.”

“He must get away with a lot,” Elena suggested.

“Like framing Zaraq,” Sofia added. “Which is why we can’t let him get away with this.”

“My curse is not your burden,” Zaraq said.

“I’m sorry, Zaraq,” Carmen said. “I’m afraid you are mistaken.” She set down her drink and pushed her plate away from her. “We’re from Earth. On our planet, you

don't let someone you care about suffer alone. My sisters reminded me of that when Arccoo was forced to leave."

She leaned forward over the table. "If we care about someone, we fight for them. I care about my sister. She cares about you. This means that I also care about you. We have to help you carry this burden. Sorry. Them's the rules."

"Your heart is wounded," Arccoo said. "I knew a good man who refused the help of others in order to achieve a goal that he believed was righteous. His heart was similarly sick with fear and regret. I wish I had done more to help him earlier. This is why I, personally, must offer my assistance in proving your innocence."

"You've been outvoted," Elena said. "Four to one." As if what she said wasn't clear, she clarified. "I'm saying I want to help you as well. That's why I said four instead of three."

The emotions swelling up in Zaraq's chest were difficult to identify. The closest he'd come to feeling them before was when he and Ryka agreed to go into business for themselves. Never truly having a family, he did not know what it felt like to have someone willing to treat him as an equal. When compared to what Sofia and her family were proposing, that was nothing.

When their meal was finished, Zaraq asked Sofia if he could have some time to think.

"You're not going to run off. Right?" she asked.

"No," he answered honestly. "I need to collect my thoughts."

With a hint of reluctance painting the shadows of her face, Sofia nodded. "There's an opera thing going on tonight," she said. "I'm going to try and look crazy hot for it. Will you be my date?"

“I’ve never been to the opera,” Zaraq said. “Is dressing warmly required?”

Sofia laughed and gave him a polite shove. “Do you have a suit?”

He nodded.

“Wear that,” she told him. “Come by my quarters at seven. You’ll see what I mean then.”

Zaraq walked slowly back to his room, considering everything he had learned that day. How could these people he barely knew be willing to risk their lives for him? Were they playing him in some way? Was this all a ploy to turn him in to the authorities?

After years of having to second-guess what everyone around him was thinking, attempting to diagnose their ulterior motives, his ability to sense deception had been refined to a sharp point. This also meant that he could recognize when a person was being earnest.

Every inch of his nerves warned him against trusting these people, but his heart told him otherwise. Its slow, steady beat advised him to remain cautious and protect them, not distrust them. As he put on his suit, he promised himself he would let them in. It felt right. However, at the first sign of real danger, he would have to find a way to leave them behind and settle the score on his own.

He arrived at Sofia’s quarters as she was opening the door.

Her dress was stunning. Caressing every slope, it highlighted her figure in ways he had yet to notice before. It sparkled in the lights like silver stars falling through the sky on a crystal-clear night. He tripped at the sight of it.

“Does hot mean very attractive?” he asked her as she beamed at his clumsiness.

“Oh, yeah, it does,” she said.

“Then you have succeeded,” he told her. At that moment, he had no desire to sit and watch singing. He wanted nothing more than to stay here with her.

Once again, as if reading his mind, Sofia made a suggestion he didn’t know he was hoping she’d make. “We have some time before the show starts,” she said. “Want to come in for a drink?”

“Yes,” Zaraq blurted out. “I am very thirsty.”

Sofia let out a single laugh. “I bet you are.”

“Your living space is very nice,” he said, really taking it in for the first time. He didn’t get much of a look at it the last time he was there. The arched ceilings were especially impressive. He found them soothing in a way.

“It’s the most incredible apartment I’ve ever had,” she said, walking over to a small bar near the balcony. She filled two short glasses with golden liquid and brought them over.

The first sip helped to calm his nerves.

“I don’t really like the opera,” Sofia said. “What if we stay here instead?”

Zaraq finished his drink. He placed the empty glass on the bar and walked slowly over to her. He could see her chest rising and falling with anticipation as he loosened his bowtie. As he came to a stop in front of her, he cupped her face, getting lost in her emerald eyes. This woman could be the end of him, and he would go with a smile.

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Sofia

Sofia looked at Zaraq with wide eyes. The desire she felt coiling in her belly released itself in pulsating waves and liquid torrents.

“Stay with me,” she whispered.

Immediately, his mouth swooped down to capture hers in a passionate kiss that left them both gasping for breath.

He pulled away, only slightly, his eyes glistening with a wild light that matched the rawness inside her. “Are you sure?” he asked. His voice was rough and filled with a potent mix of fear and longing.

Sofia nodded, her gaze never wavering from his. “More than I’ve ever been sure about anything.”

As if propelled by an invisible force, Zaraq wrapped his arms around her, lowering his mouth onto hers once more. This time, the kiss was slower but equally explosive, a searing exchange that left Sofia breathless and wanting more.

He cradled her face in his hands, his thumbs tracing gentle circles on her cheeks as he looked into her eyes.

Slowly, gently, he removed her dress, tossing it on the floor before stepping out of his own clothes.

There was no urgency now, only a languid exploration as Zaraq's skilled fingers traced over Sofia's curves, worshiping every inch of her with a reverence that brought forth soft moans from her lips. His eyes held hers captive, their dark depths mirroring the passion that was simmering between them.

Sofia reciprocated his touch, her hands running across the sinewy muscles of his chest, down to his waist, and back up again. She marveled at the sensation of hard and soft beneath her wandering hands.

"Zaraq," she moaned as his mouth found her neck, setting off a trail of fire down her spine. She arched against him, their bodies molding perfectly together like two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle coming together. Their rhythm became one of need and desire, slow and deliberate.

Zaraq gently nudged her toward the bed, their lips never parting for more than a second. He lowered Sofia onto the soft mattress before resting his weight on top of her.

Their eyes locked once again, and Sofia saw in Zaraq's gaze an intensity that shook her to the core. His lips found hers again in a fervent kiss and then moved lower, leaving hot trails on her skin.

His head dipped between her thighs. Sofia gasped, her fingers threading through his hair as his mouth explored her intimately.

Zaraq's name tumbled from her lips, a heady mantra that filled the room with its intensity. His fingers dug into her hips as she bucked under the onslaught of pleasure, her eyes squeezed shut and her heart racing

She was unraveling, becoming undone under his touch, and she loved it. Her fingers tangled in his hair, encouraging him to continue as indescribable pleasure pulsed

through her veins.

He continued to lavish her folds with attention. Every stroke of his tongue had her arching her back with the intensely passionate sensations he was drawing from her body.

“Zaraq,” she gasped once more, her body convulsing as an exquisite wave of pleasure crashed into her, leaving her trembling and breathless. Her fingers tightened their grip on his hair, anchoring her to him as her world spun.

With a final fervent kiss that left an impression of his adoration for her, he trailed his way back up her quivering body. Their eyes locked, the wild desire mirrored in each amplified by the intimacy they had just shared.

Reaching between them, Zaraq positioned himself at her entrance. She stiffened beneath him momentarily. He stilled, his gaze searching hers once more.

“Are you sure?” he asked again, his voice a bare whisper in the silent room. The question was not one of formality but a genuine concern for her comfort.

Sofia smiled, the raw vulnerability in his gaze melting any lingering hesitation she had felt. She reached up to cup his cheek with reassurance in her touch. “I’m sure, Zaraq.”

Emboldened by her affirmation, he slowly pushed forward, both gasping at the new intimacy created between them. Sofia’s grip on him tightened as he filled her completely. A moment of discomfort was quickly replaced by a fierce pleasure that made her toes curl.

Their rhythm was slow at first, each thrust measured and careful as they explored this novel sensation together. Soon, though, the slow rhythm morphed into something

more urgent and primal as desire took hold of them once again.

His mouth found hers in another searing kiss as he moved within her. Her arms, draped around his neck, pulled him closer as the intensity of their coupling grew. Inch by inch, thrust after delicious thrust, Zaraq claimed Sofia for his own.

“Zaraq,” she moaned again, her voice hitching as that delicious pleasure began to coil tighter within her. Her body moved with his, instinctively matching his rhythm and pace. Zaraq’s grip tightened on her hips, pulling her closer with each thrust until Sofia swore she could feel every beat of his heart against her skin.

“Sofia,” he groaned in response, a desperate plea in his voice that mirrored the raw passion flickering in his eyes. His teeth grazed her lower lip before capturing it in a heated kiss

Zaraq’s movements became more assertive, driven by the intoxicating dance their bodies were engaged in. Sofia arched beneath him, her nails digging into his back. Each thrust drowned her in waves of pleasure that she didn’t know existed.

She wound her legs around his waist, allowing him to delve deeper. Their breaths became ragged and frantic, echoing the fervor that had consumed them.

He lowered his head to suck a nipple into his mouth. His tongue teased the pink bud into a hardened peak. Sofia let out a strangled gasp, her fingers knotting in his hair.

The sensation of his tongue circling and flicking her nipple sent sparks of pleasure racing down her spine, pooling between her legs. His hand unerringly found its way to her other breast, his palm caressing and kneading the supple flesh.

His body was a solid weight against hers, every flex of his muscles an exquisite promise of the pleasures that awaited them.

The pleasure within her was building, a crescendo of sensations that consumed her entire being. She could feel herself spiraling toward the precipice, teetering on the edge of a fiery abyss.

As if sensing her imminent climax, Zaraq's grip on her tightened. He held her firmly as he increased his pace, each thrust driving them closer to their mutual undoing.

His name fell from her lips, her voice shaky and breathless. "Zaraq. Please don't stop."

There was no response from him except for a low growl that rumbled through his chest, vibrating against her. His movements became more frenzied, a relentless assault on her senses that left her gasping for air. The rhythm they had established earlier was now forgotten as pleasure took over them completely.

Zaraq's groan was half swallowed by Sofia's lips as they kissed, their bodies moving together in a rhythm as old as time itself. His fingers flexed against her skin, a gentle reminder of his presence as he moved in sync with the beat of her heart.

His heat enveloped her, his body pressed against hers, every inch of him branded onto her skin. Sofia blinked up at him through a haze of pleasure, every nerve ending alive and tingling. Her breath hitched as Zaraq leaned down to capture her lips with his once more.

She responded with an eagerness that matched his own, her tongue tangling with his. Every stroke brought forth a new wave of pleasure until Sofia thought she might shatter from the intensity.

"Zaraq," she whispered against his lips, the name sounding almost like a plea. He answered her with another bruising kiss, his lips moving against hers with a raw need that matched hers. The heat between them was palpable, a fiery connection that

threatened to consume them both.

She felt her whole body tense as her orgasm swelled within her. His hands gripped her hips, holding her still as he moved within her. Each stroke was deliberate, each thrust calculated to push her higher and higher until she was teetering on the edge of ecstasy.

Her climax washed over her in a rush of pure ecstasy, a blinding white light that consumed every inch of her being. Her grip on Zaraq tightened as she rode out the waves of pleasure, each one more intense than the last.

Zaraq groaned against her lips, and his movements became more erratic as he chased the impending climax.

Finally, with a few final thrusts, she felt his warm seed spill into her and fill her. In his arms, she felt like she had found a perfect fit.

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Zaraq

The gray haze that hung over Rikuus was visible even from space, and Zaraq couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt for bringing Sofia and her family to the dirty blot that was his home planet.

At least, his home planet insofar as he could remember. Though he was Thryal by blood, he had never set foot there until he was on the run. For all intents and purposes, he was a Rikuan, and he had the shady past to match.

“Whoo! Here we go!” Sofia yelled with inexplicable gusto as Arccoo brought the ship down to broach the planet's atmosphere.

The whole craft shuddered with the sudden change, and Zaraq gripped the steel and leather arms of his seat. It wasn't just from the turbulence, though. He'd been on edge for days, ever since Sofia and her family insisted on clearing his name. In fact, the only time he could remember being at ease was the night of the “opera”...

Turning his head, he looked over at Sofia, strapped into the seat beside him. His gaze traced the soft curve of her jaw, skimmed the wild smile that pulled at her lips, and then came to land on her eyes alight with adventure and passion. He felt a squeeze in his heart, knowing he'd never be able to live with himself if something happened to her.

“You know this isn't going to be fun, don't you?” Zaraq yelled over the turbulence of the ship.

Sofia just shot him a wicked grin, and for the hundredth time since accepting her help, he wondered if he'd made the right choice.

Elena called from the seat behind him. "Just give up, Z! She lives for this stuff!"

Zaraq let out a sigh, inaudible over the sound of the engines. I just hope she won't die for "this stuff," he thought as Arccoo stabilized the ship over the Rikuan parking dock.

"Here we are," Arccoo announced formally, setting the ship down. "The planet Rikuus."

To Zaraq's utter surprise, the three women on board let out a series of celebratory whoops. It was a far cry from what he felt touching down on this cursed planet. The look on his face must have given him away because Sofia reached out and squeezed his hand.

"You have to remember, this whole space travel thing is still pretty new to us," she explained with a guilty smile. "Every new planet is like Christmas."

"Who's Christmas?" Zaraq asked, but even as the words left his mouth, he knew it was a futile question.

"Just another Earth thing," Sofia explained with a sigh of mock exasperation. "It just means it's exciting."

Zaraq nodded as Sofia took her hand back and unbuckled her seatbelt. The place she had touched him was still warm, and he allowed himself a second to savor it before turning his mind back to the dangerous task ahead.

"I can't be seen in public," Zaraq explained as the rest of the party got ready to leave

the ship. “Bounty hunters are looking out for me, law enforcement, not to mention Slik.”

Just mentioning the name made Zaraq tense up, but looking around the ship, he saw the women break out in grins.

“We thought about that,” Carmen said, stepping forward. “Lucky for you, we have the whole of the royal wardrobe at our disposal.”

Sofia and Elena let out a giggle at this while Arccoo looked a little uncomfortable.

“What does that mean?” Zaraq asked. Instinctively, he took a step back, but Carmen had already hurried to the back of the ship and collected a large suitcase, which she now opened with a flourish on the ship’s cold metal floor.

Zaraq raised one sleek black eyebrow as he peered into the suitcase. It contained a jumble of clothes, wigs, makeup, suits, and assorted accessories that Zaraq guessed were intended for him.

“You can wear a disguise!” Sofia announced proudly. “At least to get you somewhere safe so we can start digging into this whole deal.”

Zaraq had to smile. Though he didn’t think the plan would work, he appreciated the thought. And, if he was honest, he didn’t have any better ideas. As a show of goodwill, he kneeled down, pulling out a ridiculous bright orange wig, a tunic made of fine silk, and a pair of Thryal army boots.

None of this will work , he thought. But then, at the bottom, he glimpsed the telltale dome of a breathing helmet and grinned. He grasped the tube that protruded from it, yanking the whole apparatus from the tangle of other clothes.

“Now this...” he muttered to himself, digging through the suitcase to find the rest of his outfit. To his relief, he found a bright blue skin-tight suit and a matching pair of gloves. Not his usual attire, but that was the idea.

“You’re going as a spaceman?” Sofia asked. When he stood up, he saw the teasing smirk on her face.

“He’s going as a Gorian,” Arccoo interjected before Zaraq could answer. “A methane-breather.”

Zaraq grinned and nodded, holding out the mask and other clothes to inspect as he spoke. “The one good thing about Rikuus is that it’s a magnet for the galaxy’s shady types. That means shady types from all over. I’ll be better disguised as a Gorian than a Thryal wearing a wig.”

He glanced back down at the suitcase, and Carmen laughed.

“I guess it would have been a good idea to consult an actual alien about these disguises,” she admitted a little sheepishly.

Zaraq shook his head. “You nailed it with this,” he told her, holding up the suit. “There’s just one more thing.”

Zaraq stepped out into the dim gray light of Rikuus, the sun further dulled through the dome of his helmet. Despite the clothes, the mask, and the thick layer of purple makeup that Carmen had gleefully applied, his heart raced to be back on the streets that he’d fled from.

“I hoped I’d never have to see this place again,” he told Sofia, leaning in close.

His voice came out tinny through the helmet’s speaker unit, and he hoped he wasn’t

speaking too loudly. The last thing he needed was the wrong person to overhear him.

“Better to see it again like this than in handcuffs or a bodybag,” Sofia whispered back, her mouth close to the microphone that relayed the world’s sounds directly into Zaraq’s ear.

He couldn’t argue with that. Ahead of them, Arccoo, Carmen, and Elena were leading the way to their hotel. It wasn’t the Constellation Casino and Luxury Hotel, but it was close enough that Zaraq began to sweat.

The grimy streets of Rikuus were just as he remembered, rife with the kinds of people he’d rather avoid. The kind of people I used to be , came the sudden thought.

Though he knew they were on one of the planet’s safer streets, he couldn’t ignore that just out of sight, in the dark alleyways that led off left and right, all manner of crime was taking place. Petty theft, drug deals, extortion, kidnapping. Not to mention the kinds of things he used to do—beatings, or worse, to those who didn’t play the game.

But then a squat yellow building caught his attention. Despite the obvious danger, his steps slowed of their own accord until he finally stopped in front of it. Beside him, Sofia stopped, too.

“What is it?” she asked, following his gaze.

“That’s the office where my dad used to work,” he said, his voice coming out quieter than he meant it. “I used to go in there with him sometimes, and he’d let me play under his desk while he went through old archives. He had this huge stack of document boxes, and I’d make a cave with them and pretend I was a space explorer.”

The memories came rushing back, warm and comforting, even if they were tinged with sorrow.

Beside him, Sofia took a step closer, sliding her hand around his gloved fingers.

As he peered at the building, sharing what little of his past wasn't completely tainted by horror, he caught sight of a Rikuan. The man was leaning languidly against the office wall in dirty jeans and a ripped shirt, smoking a cigarette. Zaraq knew if he wasn't entombed in his gas mask, he'd catch a whiff of shaka, the street drug that had its grip on most of Rikuus's underworld. The shaky look in the man's orange eyes confirmed the suspicion.

For a second, those eyes caught Zaraq's gaze, and a sneer arrived on the Rikuan's face. Before it could turn into an unseemly interaction, Zaraq turned away, hurrying ahead and pulling Sofia with him. Instinctively, he wrapped his arm around her, wishing they hadn't come here. This was no place to bring someone he cared for.

Sofia turned to him with a smile that showed she was oblivious to Zaraq's fear.

"Laying on the moves again, huh?" she asked teasingly. "At least wait until we get to the room."

She winked at him, and Zaraq didn't have the heart to tell her his affection was fueled by panic, not lust.

"We're here," Arccoo announced ahead of them. "The Kaylian Hotel."

Zaraq knew the place well. It was Slikrim's main competitor in the luxury hotel market, and he shuddered to remember some of the horrible things he'd had to do there back in the day. Flashes of violence broke through his thoughts as the rest of the group filed into the pink marble-clad building, oblivious.

"Coming?" Sofia asked as Zaraq hung back at the door.

“Uh, yeah,” he replied. He didn’t know if he was safer out on the street where gangsters and cops were looking for him, or inside where any member of staff that he’d formerly brutalized might see through his flimsy disguise.

Finally, he decided on the latter and followed Sofia and the others inside.

Their first night in Rikuus was uneventful. Thankfully no one at the hotel had recognized him, and now that he was off the streets, Zaraq managed to relax a little. That all changed the next day, though, when the plan started to emerge.

“I’m going to start at the casino,” Sofia announced over breakfast in their room.

He’d hidden in the bathroom while she’d gone to the door to collect their room service. Now they were sitting at the large table their room had come equipped with, eating their gourmet Rikuan breakfast, all on the prince’s dime.

Zaraq could hardly enjoy it, though. His stomach was twisted in knots at the thought of Sofia going out there alone, especially into the belly of the beast.

There was that word again.

“I really don’t think you should go in there alone,” Zaraq warned, watching as Sofia nonchalantly popped a jaran cherry in her mouth. “Slik is dangerous, and his men are just as bad. I should know.”

Sofia stopped chewing for a second, giving Zaraq a look. “You know as well as I do that we’re here to gather information, and since you can’t leave the room without someone coming after you, you’re just gonna have to be okay with me doing it for you.”

Zaraq frowned, but he knew she was right. He was sending her out into the unknown

while he sat in the comfortable safety of their lush hotel room. But what choice did he have?

“I just wish I could go with you somehow,” he told her, releasing his grip on the tablecloth. He didn’t even realize he’d been grasping it until now.

“Well... actually...” Sofia got a conspiratorial look in her eye, but before Zaraq could say anything, she’d rushed out the door and down the hallway.

Within a few seconds, she was back with a groggy-looking Elena.

“What’s all this about?” she asked, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

“What do you know about radio transmitters?” Sofia asked, pulling her sister into the room with a look of excitement in her eyes.

“Can you hear me okay?” came Sofia’s voice, crackling through the room’s intercom.

Or rather, what used to be the intercom. Haphazard black and red wires were snaking out of it and connecting to the Gorian helmet lying on Zaraq’s purple-stained pillow.

“Yeah, but stop talking to yourself,” Zaraq replied, sitting on the bed beside the mess of electronics that Elena had quickly constructed. Elena, Carmen, and Arccoo had abandoned their rooms for Zaraq’s and Sofia’s, and they were taking up all the chairs.

“All right, all right,” came Sofia’s voice again. “I’m going in.”

Zaraq took a deep breath and held it. The stillness in the room told him the others were doing the same.

“Hi!” came Sofia’s chirpy voice, devoid of its usual sass. “I was wondering who I

should talk to if I want a job?”

Zaraq’s heart stopped beating for a second, and he somehow inhaled even further. That wasn’t the plan. She was just supposed to be a patron, keeping an eye out for anything useful. But this...

Zaraq wheeled around to look at the others, but they seemed just as perplexed as he was. Carmen gave an apologetic shrug but turned her eyes back to the intercom when a gruff voice came over the speaker.

“That’d be Slikrim,” the voice said, and Zaraq’s blood ran cold. “Come with me.”

Zaraq could hear the tap of footsteps over the casino’s background noise. Then the sound of patrons and music died away, and Zaraq knew Sofia was being taken up to Slik’s office.

“Who’s this?”

Zaraq clenched his fists as Slik’s slimy voice came over the speaker.

As he listened to Sofia enquire after a job, he became more determined to get himself, and her, out of this mess before it went too far.

“We run a very prestigious establishment here,” Slik was saying. “We don’t just accept any girl who walks in off the street, you know.”

“Of course,” Sofia replied, her voice smooth even through the crackle of the speakers. “But how many Earthling girls do you have working here?”

There was silence for a moment, and all Zaraq could hear was the pounding of his own heart. He had to admit, it was a good ploy. Slikrim, for all his terrible traits, was

a savvy businessman, and Zaraq knew he'd struggle to resist an exotic creature like Sofia to bring in customers.

"Can you dance?" Slik asked, and again, the question burned in Zaraq's ears.

"Sure can," Sofia replied confidently.

Behind him, Carmen scoffed. "Sure, the chicken dance maybe."

Zaraq didn't even ask what the chicken dance was, or even what a chicken was, for that matter. His attention was focused entirely on the conversation playing out before him.

"We'll see about that," Slik replied, and Zaraq could hear a cruel smile in his voice. "Go to this address tomorrow at noon. My second-in-command, Vexis, will give you a trial."

Zaraq heard the rustle of paper, Sofia's thanks, and then her footsteps echoing through the corridor. It wasn't until ten minutes later when she walked back into the hotel room that Zaraq finally allowed himself to breathe.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:25 am

Sofia

“It’ll be fine,” Sofia insisted the next day as she got ready to leave the hotel.

She reached for her purse, but Zaraq’s hand closed around hers, stopping her.

“I need you to promise to be careful.”

Sofia looked up, locking eyes with him. The deep purple of his irises was as arresting as ever, and for a moment, she considered just pulling him onto the bed, tangling herself up in his arms, and forgetting this whole plot.

But that part of her had to be pushed aside for now. Feeling his warm hand on hers, she knew none of that would be possible if they didn’t clear his name. At least, not in the long run.

The thought took her off guard. In the long run? Was she really that committed already? It made her cough a little, as if she could hardly swallow the fact that she’d found someone she was having those thoughts about.

Straightening up, Sofia took Zaraq’s hand in both of hers. “I’m doing this because it’s the only way. Look, I’m not stupid. I know it’s dangerous. I know it’s probably even a little bit reckless, but what else have we got? I don’t want you to run forever. I’m not interested in sharing my life with a fugitive.”

At this, Zaraq smiled and stepped a little closer. He’d caught her speaking that thought out loud this time—forever, sharing their lives—and if the look in his eyes

was anything to go by, he felt the same way.

That wasn't a conversation Sofia could have right then, though. Not when their future—whatever it was and however long it lasted—depended on her putting their plan into action.

"I'll be on the speaker the whole time," she told him.

She touched the receiver in her ear, the one Elena had cobbled together from the helmet, and an assortment of parts she'd pulled out of her comm. The act of touching it helped Sofia to stay focused on the plan when all she wanted to do was kiss Zaraq.

"The second anything sketchy happens, get out of there," Zaraq insisted, bringing her other hand up to his mouth and planting a kiss there instead.

"Zaraq, I'm going to some gangster's house to do a trial as a dancer. It's gonna be sketchy from the outset."

Before Zaraq could protest again, she pulled her hand from his grasp, grabbed her purse, and strode toward the door. Just as she went to twist the handle, she turned back.

"Don't worry. I'll be okay," she repeated. She stepped out before the look of concern in Zaraq's eyes really did have her running into his arms.

The streets of Rikuus were seedy, and she felt a dozen pairs of eyes on her as she waited to hail a transport pod.

Her pink and mauve dress was intentionally short at the hem and low at the neck—something she'd borrowed from Carmen's costume suitcase, though she couldn't understand why it had been thrown in there in the first place. Probably a joke

from one of her sisters when all of this seemed theoretical. Now that it was actually happening, the costumes seemed childish.

That said, the dress had ended up coming in handy, as had the blue suit and helmet, so maybe they hadn't done too badly after all.

Her thoughts were interrupted as a particularly vile man sidled up to her and hungrily looked her up and down. She didn't know what kind of alien he was, but his gray-blue skin, yellow eyes, and flickering tongue reminded her of some kind of snake from back home.

"How much?" he asked, his lipless mouth sneering to reveal a row of rotting, pointed teeth.

It made her skin crawl, and although Zaraq said nothing through her earpiece, she was sure he'd be fuming at the man's words. Luckily, she'd had enough practice fending off men back on Earth. She figured the same rules pretty much applied.

"How much what?" she asked sweetly, feigning ignorance.

The man seemed not to like this, and he blinked a couple of times. Only, he blinked them sideways.

"How much for a ride, sweetheart?"

Everything in Sofia was repulsed, but she kept up the act. "I think that depends where you want to go. I guess back home a cab would cost you about three bucks a mile, but then you have to factor in the base rate, that's about another three bucks, plus is it peak or off-peak? Right now it's about 11:30, so that's off-peak. You're in luck. I guess you'll need to convert that to Rikuuns, though, and I don't know if you have different tariffs here."

The man flickered his tongue again, but this time Sofia got the feeling it signaled confusion rather than salaciousness. Over his shoulder, Sofia caught sight of a pod and flagged it down.

“Well, good luck!” she called to him as she hopped into the pod and slammed the door hard. As the pod drove away, she looked back to see the man still standing there, trying to figure out what had just happened.

“That was...” came Zaraq’s voice over her micro earpiece.

“Masterful, I know,” Sofia muttered under her breath as she handed Vexis’s address over to the driver.

Zaraq spoke again. “I was going to say risky. Honestly, half of me is impressed. The other half is terrified for you. You can’t speak to everyone like that. When you meet Vexis, just—”

“Be careful,” Sofia finished for him. She said it a little too loudly this time, though, because the cabby—or was it poddy?—yelled over his shoulder.

“Hey, lady, I drive how I drive! You want careful, you can get out and walk!” He shot her a look in the mirror but didn’t make any move to stop the pod. Sofia had to force herself not to giggle.

By the time she arrived at Vexis’s doorstep, though, she didn’t feel like giggling anymore. The ride had taken her through some of Rikuus’s worst neighborhoods, and she witnessed the extreme poverty some of these people had to endure.

Children begged on the streets, countless women leaned into pod windows looking for their next john, and plenty of thuggish men guarded shady establishments. In one alley, she’d caught a glimpse of what seemed to be a drunken brawl, five or six men

all scrabbling at each other and throwing wild punches, many of their faces already streaked with blood.

Sofia imagined that this must have been the world Zaraq was thrust into after his parents were killed, and her heart ached at the thought.

No wonder he's worried about me , she thought, and a tendril of fear snaked its way up her spine. Maybe I'm getting myself in too deep.

It was too late for that, though. The cab had come out the other side of the ghettos and into the rich neighborhood, which presumably only meant that the criminals there were more successful.

She now stood at Vexis's address, a house that was opulent and imposing. Its tall double front doors were made out of some hard, black stone and shone to a high polish. To the side of the door was a sleek silver panel, which Sofia recognized as a security pad.

With a deep breath, Sofia approached the pad, knowing already that she was probably being watched. As discreetly as she could, she held her purse closer to the silver panel, hoping the reader Elena had given her was close enough to work.

"Hello?" she asked sweetly, batting her eyelids at the camera hidden inside. "I'm here to see Vexis?"

There was no answer, and for a second, Sofia was afraid something had changed. Maybe Slikrim had changed his mind about her. But then a tiny beep sounded from the panel.

Sofia hoisted her purse up on her shoulder, silently praying that the reader had caught the door's opening frequency. She wouldn't find out until later, and until then, she

had to play the part of an aspiring casino dancer.

The shining black doors slid open with little more than a whisper, and Sofia was greeted by a tall Rikuan man standing in a large foyer. The floor was black and white marble, the roof arched, and the walls hung with tasteful art. But Vexis himself really caught Sofia's attention.

His pale mauve skin perfectly matched her dress, and his eyes burned black. He was almost as tall as Zaraq's six-foot-two frame and just as muscular. His shaved head was covered in bright white tattoos, though they could have been skin markings. Sofia didn't know enough about Rikuans to make that call.

Either way, she was immediately intimidated but fought down the urge to run. Instead, she shot him a flirtatious smile.

"Slikrim didn't tell me you were so handsome," she told him, batting her eyelashes at him.

Vexis let out a short laugh that sounded more like a grunt. "You're good. I'll give you that."

He gestured for Sofia to follow him inside. As she walked through his huge home, her heart raced. She clutched her purse tighter, as though it might protect her.

Fuck, why didn't I bring a weapon? she thought, suddenly wincing. She remembered what she'd seen in Zaraq's pack that first day in the catacombs and realized that her suspicions were correct. It was a blaster. It had to be. Why hadn't she asked him for it?

"Drink?" Vexis asked as he led her to a vast living room, equipped with its own bar.

“Sure,” she replied, setting down her purse and making herself at home on the plush gray couch with feigned confidence. “I’ll have what you’re having.”

She winked, draping her arms over the back of the couch in a gesture she hoped he found endearing. Her feminine charms were the only weapon she had at her disposal now, and while they weren’t quite as good as a blaster, she hoped they would be enough to keep her safe.

Vexis seemed to like this, and he grinned at her before turning to fix the drinks. In the silence that followed, Sofia heard a quiet voice in her ear.

“See if you can spot anything incriminating,” Zaraq told her. The amount of interference reminded her he was way back on the other side of the city. “If this guy is second-in-command, it’s because he’s earned Slik’s trust. That means he’s probably up to his neck in murders and extortions. And that might include Ryka’s death.”

Sofia nodded even though Zaraq couldn’t see her and scanned the room, looking for anything that might give her a clue. But the place was spotless. The only thing she saw was a locked cabinet built into the wall. She stared hard at it, wondering what could be behind those doors...

“You like guns?” came Vexis’s voice, and Sofia nearly jumped.

When she met his gaze again, she saw he was holding the drinks in his hands. He glanced at the cabinet, and Sofia figured he’d caught her looking. In two strides he’d joined her on the couch. His weight tipped her toward him, and she hoped he didn’t see the panic on her face.

If he did, he didn’t say anything. Instead, he held out a drink toward her. It was almost impossibly cold to the touch and to Sofia’s relief, the sensation stopped her

fingers from shaking.

“I prefer dancing,” Sofia replied with a smile, trying to hide her panic at the word “guns.”

She took a sip of the drink which, in contrast to the glass, was warm, peaty, and almost bubbly in her mouth.

“Well, I like both,” Vexis told her with a seedy grin before taking a swig of his own drink. “But if guns don’t turn you on, let’s stick with the dancing for now.”

Sofia looked at him through her lashes before taking another sip of her drink. Finally, with intentional slowness, she set her glass on the coffee table, making sure she leaned down enough that Vexis caught a flash of her cleavage.

She hated that she was doing this, hated that she was letting this man objectify her, and hated, most of all, that this felt like a betrayal to Zaraq.

This is for Zaraq, she reminded herself. In some twisted way, giving this creep a glimpse of her body was all for a good cause.

“Got some music?” Sofia asked as she stood from the couch and shot Vexis a sultry look.

He grinned, his dark eyes roaming her body as he touched a hidden keypad in the couch’s arm. A slow beat came on over hidden speakers, filling the room with something close to R&B music except... alien.

Still, it was something she could move to, and she laughed internally at what she’d heard over the earpiece yesterday. The chicken dance was definitely not the only dance she knew.

Moving her body slowly to the rhythm, she let her hips roll seductively. Vexis appeared to enjoy this because he leaned back in his seat as if to better appreciate the show she was putting on for him.

Fueled by her success, she let her lips curl into a suggestive smile before raising her arms above her head. With them, she felt her dress lift up a little higher. When she turned around to waggle her ass at the Rikuan, she knew the move would drive him wild.

Apparently, she was right because Vexis practically growled at her. When she turned around again, sliding her hands over her body as she did so, she caught the telltale look of lust in his eyes.

“What do you think?” she teased, still dancing seductively to the music.

“I think you’re a natural,” he replied, practically salivating. “And I think you should try those moves out over here.”

With that, he patted his lap and spread his legs wider. It was obvious he expected Sofia to giggle, saunter over, and plant her ass squarely in his lap. Sofia, of course, had other ideas, but she was pleased to see her plan was working exactly as intended.

“Sorry, honey,” she told him, feigning disappointment. “I have to go, got an appointment. But how about you and I meet up again tomorrow? You could take me dancing.”

She flashed him a look that she knew he couldn’t say no to and bent over again to pick up her purse. This time, she lingered a little, hoping one last glimpse of her cleavage would seal the deal.

“I don’t usually let women keep me waiting,” Vexis replied, hitching his crotch,

which was quite obviously bulging. “But you’re so cute I might just have to make an exception.”

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:25 am

Zaraq

Sofia arrived back at the hotel room, talking a mile a minute. It was obvious she was thrilled by her successful quest of retrieving the code to Vexis's apartment. He could tell she was eager to share the details of her surreptitious pursuit while the memory of every heart-racing moment was fresh in her mind.

But the thrill of her day was cut short by Zaraq's hands on her shoulders and his lips on her throat. They were hot and heavy.

"I don't like you going out with other men," he growled. He was uncertain how his possessiveness would be received, but at this moment, he didn't care.

"I didn't," she murmured, her breath hitching as his hands slowly slipped down her arms. "I was working, Zaraq."

Work. The singular thing that had kept them together was now threatening to pull them apart. He sighed into her hair, the sweet scent of vanilla and cinnamon wafting up to him.

"Work or not, Sofia," he muttered, his voice a low rumble against her ear. "I can't bear the thought of you being in any danger." His hands stilled on her waist, his fingers gently pressing into her skin.

"Zaraq," she began, turning in his hold to look at him. She reached up to touch his cheek, letting her thumb brush over the hardened stubble on his jawline. "I can handle myself."

“I know you can,” he admitted reluctantly. His hand came up to cover hers on his cheek, holding it there as if anchoring himself. “But that doesn’t make the worry go away.”

With a soft smile playing on her lips, she entwined their fingers together. His eyes softened as he pulled her closer, wrapping his arms tightly around her. He remained silent, for sometimes words were inadequate to express what was felt so deeply within one’s heart.

Instead, he kissed her, lowering his head and capturing her mouth as he reached to remove her dress with a gentle yet urgent fervor. His lips were warm and insistent, his tongue exploring the softness of her mouth in a dance that felt wholly new every time they did so. The kiss spoke volumes, hungrier than words could ever hope to be.

Sofia responded in kind, her body melting against his, their breaths becoming one as the world outside vanished.

As the buttons of her dress slipped open, a cool draft of air brushed her exposed skin, sending tingles throughout her body. His hands were firm yet gentle, tracing sinuous paths down her back.

His hands traced a searing path down her torso, his fingers brushing lightly over her skin. His movements were slow, his touch almost reverent as he traced the contours of her body.

The world outside ceased to exist, their surroundings fading into insignificance. It was just them, lost in each other’s arms, their hearts pounding in sync.

Suddenly, Sofia untangled herself from him to discard the remainder of her clothes. She watched as his eyes darkened further with desire and a hint of admiration. They stood there for what felt like an eternity, drinking in each other’s presence.

Zaraq moved toward her then, his large frame dwarfing hers as he pressed himself against her. She let out a small gasp at the contact, and he grinned against her skin. Their bodies molded together perfectly, two pieces fitting together to complete a puzzle.

His hand moved to cradle the back of her head as he pulled her closer for another all-consuming kiss. Sofia responded eagerly, their tongues dancing together as she wrapped herself around him.

His other hand moved slowly up her thigh to reach the junction of her legs. He plunged two fingers inside of her, and she cried out from the intensity.

He didn't falter. His hand moved rhythmically, exploring her with precision. His breath ghosted over her neck, and she shivered in response, clutching at his shoulders for support.

Her heartbeat echoed in Zaraq's ears, the staccato rhythm matching his own. He drank in her sounds, the pleased cries and gasps that were solely for him. Each one was a sweet melody that coiled around his heart, stoking the fire within him.

"Zaraq," she gasped, her hands clutching at his shoulders for support. His response was a low growl and a quickening of his movements.

His fingers moved inside of her with practiced ease, hitting all the right spots that he knew would drive her crazy. His thumb flicked over the sensitive nub of her pleasure, and she let out a whimper of anticipation.

"Shh... easy, love," he whispered, his voice strained with his own desire as he helped her ride out the waves of pleasure coursing through her body.

Suddenly, he stilled his fingers and withdrew them, wanting more. He gently lifted

her in his arms, carrying her to the bed with an easy strength.

Her hands found purchase on his broad shoulders as he carefully lay down beside her. She curled into him, leaning into his warmth as he draped an arm around her, pulling her even closer.

Zaraq's hand traced leisurely paths along her spine, and he felt a shiver move through her. His lips brushed against her forehead, relishing the feeling of her skin. She helped him out of his clothes and then guided his throbbing member to her opening.

With one quick thrust, he was buried to the hilt inside her, eliciting a gasp from both of them. The sensation was overwhelming, a mix of pleasure and pain that rendered her breathless. He stilled for a moment, allowing her to adjust to his size before he started moving.

His thrusts were slow at first, each one sending wave after wave of pleasure coursing through her body. As he picked up his pace, their bodies moved in a practiced rhythm. Their moans filled the room, mingling with the soft rustling of the sheets and the faint hum from the city outside.

Sofia traced her fingers over his taut muscles, feeling them tense beneath her touch. A sheen of sweat made his skin glisten in the dim light, the cords of his neck standing out as he moved within her.

The room filled with their shared breaths and whispers of pleasure. Sofia clung to him, her body writhing in time with his thrusts.

Zaraq buried his face in the crook of her neck, his breath hitching with each thrust. His fingers dug into her hips, pulling her closer as he tried to anchor himself amid the overwhelming sensation.

Their bodies moved together, two perfect halves of a whole, their synchronized rhythm colliding with the silence of the room. A low moan slipped from Sofia's lips and echoed in the dimly lit space.

His kisses trailed down her neck, nipping lightly at the sensitive skin there before trailing back up to capture her lips once more. Their kiss was searing, their tongues tangling and untangling as they drowned in each other's warmth.

Zaraq knew the pressure was building within her again, a taut coil winding tighter and tighter with each stroke. Her fingers traced patterns on his back, nails digging into his skin as he lost himself in her.

Feeling her tighten around him, Zaraq groaned deeply. His movements became more frantic as he chased his own release. He buried his face in the crook of her neck, his hot breath against her skin sending shivers down her spine.

"Zaraq," she moaned, her head moving from side to side as if delirious. His hand slid down to where they were joined, his thumb applying pressure on her sensitive nub again.

His thrusts became more insistent. He was hers and she was his in this moment of pure bliss. Their souls intertwined with every gasp, every whisper of the other's name.

"Zaraq," she cried out again, closing her eyes as a wave of pleasure washed over her. His name echoed in the room as her climax took hold of her, coursing through every inch of her body. Her body trembled beneath his.

Feeling her climax around him pushed Zaraq over the edge, too, spilling into her with a deep groan that echoed around the silent room. He cradled her close as they rode out their shared orgasm together, their hearts pounding in unison.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:25 am

Sofia

Sofia woke to find Zaraq gazing at her, his deep purple eyes lightening as she tilted her head up to look at him. The morning sun made his silver-gray skin almost shimmer, and his sleek black hair, usually tied up, framed his face now and spilled across the pillow.

Against the white hotel sheets, still carrying a slightly purple tinge from his Gorian disguise, Zaraq appeared otherworldly. That is, more otherworldly than usual.

“How long have you been awake?” Sofia asked, stretching to shake the sleep from her bones. As she moved, she felt her naked body pressed up against Zaraq’s and a thrill ran through her as she remembered the previous night’s lovemaking.

Because that’s what it was. Wasn’t it? An outpouring of the love that was growing between them?

“Hours,” Zaraq replied with a grin. He brought his hand up to brush a strand of auburn hair from her face, lingering to stroke the soft skin of her cheek.

“Have you been staring at me the whole time, creeper?” Sofia joked, but beneath her sarcasm, the thought of him watching her made her giddy.

“Uh-huh,” Zaraq admitted without an ounce of self-consciousness. “You’re beautiful when you’re asleep.”

At this, he smiled, and Sofia could see the adoration clear in his gaze. It wasn’t

something she'd seen before, and it made her both deliriously happy and painfully self-aware.

"Sorry to have ruined the effect," she replied, trying to ease that tension in her. But despite her words, her hands came up to caress Zaraq's bare chest, and her voice was soft.

"You're even more beautiful when you're awake." Zaraq gazed at her for another moment and then leaned forward and kissed her. His soft lips sent a wave of pleasure crashing over Sofia.

As they kissed, Zaraq pulled her closer to him, and she felt suddenly safe in his arms. His strength comforted her, and like the night before, she felt his protectiveness. It was as though he didn't want to let her go—not into the streets of Rikuus, not into the dangerous underworld, and certainly not into Vexis's company.

When he pulled away, she saw the adoration in his eyes replaced by the same worry that had clouded him for the last several days.

"I'll be okay," she assured, without him needing to speak.

She wasn't sure if she completely believed her own words, but there was nothing more she could say or do. Their plan was already in motion, and stopping it now would only put them all in more danger.

Zaraq seemed to recognize this and instead of arguing with her, he simply nodded, letting his fingers trace the curve of her jaw again.

"I know I've told you to be careful a thousand times, so I won't say it again," he told her, letting his fingers curl around the back of her neck. The sensation was comforting to Sofia. "But what I haven't told you yet is that I think I'm falling for

you.”

In Sofia’s chest, her heart suddenly did somersaults, or maybe it was bursting into a thousand butterflies, or possibly even melting and exploding at the same time. Whatever it was doing, Sofia had never experienced anything like it before, and it took a long while for her to find the breath to answer.

“Me, too,” was all she could muster when she finally found her voice again.

For someone who usually had no issue churning out a tirade of words on command, the act of being made speechless was another new experience for Sofia. The words she’d uttered sounded, to her, entirely inadequate to describe what she was feeling toward Zaraq, but judging by the grin that spread across his face, she’d said exactly the right thing.

He pulled her into another kiss, this time passionate and deep, their bodies pressed against each other in some sort of desperate fervor. Neither of them said it out loud just yet, but it was clear something other than longing lingered in their kiss, in their touch. It was fear.

They spent the morning in bed, kissing, cuddling, and then making love again. Their bodies were becoming attuned to each other, and they came together in a grasping frenzy as if it might be the last time. That was something neither of them could bear to say out loud, but the impending threat of their plan hung over both of them.

When they lay together after making love again, panting in unison, Sofia turned to Zaraq. She draped herself over his chest and whispered in his ear.

“I’m coming back,” she told him. “I promise.”

At this, Zaraq stiffened, wrapping his arm around Sofia’s waist. He shifted so he was

looking her in the eye, and Sofia saw a heaviness that hadn't been there before.

"I know you can't promise that," he told her solemnly. "You managed to trick him yesterday," he added, holding up a hand to Sofia's protests. "But this guy is mean. If he really did kill Ryka, he's dangerous and probably unpredictable. Please don't underestimate the danger you're putting yourself in."

Sofia took a deep breath, letting his words sink in.

"I know," she told him, and she meant it. "But it's worth it for you. Besides, he might be an alien man, but he's still a man. You're not the only one charmed by my feminine wiles."

She shot him a grin, hoping the joke might help lift the mood, but Zaraq only smirked.

"Hopefully, he's not too charmed," Zaraq answered, some of last night's jealousy flashing in his eyes again.

Sofia could tell he was torn about her flirtation with Vexis, and she gave him a kiss on the cheek to comfort him.

"Don't worry, you're the only alien I have eyes for."

With that, she sat up, swinging her legs over the side of the bed and wrapping herself in the sheet. Her body craved some breakfast to re-energize after the unexpected morning sex.

"Hungry?" she asked, pulling the room service menu onto her lap. Behind her, she felt Zaraq shift. A moment later, he was wrapping his arms around her from behind and kissing her neck.

“Insatiable,” he joked, moving his lips up and sucking softly on her earlobe.

Sofia laughed, leaning into him. “You know what I mean.”

Finally, they managed to order breakfast, and while Zaraq showered, Sofia got dressed. For now, it was her usual cargo pants and her favorite shirt—a Ghostbusters tee she’d had since she was a teenager. She knew that night she’d be slipping back into some skimpy outfit, though. She just hadn’t yet figured out which one.

Nevertheless, the thought of flirting with Vexis again made her tense. When someone knocked at the door, she almost jumped out of her skin.

By the time Zaraq was out of the shower, Sofia had laid their breakfast out on the table and was picking absentmindedly at the meal.

“I thought you were hungry?” he said as he emerged from the bathroom, tousling his hair with a towel. At his waist, he’d wrapped himself in another towel, leaving his chest bare and glistening with water. It was almost enough for Sofia to pull him back into bed for round three, but she knew they had to focus.

“Do you have a blaster? I saw one in your pack that day in the catacombs,” she said suddenly. A half-eaten piece of toast, or what passed as toast on Rikuus, was suspended over the table in her now-still hand.

Zaraq looked taken aback but recovered quickly.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” he said, abandoning his hair-drying and sitting down in the high-backed chair beside her. “I figured it was better to keep that sort of thing away from you for as long as I could.”

Sofia thought for a moment, watching her breakfast spread drip slowly to the side of

her toast. She finally decided this latest lie of omission fit into the same category as his other lies—forgivable because he intended to protect her. Right now, though, she needed something more tangible than ignorance to keep her safe.

“Can I take it with me tonight?” The piece of toast was beginning to get soggy, drooping in her hand while she waited for Zaraq’s answer.

It was clear he was battling with himself as he mulled over the question.

“You’ve used one before?” he asked finally, one eyebrow raised.

Sofie nodded and quickly shoved the piece of toast in her mouth before it disintegrated entirely. The alien jam, or whatever it was, was actually pretty good, and Zaraq’s question was slowly reviving her appetite.

“I can handle a weapon,” she told him after swallowing the mouthful.

“Only use it if it’s absolutely necessary,” he told her with a warning look that made her want to scoff. “Pulling out a blaster is liable to get you shot if you don’t—”

Sofia reached across the table, stopping him in his tracks. With a sigh, he turned his hand over, clasping her fingers in his.

“Sorry,” he relented. “I know you’re more than capable. I just don’t want you to get hurt. I really care about you.”

Sofia felt those exploding butterflies in her chest again and squeezed Zaraq’s hand.

“I care about you, too,” she told him, turning her body toward him so they were gazing straight at each other. “That’s why I’m doing this. And that’s also why you need to give me your blaster.”

At this, Zaraq mustered a smile. “Do you always get what you want?” he teased.

“I told you, feminine wiles.” Sofia ran her free hand over her curves for Zaraq’s benefit, and this time he laughed.

“I guess I can’t argue with that.” He pushed his chair away from the breakfast table and strode over to the bag he’d stashed in the corner of the room. Within a few seconds, he’d fished the blaster out and held it up for her inspection.

The small black weapon had a silver barrel, exactly what she’d caught sight of in the catacombs. The blaster was no more than six inches across, but she knew from experience not to underestimate it. She’d seen one of these pack a punch when necessary, and she didn’t envy anyone who had to stare down its barrel.

“Thank you,” she said as Zaraq placed the gun on the bedside table next to her purse.

When he came back to the table, she grabbed a piece of unidentifiable alien fruit. It dripped with a rich syrupy juice that reminded her of honey.

“Want some... honey fruit?” she asked, leaning forward while the fruit syrup dripped over her fingers.

“Jasfora,” Zaraq corrected with a smile. “And yes.”

Sofia returned the grin, holding her other hand beneath the jasfora to catch the drips. She brought the fruit to his mouth and fed it to him, letting him lick the syrup from her fingers. The warmth and wetness of his tongue had her body buzzing with endorphins all over again.

“Now your turn,” Zaraq replied. “Have you tried any laki yet?”

He gestured to a box of what looked like baklava, only white. Sofia shook her head, hoping Zaraq was about to return the favor, and to her delight, he did.

Only she wasn't quite as graceful as he had been when eating the jasfora. She immediately managed to cover herself in a fine dust of snow-white crumbs. Worse still, some of them went up her nose.

“Achoo!”

Her sneeze sent the remaining crumbs billowing into the air, and when she opened her eyes, she saw that Zaraq was staring at her with a look somewhere between amusement and utter confusion.

“What was that?” he asked, baffled.

“What, the sneeze?”

“Is that what you call it?” Zaraq raised his eyebrows, clearly fascinated.

Sofia laughed, shaking her head. “Don't tell me aliens don't sneeze.”

“None that I know of.”

Sofia thought about it. Now that he mentioned it, she didn't think she'd ever seen Arccoo sneeze, or any other alien for that matter.

“Well, I guess it's just another one of those weird human things,” she told him with a grin.

“One of those endearing human things,” Zaraq corrected, pulling her out of her seat and into his lap.

For a moment, she thought Zaraq was going to start feeding her breakfast again, but instead, he just held her close. She could feel his breath against her, his arms warm and tight around her.

The gesture was heavy with meaning, and Sofia was forced, all over again, to think about what might happen if her date that night didn't go as planned. And it wasn't just her own safety that was at risk.

She'd tried to push the thought from her mind until now, simply focusing on her own part of the plan, but now, as they sat silently in each other's arms, clutching each other, Sofia finally acknowledged that Zaraq was risking his own safety that night, too.

"You'll be in and out quickly, right?" she asked now, running her fingers up the shimmering skin of Zaraq's bare biceps.

"As soon as I can find what I'm looking for," Zaraq answered, and she felt his breath warm on her shoulder. "That bastard has to have it somewhere."

"What if he doesn't?" she asked, fear finally tinging her voice.

"Then I'm doomed either way."

The words hung heavily between them, filling the silence with a kind of dread that made them cling to each other even tighter. The thought that they wouldn't get through this had barely crossed Sofia's mind, but now, on the brink of it all getting very, very real, the possibility made her heart ache.

The tension was suddenly broken by a knock at the door. For a second, Sofia and Zaraq froze, expecting the worst, but when Elena's voice called out, they breathed a sigh of relief.

“Coming!” Sofia called, motioning for Zaraq to hide just in case.

When she opened the door, though, Elena was alone except for a stretch of black fabric she held in her hands.

“I think we landed in the right part of town for skimpy dresses,” she announced, barging into the room without asking.

“Sure, come right in,” Sofia joked, shutting the door.

Elena stopped in her tracks when Zaraq stepped out of the bathroom. He was still clad in only a towel, and it took a second for Elena to snap out of it.

“Uh, well, I can see you’re busy,” she said, turning to Sofia with a knowing grin. “Just wanted to give you this for your, uh... date.”

Elena held up the black dress—a sleek, figure-hugging piece with cutouts designed to reveal Sofia’s waist. In the background, Sofia could see Zaraq’s skin flush blue. She could only imagine the jealousy he was feeling, knowing she was wearing this dress for someone else.

“I guess I’ll leave you to it,” Elena muttered, giving Sofia’s arm a squeeze.

When it was just her and Zaraq in the room again, they gazed at each other for a long moment. This time, they didn’t say anything. Sofia knew as well as Zaraq did that in a few short hours they would both be risking their lives for Zaraq’s freedom.

Sofia’s throat tightened a little at the thought, and though she wanted to speak, the words stuck in her throat. Finally, she simply stepped forward and folded herself into his arms, breathing him in.

She couldn't say it out loud just yet, but she knew if they made it through this, there were three words she needed him to hear.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:25 am

Zaraq

Zaraq's reconstructed helmet kept knocking against the back of his head as the pod zoomed haphazardly toward Vexis's house in the rich part of town. He was pretty sure one of the wires Elena had put back in had come loose again, and along with the banging from the bouncy pod ride, he got a small electric shock every so often if he bumped it too hard.

"Ouch!" he muttered under his breath when the pod screamed over a particularly deep pothole.

He wanted to tell the driver to take it easy on the bumps, but he decided the risk of drawing attention to himself just barely outweighed the risk of concussion and electrocution.

So he kept quiet, trying not to think of what Sofia and Vexis were doing. She'd said they were going dancing, leaving Vexis's place empty, but "dancing" in the underworld was rarely an innocent affair.

Worse still, Vexis had decided to take her to Goendir—one of the planet's shadiest clubs, known for its sleazy clientele, frequent bar fights, and illicit drugs. He'd warned Sofia to always keep an eye on her drink, to refuse any "cigarettes," and to stay alert. But beyond that, he knew he couldn't do much.

He pulled his pack across the greasy transport pod seat and double-checked its contents for the night's mission. Conspicuously missing was the blaster he'd carried everywhere since escaping this wretched planet. But he silently thanked Sofia for

insisting on taking it with her. He could probably do without it tonight, but if anything went wrong for her...

Something else tugged at his mind, though, something he couldn't let go of. Despite his best efforts, he couldn't help but get flashes of Sofia's skin and then of Vexis sliding his hands under her dress as they danced along to the club's pulsing music.

"Oh, gods no," he muttered to himself, his voice filling the helmet.

The thought of it was enough to make him want to hurl, but that wasn't an option for obvious reasons. Besides, it would put him squarely inside the "drawing attention to himself" category, which could ruin everything. Tonight, of all nights, everything had to go perfectly.

Trying to distract himself from thoughts of Sofia and Vexis's date, he turned and peered out the window at the dark streets. They were driving through the slums now, an area known for its constant power outages—an area where he had lived in for a while before finding work at the casino.

He took back his wish for the poddy to slow down. He knew all too well that stopping in a place like this almost guaranteed a pod-jacking, especially when the streetlights were out like they were now.

He thought back with shame to the time he'd spent there. It wasn't as if he'd stolen any pods himself, but he was only one step away from that being his life. And what he'd done for Slik in the end wasn't any better. It was arguably worse.

Outside, the streets had become illuminated again, the power shuddering back to life, and soon the ghettos were behind them. Zaraq only hoped he could leave them behind for good.

His thoughts were broken by the pod coming to a violent halt.

“That’ll be eighteen Rikuuns, pal!” the poddy shouted without bothering to turn around or even look in the mirror. Ordinarily, this would have annoyed Zaraq, but considering he was trying to stay incognito, he let it slide.

He tapped his wrist comm to the meter, waiting for the ping that confirmed the payment. The moment he heard it, he was out of the pod, not even turning to watch it leave.

Instead, his eyes were on Vexis’s house. The place was set back from the street, and Zaraq knew from his own days in Rikuus’s criminal underworld that this was intentional. The streetlights didn’t reach that far back, which meant anyone coming or going by night was shrouded by the building’s shadows.

Usually, this was to obscure shady deals, protect the identities of sex workers, or hide mob connections. But tonight, it worked in Zaraq’s favor.

Sticking close to the fence and using a large salika tree to obscure him, Zaraq crept toward the house. It appeared still, and when he saw and heard nothing for several minutes, he hurried forward to the front door.

As he approached the security panel, he reached into his pack and pulled out the reader Sofia had used to hack the door the day before. With one press of a button, he saw the huge obsidian doors slide open, and Zaraq slipped inside before anyone on the street could notice.

Inside, he pulled off his helmet, relishing his first breath of fresh air since leaving the hotel. The house smelled all too familiar, like shaka smoke and alcohol—the same way the casino and almost every gangster’s home smelled. Still, it was better than being trapped behind the glass of the helmet, and he could see better, too. Setting the

apparatus down on the foyer table, he let his eyes adjust to the dim light.

The house was enormous, but Sofia had already given him a good idea of where to look for the proof he needed. He crept through the silent foyer, making his way to the living room.

“There you are,” he muttered as he caught sight of the gun cabinet.

It was just where Sofia had described, and as he approached, he caught sight of the large silver digital lock that held the thing shut. On a whim, he tugged at the handle, just in case, but it didn’t budge.

“Guess we’ll have to do this the old-fashioned way,” he said, putting down his pack and pulling out a series of wires connected to a small black box.

During his time at the casino, he’d broken into his fair share of debtor’s houses, waiting for them in the dark with a baseball bat or sometimes a garrote. He could still feel the struggle of the men he’d choked just enough to scare them, still hear the crunch of kneecaps breaking and the cries of his victims as they begged for mercy.

The thought made him shudder, and he tried his best to push those dark memories aside. He reminded himself that finding justice for Ryka’s murder was his job now. It wasn’t enough to make up for all the harm he’d done, but it was a start.

At the very least, his former career meant he knew a thing or two about picking locks. The box in his hand was a lexor, and he popped the lid to the digital lock before connecting the lexor’s wires to the glowing control panel inside.

Within seconds, the lexor showed dozens of lines of code. Complicated but child’s play compared to some of the home systems and safes he’d hacked. It didn’t take more than a minute for the lock to chime its opening bell and slide open.

“Whoa,” Zaraq muttered as he pulled open the cabinet doors. Blue light spilled out, momentarily blinding him, but when his eyes adjusted again, he knew he’d hit the jackpot. The gun cabinet was stocked with dozens of weapons—solaris guns, zapfa rays, semi-automatic blasters, and gamma knives along with an assortment of smaller weapons intended to intimidate. He knew these weapons all too well from his own time at Constellation Casino.

But the one weapon he was looking for wasn’t there.

He knew from the warrant out for his arrest that the cops were also looking for a sigma blaster connected to Ryka’s murder—a thin, straight tube about the size of a man’s hand. It didn’t look like much, but it harnessed ions in the atmosphere to shoot a small but highly concentrated energy blast. It would kill a victim in perfect silence and never needed to be reloaded. Sigma blasters were highly illegal and hard to obtain, even on Rikuus, which meant the chances of finding one were slim. That is, unless he was in the house of Ryka’s killer.

He scanned the cabinet again, but nothing in there matched what he was looking for. He was about to turn away and search the rest of the house when something caught his eye.

There, in the bottom corner of the cabinet’s floor, a small patch of the plush blue lining was worn away. It seemed like a strange spot for that amount of wear, and absentmindedly, Zaraq brushed his fingers across it.

A sudden voice emitted from the cabinet, startling Zaraq.

“Open,” it said, as the floor to the cabinet slid back and a small cache was raised.

Inside, Zaraq found a small white box that almost glowed under the blue lights, and when he opened it, his heart skipped a beat. There, half-hidden under some papers,

was a sigma blaster. For a second, all Zaraq could do was stare. His heart pounded and relief flooded him as he realized his nightmare might finally come to an end.

With his pulse still pounding in his ears, Zaraq pulled an airlock bag from his pack and carefully bagged the weapon, making sure not to touch it. As he did this, the papers that had been lying on top of the blaster spilled onto the floor. Zaraq shoved the sigma blaster into his bag and was about to put the remaining items back when he saw something that momentarily froze him.

Among the papers were several fake galaxy IDs, each under a different name. What they had in common was that they each featured a picture of someone he knew from the slums, someone he had practically grown up with.

Vexis was a common enough Rikuan name that he hadn't even considered Slikrim's new right-hand man might be known to him, but as he looked at the sneering face on the cards, Zaraq felt his face grow hot.

"I told you not to turn any lights on when we're doing the rounds," came a sudden voice from the other room. It was high and weedy, but unmistakably threatening, and Zaraq suddenly shot up, leaving the spilled contents of the box.

"You think I don't know how to do my job?" came a second voice, this one gruff and heavy.

Panicked, Zaraq knew he only had seconds before the guards followed the source of the light and found him. Grabbing his pack with one hand and a zapfa ray in the other, Zaraq scrambled away from the cabinet just as the men entered.

"Hey!" the weedy one shouted, but Zaraq had already run, darting through another doorway that led into a grand dining room.

Undeterred, the guards followed closely behind, yelling for him to stop.

But Zaraq hurtled through the room, knocking down chairs behind him in a desperate bid to block their path. He was pulling over the chair at the head of the dining table when he heard the first shot.

The telltale sizzle of a blaster whizzed past him, just narrowly missing his ear, and instinctively, he ducked. The zapfa ray was still clasped in his hand, and using the table as cover, he sent off two shots. One of the yellow rays connected with a frosted glass sconce just beside the doorway. The other just narrowly missed the gruff guard who Zaraq recognized now as Joran—a thug in the security team he'd always disliked.

Before the two men could recover, Zaraq fired a shot into the glass door beside him. In a flash, he emerged from the table and ran through the shards to the house's vast walled garden.

He could hear the guards inside, scrambling over the chairs and through the glass.

“Was that Zaraq?” he heard Joran yell.

“Who?” yelled the weedy one, but Zaraq aimed to be far away from there before that question was answered.

With all the energy he could muster, he sprinted through the garden until he reached the street. A new pod was in the drive —the guards' presumably—and Zaraq silently hoped they were stupid enough to have left the code unlocked.

Knowing Joran, I might be in luck.

The two men were coming from around the corner of the house just as Zaraq jumped

in the pod's driver's seat. To his utter relief, the DriveAI welcomed him as soon as he closed the door, and within seconds, he was speeding away from Vexis's home.

Several blaster shots followed him, one hitting the pod's side mirror, but nothing that would slow him down.

As Vexis's home grew smaller and smaller in the rear mirror, Zaraq let out a deep exhale, emptying the air from his lungs as if to breathe out the remnants of his adrenaline. His hands were still shaking a little as he pulled off the blue gloves he'd been wearing this whole time, stretching his fingers back and forth.

Apart from some chafing from the suit, and a small cut on his cheek from a piece of flying glass, he was entirely unharmed.

"I got lucky," he reminded himself, playing over the last ten minutes in his mind.

He knew he should have been more careful and staked out the place longer before entering.

Of course, Vexis had guards , he thought.

Yet...

As he directed the pod through some of the lesser-known back alleys and smaller streets, he felt a sudden elation course through him. Against all odds and in spite of his mistakes, he'd made it out. A broad grin crept across his face at the thought.

He'd been running from his past for so long, convinced he'd never come back to Rikuus, and even more convinced that no one would ever believe his innocence. But tonight had changed everything. His heart rate began to slow as he breathed in again, and he reached over to the pack he'd thrown into the passenger's seat beside him.

Zaraq moved aside the zapfa ray he'd thrown on top and, patting the pack, felt the familiar shape of the sigma blaster. This, he knew, was his ticket to freedom. Now, not only did he have proof that he didn't kill Ryka, but he also had a whole family of people who believed him, who had fought for him.

He couldn't wait to get back to the room and show Sofia. But as the pod pulled up outside the Kaylian Hotel, Zaraq's comm suddenly chimed.

If he hadn't still been wearing the purple makeup, anyone watching would have seen the color drain from his face as he read the incoming message.

Sofia

The thumping bass of the tightly packed club filled Sofia's ears, coursed through her body, and vibrated in her chest as she stepped deeper into the belly of Goendir. The place immediately got her hackles up, its sticky floors tugging at her high heels while all around her, the club's seedy clientele yelled, drank, smoked, and danced in varying states of inebriation.

The walls were painted a dull black, the occasional strobe light picking up the grime that had accumulated there over the years. Other than those bright flashes, the whole place was dark and shrouded in smoke. The music, apart from being bad, was loud, and Sofia could hardly hear herself think.

Aliens of all kinds moved on the dance floor, limbs, tentacles, and antennae bouncing in unison to the beat. Some moved deftly, others wildly, and some, Sofia noticed, appeared to move with very little control over their bodies at all.

As she followed Vexis further into the throng, she noticed a strange smell permeating the hazy air—something between burning rubber and strawberries. When she caught several pairs of shaky eyes staring at her from the club's darkened corners, she shuddered a little.

“Let's dance,” Vexis yelled over the music, turning and placing his hand on Sofia's lower back to steer her toward the crowd. She could feel his fingers touching her skin where the black dress opened at the waist, and it made her skin crawl.

“Aren't you going to offer me a drink first?” Sofia countered with a flirtatious smile.

She figured this might help prolong their night for Zaraq's sake. That and she didn't want Vexis to start grinding on her any time soon. The Rikuan paused, the club's strobe lights intermittently showing the smirk that was forming on his face.

"You women are all the same," he scoffed but turned around, guiding Sofia toward the bar instead.

When he finally took his hand off her back to order the drinks, she breathed a sigh of relief and buried her indignation at his sexist remark under the desire to get out of this date alive. Zaraq had said he only needed an hour or so to get the job done, and Sofia figured she could do anything for an hour. Even flirt with this cretin.

Sofia watched closely as the bartender mixed her drink, some bright orange concoction that Vexis had called a singe. Zaraq's words came back to her. "Watch your drinks, don't accept any 'cigarettes,' and most of all, stay alert."

She could definitely do those first two things, and she hoped the singe wouldn't impair her ability to perform the last.

Her thoughts were broken when she saw Vexis's enormous mauve hand wrap around the glass and lift it from the bar, along with his own drink.

"Let's hope this loosens you up a little."

"I'm sure it'll help," Sofia replied with a wink, taking the glass from him.

That seemed to do the trick, and soon Vexis was grinning at her, running his eyes hungrily over her body without a hint of subtlety. Without even looking her in the eye, he leaned down close to her ear.

"This way," he growled, taking her free hand in his.

He pulled her away from the bar, past the throng of dancers, and toward a set of red-carpeted stairs that led up to the club's mezzanine. A security guard blocked the staircase, but as soon as he caught sight of Vexis, he nodded solemnly and stepped aside. It was as though Vexis owned the place.

"Friends in high places?" Sofia asked as Vexis guided her to a VIP booth. As she sat down, the fake leather seats grabbed at her exposed thighs, and she attempted, in vain, to tug her dress down to cover them.

To her surprise and disgust, Vexis reached over from the seat opposite and stilled her hand, letting his fingers graze her legs.

"Leave it," he instructed, before letting his eyes drop down to her lap. It felt, to Sofia, almost as intrusive as his touch.

She could think of plenty of things to say in return, plenty of things she'd said to men in the past who couldn't keep their hands to themselves. But tonight she knew she wouldn't say any of that. She would play the perfect blushing beauty.

And then, when she got back to the hotel, she would take a long, hot shower to wash his touch, his gaze, and his words off of her.

"So, you're a big deal around here, huh?" she asked again, trying to turn the conversation away from how long or short her dress was supposed to be.

Vexis seemed to like this boost to his ego, and he removed his hand to lean back in his seat, sipping his drink with an arrogant grin.

"You have no idea how big I am," he told her once he'd swallowed his mouthful of singe. "But if you're lucky, you might find out."

Sofia forced herself to smile seductively, though everything in her wanted to throw her drink in his face. The only thing that kept her going was the knowledge that she was helping Zaraq, and her plan was working.

Maybe working a little too well, she conceded and tried to figure out how to keep Vexis on the hook but not give anything up.

“Aren’t you a charmer?” she lied, twirling her straw in her drink. “You learn that at the casino?”

She figured she could pump him for some information while she was at it, flirting just enough to distract him from what he might be giving away. She was just some bimbo dancer, after all. Right?

As a little extra incentive, Sofia pulled the straw out of her drink and lifted it to her mouth, keeping eye contact with Vexis the entire time. She twirled her tongue around the straw and sucked the slick orange liquid off it, knowing what she was doing was driving the Rikuan crazy.

The look in his eyes reminded her of a hungry dog, and she raised an eyebrow as if to say, well?

“I’ve had my fair share of women there if that’s what you mean,” Vexis replied, leaning forward again. “Women love a man in power.”

“Is that so?” Sofia asked, her nerves starting to get the better of her. Her flirtation was beginning to get dangerous, and she knew if Vexis got impatient, she might not be able to rein him in.

Instead, she took another sip of her drink and tried to figure out what to do. She figured she only needed to keep him busy for another half hour or so, and then she

could make some excuse to leave or slip out while he was buying another drink.

“Never had an Earthling girl, though,” Vexis continued, looking her up and down again. “I look forward to finding out what that’s like.”

“You’re very confident, I see,” Sofia teased, trying to slow him down. The pulse of the music below was getting faster now and so was the beat of her heart. Not only that, the singe was making her head spin a little.

“You want the job, don’t you?” Vexis asked, raising an eyebrow. “That’s how things work around here.”

Sofia panicked a little, but outwardly, she remained cool and calm.

“And here I thought you liked me for my personality,” she joked, letting out a low, sexy laugh.

Vexis seemed to enjoy this, and he grinned at her again, downing the rest of his drink in one shot.

“Come on, no more teasing,” Vexis told her as he smacked his lips. “I want to see you dance for me again.”

“Here?” Sofia asked, a little relieved. He might have been asking for a private show, but it was a hell of a lot better than him dancing with her. At least this way she could keep her distance.

Vexis nodded and leaned back in the booth again, gesturing with one hand for her to get up.

Setting down her half-finished singe, Sofia made a show of getting up slowly, the

way she had at his house the day before. She could feel his eyes on her as she stepped out of the booth, as she adjusted her dress, as she took her place in front of him.

Like last time, she started by shaking her hips, each movement getting more and more pronounced with every beat of the music. The look on Vexis's face told her he still liked this move, and she shot him a sultry smile to make sure she was holding his attention. The longer she could dance, the less she'd have to put up with him touching her.

As the bassline bounced, Sofia began to swivel her hips and run her hands up her sides, stopping to caress the skin that showed through the dress's cutout. Vexis literally licked his lips at this, and Sofia instinctively turned away to grimace.

Thankfully he didn't appear to notice, and instead, she worked the turn into her moves, giving him a spin to show off her body. When she turned back, though, she started. Vexis was making to get up from his seat and Sofia dreaded what would come next. Her skin crawled at the thought of him trying to kiss her, or worse, but she still had at least twenty minutes to kill for Zaraq to make it out safely.

A bright, high-pitched tone suddenly cut through the thumping bass, and in the dim light, Vexis's wrist comm lit up, casting the mezzanine in a ghostly blue glow. The call stopped Vexis in his tracks, and Sofia watched as a scowl crossed his face.

"Hold that thought," he told her before sitting back down and tapping the comm to answer.

Sofia let out a breath of relief. If this call lasts a while, I might get out of here unscathed .

"This better be good," Vexis barked into the device, his mauve skin turning a dark purple by the light of the comm. "I've got an alien girl practically begging for it over

here.”

Sofia felt another surge of disgust and anger rise in her, but by then she was practiced at swallowing her vitriol and fluttering her eyelids at the sleazebag, which was exactly what she did.

“Boss, someone broke into your place!” came a gruff voice over the comm, and Sofia’s blood suddenly ran cold. “The guy took something from the gun cabinet and get this... I think it was Zaraq!”

Sofia knew she should run, but the sound of his name made her freeze, and when Vexis turned his flaming gaze toward her, she couldn’t react fast enough. Her purse was still on the table, the blaster safely inside, but before she could reach it, Vexis was out of his seat. A split second later, his enormous hand was clamped painfully around her arm, and his face was right up in hers.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” he yelled at her, spittle flying from his mouth. “Nobody plays me and gets away with it.”

“What are you talking about, sweetie?” Some part of Sofia hoped she could still fake her way out of this, the way she’d faked her way into it, but even as she spoke, she could hear the guilt in her own voice.

Vexis was having none of it. “Save it. I’m not as dumb as you think.”

With that, he grabbed her purse off the table and yanked her toward the stairs. As she stumbled along, she caught the eye of the security guard who had let them pass.

“Help, please!” she pleaded, hoping that someone in the throng of hundreds of people would see what was happening and help her.

But the security guard simply turned away, acting as if he hadn't seen her. The rest of the patrons and staff did much the same—either too inebriated, too jaded, or too well-trained to make a fuss over her. To Sofia, it was clear a helpless woman being dragged from the club was business as usual.

Outside Goendir, Vexis shoved Sofia into his pod, slamming the door behind her. She considered, for a second, making a run for it, but even if the door was unlocked, which she doubted, where would she go? The club clearly offered no sanctuary.

An abrupt noise beside her startled her. Vexis had thrown open the driver's door, and the pod visibly dropped as he deposited his enormous frame into the seat beside her. He threw her purse at his feet before turning to her with a scowl.

“Give me that,” he growled, pointing at her comm device.

Sofia's heart sank, knowing her last hope of escape was being confiscated, but she did as she was told. The look of pure hatred in Vexis's black eyes scared her into obedience. At least for now.

She unbuckled the silver clasp of the wrist comm, but he grabbed it before she could even hand it over.

“Zaraq huh?” he muttered hatefully, as he tapped at her comm.

She could see the white markings on his shaven head glowing dimly in the night as if his anger was manifesting physically. For a brief moment, Sofia wondered if it was the Rikuan equivalent of getting red in the face, but she knew she had better things to be thinking about.

As Vexis searched for Zaraq's name, Sofia let her eyes drift to her purse. She could just see the corner of the pink leather sticking out beside Vexis's foot. It was

impossible to reach from where she sat, and of course, Vexis was between them. Her mind raced with possible solutions, but nothing came up.

“Zaraq, you worthless jirt!” Vexis suddenly barked into the comm, and Sofia could see he was sending a voice message. “You have something of mine and I want it back! Luckily, I have something of yours, too.”

He shot Sofia a wicked smile, something between desire and hatred.

“If you want the girl to live, you’ll bring back the sigma blaster,” he continued. “You’ve already lost your friend. Do you want to lose your pretty little girlfriend, too?”

At this, Vexis set down the comm and turned to Sofia again.

“Let’s hope, for your sake, he actually does like you for your personality.”

With that, he put the pod in drive and sped away from the club, the dark streets flying past their windows in a blur. A stone of dread rested heavily in Sofia’s stomach, getting heavier with each passing moment.

She knew she couldn’t let Zaraq come back for her. He’d be giving up everything they’d fought for. And more than that, she knew Vexis wasn’t the type to give a fair trade.

If she had anything to do with it, Zaraq wouldn’t get anywhere near Vexis’s house. Now she just had to figure out how to make sure of that.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:25 am

Zaraq

Zaraq's heart pounded as he heard Vexis's threat ring out over his comm. The blue suit he was wearing suddenly felt too hot and too tight, as though it was restricting his breathing. Zaraq pulled at his collar as he played the message again. But the words were still the same, the voice was still all too familiar, and the mention of Zaraq's "pretty little girlfriend" was still there, like a sucker punch to the heart.

That and he still couldn't seem to get enough air.

The guards' stolen pod seemed to reverberate with the Rikuan's snarling voice, and even though Zaraq knew he should hurry inside, out of sight and definitely out of the fluorescent light of his wrist comm, he felt momentarily frozen in the driver's seat.

Suddenly, though, a new thought invaded his mind, sending a jolt of energy rushing through him.

"He's bluffing!" Zaraq shouted, as he grabbed his pack and weapon, tore out of the pod, and slammed open the glass door of the hotel.

Somewhere in his mind, he knew this suspicion was unlikely. Vexis had called from Sofia's comm after all. But he could have stolen it, he reasoned, hoping against hope that Sofia was unharmed and waiting for him back in their room.

He barely noticed the confused look of the night receptionist as he ran past the welcome desk and up the stairs, his face still purple and helmet missing. Nor did he register Arccoo's curious inquiry when he passed him in the hallway. He didn't stop

running until he'd thrown open the door to his own room.

“Sofia!”

The vast space was silent, the purple-stained sheets still tousled from their morning's lovemaking, the remains of their breakfast wilted and stale now on the dining table. Even Zaraq's towel still hung on the back of the kitchen chair where he'd left it that morning. Nothing had been touched, not even by the housekeeping they'd made sure to refuse.

But Zaraq still didn't want to believe Vexis was telling the truth.

“Sofia! Are you here?”

He rushed into the bathroom, just in case she was simply out of sight, perhaps taking a long bath after the evening's unsavory activities. But like the bedroom, the bathroom was empty, its gleaming white walls staring back at him with total indifference.

As Zaraq turned to leave, he caught sight of himself in the mirror.

He was panting heavily, and his face was streaked purple with patches of his own gray skin shining through where he'd sweated off the makeup. The cut from the glass had begun to clot, leaving a scab of blue blood on his cheek. But what struck him most of all was the look in his eyes.

It was wild, angry, anguished. It was all his feelings for Sofia alchemized into a desperate concern for her wellbeing. In fact, it was all the things he hadn't allowed himself to feel for another person since he'd left Rikuus all those years ago.

The sudden rawness of it hit him in the chest. Without thinking, he spoke.

“I love you, Sofia,” he said out loud, hearing the power in his words. Words he wished he’d told her sooner. The thought that she was out there, her life at risk because she’d tried to save him from injustice, pained Zaraq. He, who hardly deserved a second glance from her because of his past, had not only put her in danger. He had failed to protect her.

As he continued to gaze into his own anguished eyes, he heard footsteps enter the hotel room.

“Sofia?” he cried out suddenly, tearing his eyes from the mirror and dashing into the room. But of course, it wasn’t her. The person who greeted him was Arccoo.

“I take it that means things didn’t go according to plan.” The Thryal prince gazed at Zaraq solemnly, his gray hands clutching the edges of his intricately embroidered robe.

“No, not exactly.” Zaraq crossed the room in just three steps, his boots heavy on the carpet and his brow tightly furrowed. In his hand he still clutched his pack, and when he pulled out the sigma blaster, Arccoo’s dark purple eyes widened.

“Is that...” he uttered, his gaze flicking between Zaraq and the weapon.

Zaraq nodded. “The weapon he used to kill Ryka.” The words hung heavily in the air, but the next part really weighed on Zaraq. “I’ve got the proof, but I wasn’t fast enough. Some of his guards found me. I got away, but Vexis figured it out. He has Sofia, and he wants to make a trade.”

Zaraq could feel the heat rising in his face as he said it, and he knew all the emotions he’d seen in the bathroom mirror must have been on full display now for Arccoo. For a moment, the two men stood in silence. The only sound in the hotel room were the shouts of fighting and revelry that floated up from the city’s sordid streets below.

Then another sound rang through the stillness. Zaraq's comm was chiming again, and he felt his heart jump into his throat.

When he checked the message, it practically jumped out of his body altogether.

"Zaraq," came Sofia's voice. It was a thin, hurried whisper but undeniably her. "Don't make the trade, okay? We worked so hard for this, and I knew the risks. Just promise me you'll—"

In the background, a sudden bang, like a door slamming, stopped Sofia in her tracks, and a second later, the recording stopped.

Zaraq didn't consider her suggestion for a moment, and when he looked up at Arccoo again, a fire blazed in his eyes. "I have to go get her."

Without another word, he stuffed the sigma blaster back in the pack and made to leave, but Arccoo stopped him with a hand to the chest.

"Do you have your own weapon?" he asked, his voice low but firm.

From the pack, Zaraq pulled out the small zapfa ray, but Arccoo just shook his head.

"If you're doing this, you're doing it properly. And with backup," he told Zaraq with the authority of a prince. "You might want to change as well."

Zaraq looked down at himself, the tight blue suit still clinging to his body. He could feel it hot around his throat again, and as much as he wanted to rush out and get Sofia back, he knew Arccoo was right.

"What backup are you talking about?" Zaraq asked, though he thought he already knew the answer.

“You’re looking at it.”

Arccoo held out his hand, his fingers splayed forward in the traditional Thryal greeting of solidarity. Zaraq hadn’t encountered that gesture since he was a child—not since his mother and father were alive.

With a solemn nod of thanks, Zaraq held his hand out at a ninety-degree angle to Arccoo’s and then slid his fingers between the prince’s. To seal the gesture, they each bowed until their foreheads touched.

When they stood straight again, Arccoo was smiling slightly. “We’ll make sure she comes home safely. You get changed. In the meantime, I’ll find you a real weapon.”

“Thank you.” Zaraq’s words came out thick with the gratitude he felt, and as he grabbed a pile of his regular clothes and ran to the bathroom to change, he thought again of how remarkable Sofia and her family’s solidarity had been.

As he unzipped the suit and finally released himself from its clutches, he was struck by a touching realization. Just a few weeks earlier these people had been strangers, and realistically, they owed him nothing. But as he was learning, that came second to their sense of justice and solidarity, as well as Sofia’s feelings toward him.

Zaraq could never have guessed that three Earthlings and a Thryal prince might rally behind him like this.

Out of his blue suit and gloves, and dressed once again in his black cargo pants, gray shirt, and black leather jacket, Zaraq wiped the last of the purple makeup from his face. When he stepped out into the room again, he was met by two of the three Earthlings, plus the Thryal prince he’d just been musing about.

“Sofia’s in trouble?” Carmen gasped the second he appeared.

She clutched Elena's hand tightly, and both sisters held panic and pain in their eyes.

"Not if I hand over the murder weapon." Zaraq wanted more than anything to set their minds at ease. "Which I'm about to do now."

He grabbed his pack from the bed again, glancing inside one more time to check the sigma blaster was where he left it.

He was about to ask Arccoo for the extra weapon when he caught Carmen and Elena exchanging a glance. They turned back to him with a look of determination.

"We're coming with you," Elena announced, her voice strong despite the fear she wore on her face.

"We need to get Sofia out of this mess," Carmen added.

In the large hotel room, the four of them stood in silence for a second, but Zaraq's heart ached at the thought.

"I'm sorry, but there's no way," he said finally. "Sofia would kill me if she knew I was dragging the two of you into this mess."

Carmen went to protest again, but this time, Arccoo stepped forward. He'd changed out of his regal garments and was now wearing something a little closer to Zaraq's outfit—a dark navy jacket, thick black pants, and, Zaraq noticed, the Thryal military boots he'd seen in Carmen's costume trunk.

The prince took Carmen's hand, holding it tightly. "Zaraq is right. It's far too dangerous, and I couldn't live with myself if anything happened to you. To either of you," he added, shooting Elena a look of deep concern. "It's best for everyone if Zaraq and I do this alone."

Zaraq nodded. “The fewer people the better. I know how deals like this go. A handover is supposed to be quick and easy. If we show up with too many people, Vexis will take it as a threat, and then it could be the end—for all of us. Better if it’s just me and Arccoo.”

Zaraq felt Carmen’s gaze intensify for a moment, and he knew she must be grappling with his words, with the thought of remaining helpless while her sister was traded like goods.

What Zaraq hadn’t said was the real reason he didn’t want them to come. He knew he had to fix this himself.

Because it was all his fault.

The weight of the guilt threatened to crush him, but he knew he couldn’t succumb to it, not now. He needed to fight for Sofia first.

Finally, Carmen’s dark brown eyes softened, and she nodded.

“Okay, but please, be careful. And Zaraq,” she added, stepping toward him with a heavy look in her eyes. “I know what you’re giving up to save her. Thank you.”

As she gazed at him, Zaraq saw her eyes grow glassy with tears. The air in the room felt suddenly thick, and if the others were anything like Zaraq, they were thinking about how terribly unfair this all was.

Zaraq wished he could say something to reassure them that everything would be all right, and for Sofia, he believed it would be. But as Carmen said, he was giving up his freedom all over again.

“We’d better go,” Arccoo interrupted, and suddenly the tension was replaced by

action.

As Zaraq got ready to leave, Arccoo presented him with a delta blaster.

“This will serve you better than that zapfa ray. Let’s just hope you don’t have to use it.”

Zaraq took the slim silver weapon from Arccoo’s hand, feeling the weight of it. It was significantly heavier than the zapfa ray, which, he now realized, was the worst weapon he could have snatched from Vexis’s arsenal. He managed a smile for the first time since he’d received the kidnapping message.

“I think you might be right about that.”

He stuffed the gun into the back of his pants and covered it with his shirt and jacket. With one last apologetic look at Carmen and Elena, he strode out of the room. Arccoo followed close behind after kissing Carmen goodbye, and by the time they’d gotten down to the dark street, Zaraq was feeling almost hopeful.

“This way,” Arccoo said, directing him away from the stolen pod and toward the hotel’s rear parking lot.

“Where are we going?” Zaraq asked, eager to get on the road.

“The best way to get arrested before you even get there is to drive around in what I assume is a stolen vehicle,” the prince declared. “Not to mention the warrant for your arrest and the murder weapon in your pack.”

Zaraq cursed under his breath, annoyed at his own impulsiveness.

“You have a point,” he conceded, beyond grateful for Arccoo’s levelheadedness.

“What’s the alternative?”

“I already commed a rental,” Arccoo explained. He swiped his wrist across the door of a sleek black Catraaka 6000 parked on the edge of the lot before slipping inside.

Zaraq, once again, was flooded with gratitude. He knew his inevitable incarceration would be a little less bitter now that he’d had the chance to make friends like this. At least his life hadn’t been a total waste.

“When we get there, I want you to stay in the car, okay?” Zaraq told Arccoo as he slid into the passenger’s seat. “I want this to be as clean as possible.”

Arccoo glanced at him skeptically as he started up the pod’s DriveAI.

“What makes you think any of this is going to be clean?” he asked, and the words cut Zaraq to the quick.

“It has to be.” His brow was set in a look of stubborn determination. “For Sofia’s sake.”

Without another word, Arccoo pulled the pod out from behind the hotel, and soon they were zooming up the seedy main street of Rikuus. All manner of nightlife still littered the city even at this late hour, and Zaraq hoped Sofia, at least, would be able to escape this place for good, even if he couldn’t.

Vexis’s house was still shrouded in shadow, just as it had been earlier that night. The only difference now was that a single light glowed from inside. Zaraq recognized it as the living room light, and he tensed as Arccoo brought the pod to a halt across the street.

“I should be out in ten minutes,” Zaraq told him, his voice low and strained.

“And if you’re not?” Arccoo asked. As he spoke, he absentmindedly touched his own weapon, holstered at his side.

“Then something’s gone wrong.” Zaraq said this matter-of-factly, reminding him of his old days. “Let’s just hope we don’t have to worry about that.”

With one last glance at the prince, Zaraq grabbed his pack, feeling the weight of the sigma blaster shifting inside. His own blaster was still tucked into his belt but as he made his way toward the tall black doors, his only thought was for Sofia.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:25 am

Sofia

The moment she heard the door open, Sofia scrambled to conceal the wrist comm in the pile of dirty clothes she'd been sitting on. Her heart raced as she shoved the device deep into the pile, turning her back to the laundry door to obscure her efforts.

One leg was bent beneath her, the other curled up almost to her chest, and she hoped the amount of thigh this revealed beneath her tight black dress would distract her captor. If she could get him staring at her legs, even just for a second or two, she might be able to draw his attention away from what her hands were doing.

“Hey!” barked Vexis from the doorway, striding into the small laundry room he'd commandeered for her captivity.

From where she crouched among his sweaty shirts and dirty underwear, Sofia turned her face toward him and brushed a strand of auburn hair away. She hoped she would appear unfazed by the Rikuan's tone.

The truth was, though, he scared her.

Still, she wasn't about to be bullied into submission, and despite her trepidation, she looked him square in the eye.

“Yes?” She raised an eyebrow and turned half her body to face him, just to drive the point home.

Vexis, who had, in fact, been staring at her thighs, suddenly met her eye. He scowled

and closed the gap between them before grabbing her by the wrist and pulling her roughly to her feet. The gesture took her off guard, and though she'd already discarded her heels, she stumbled for a second.

But what worried her more was Vexis's sudden violence. For a second, she feared she hadn't been fast enough in hiding the comm after all. Her heart thundered in her chest, and a single thought invaded her mind.

If he finds it, I'm done for.

For a long moment, Vexis simply glowered at her, his tall frame dwarfing her meager five-foot-six, his black eyes boring into her. The patterns on his skull were glowing again, shimmering a phosphorescent blue that rippled across his skin.

But all of a sudden he laughed, and the shimmering subsided a little. It was a cruel, grating laugh that reminded Sofia of scraping metal.

"You know, part of me hopes Zaraq doesn't come back with the weapon after all. I think I'd enjoy hurting you." He looked her up and down, the way he had just yesterday when she'd danced for him and the way he had in the club before everything went south.

Only this time an edge of violence crept into his gaze alongside the usual misogyny.

The words made Sofia shudder, and since she no longer had to feign flirtation, she tried to step back out of Vexis's grasp. He only gripped her wrist tighter.

"Ahh!" she cried involuntarily, but the sadistic look in his eye was obvious. When she saw how her outburst pleased him, it stopped her protestations short. Instead, she forced herself to stop wincing and softened her gaze.

“Zaraq didn’t do anything,” Sofia insisted, trying her best to maintain composure despite the pain shooting through her wrist. “And neither did I. This is all a huge misunderstanding! You have to believe me!”

She knew her lies were probably in vain, but she had to try anyway. If she could find some way of getting through to Vexis, even just for a moment, that could be the difference between life and death, between false imprisonment and freedom.

The look on the Rikuan’s face told her he wasn’t buying it, though. His mauve cheeks and nose wrinkled as his purple lips curled up into a snarl. The black eyes that had been so cruel just moments earlier now carried a hint of something else—amusement almost.

“Oh, really?” he spat, though not without humor. “So what, you just show up at my doorstep and lure me out of the house on the same night Zaraq breaks in and robs me? The same Zaraq you have stored in your comm? And I’m supposed to believe that’s a coincidence?”

The mention of the comm set Sofia on edge. Had he noticed it missing from the pod? He hadn’t seemed to realize she’d shoved it down her bra when he was dragging her into the house, but maybe he’d gone back to find it in the interim.

The question made her heart beat faster but she did her best not to show it. Instead, she attempted to steer the conversation in another direction.

“And what do you think he stole?”

Her free hand tugged nervously at the hem of her dress, while the hand Vexis gripped was beginning to turn numb.

When she glanced down, she saw her skin was turning white.

Vexis appeared to notice too and, to her relief, he finally released his grip. The feeling was short-lived, though. As Sofia cradled her hand, Vexis pulled open the black coat he was wearing and grasped at something tucked into his leather belt. Her heart raced to see it was a blaster, and as he pulled it out and held it up to her, Sofia's blood turned cold.

"I think you know what he stole," Vexis replied, fingering the shiny black metal of his weapon as if caressing a beloved pet, or perhaps a lover. His eyes glowed as he inspected the blaster, almost with adoration, but then flickered back up to meet her gaze.

"You ever seen a sigma blaster?"

His voice was a low rumble, and Sofia's breath hitched in her throat as Vexis brought the gun up under her chin. He was close to her now, his face filling her vision until she could see every pore in his mauve skin. This close up, she noticed that his black eyes held a tinge of yellow, and his breath was sour and hot on her skin.

"Uh-uh," Sofia breathed, not even daring to shake her head. She was frozen still by the cold metal pressed against her skin—something she'd never wanted or expected to feel.

He pushed it harder against her, tilting Sofia's head back to expose her throat. It was the most vulnerable she had ever felt, and as a woman who was used to taking control over risky situations, this was not only terrifying but deeply uncomfortable. She hated that with the advantage of a gun, Vexis had effectively reduced her to a frightened child.

"See, a sigma blaster is a very special weapon," Vexis crooned, finally releasing the pressure and instead sliding the blaster gently along her jawline and up toward her earlobe. "They're hard to come across and expensive. So it's a real shame Zaraq

decided he'd take mine for himself."

Sofia's breathing grew shallow as Vexis moved the barrel of the blaster down. He traced the line of her throat, the barrel catching momentarily at her clavicle. At her sides, her hands gripped tightly at the soft black fabric of her hem, as if to anchor her.

"That's the thing, though. A sigma blaster is a weapon with only one purpose—to kill, efficiently and silently. They're for professionals," Vexis continued, keeping the blaster aimed at Sofia's throat but bringing his dark eyes up to meet hers.

"I'm a professional. And if Zaraq knew that, he would have laid down and taken the rap for his friend's murder. I guarantee you the cops will go easier on him than I will. But he just couldn't do that. Could he?"

At this, Vexis dragged the blaster barrel further down Sofia's chest until the cold metal came to rest in her cleavage.

"Instead, he sent you to distract me so he could get his hands on the murder weapon."

Sofia tried to breathe again, attempting to ignore the threat that was all too real now. She'd made her choice to fight for Zaraq, and despite the gun, despite Vexis, despite her fear, that wasn't about to change.

"So you did kill his friend?" she asked, forcing her voice to remain steady. If she was going to die for the truth, she at least wanted to hear it.

Vexis chuckled, and Sofia felt the gun shudder a little against her chest along with his laugh.

"I did what I had to do to get where I am," he told her, his eyes glinting with malice. "And that means taking out anyone Slik doesn't like. Turns out traitors are bad for

business.”

“So, what, you just shot him? Just like that?” Sofia pressed, feeling emboldened now by the Rikuan’s confession.

She gazed pointedly at him, her green eyes alive with defiance. For a moment, Vexis paused, and then finally he dragged the barrel away, leaving a mark on Sofia’s breasts. She almost shuddered with relief but didn’t want to give him the satisfaction.

“If I’d been using a delta blaster, yes, I would have shot him,” he told her, glancing thoughtfully at the delta blaster in his hand. “But like I told you, a sigma blaster is special. It doesn’t shoot through matter. It disintegrates it. This means when I pressed my blaster against Ryka’s chest like I did to you just now, I didn’t shoot him in the heart. It would be more accurate to say his heart ceased to exist.”

The cruel smile that spread over Vexis’s face sent a cold shiver up Sofia’s spine.

“That’s horrible,” she uttered before she could stop herself. Her comment only seemed to fuel Vexis’s enthusiasm, though.

“No, you know what’s really horrible?” he asked with a grin. He tucked the blaster back into his pants as he puffed his chest out at her. “Being the one blamed for your best friend’s death. Slik is an artist like that.”

Sofia looked at Vexis’s cruel black eyes in horror as the truth started to dawn on her. Death would have been too kind an end, according to Slikrim. No, he had to make Zaraq suffer.

“He likes to teach lessons,” Vexis continued, finally stepping back a little. For the first time since her captor had entered the laundry room, Sofia felt like she had room to breathe.

“Killing Zaraq outright would have been effective, yes, but it was too quick, too easy,” Vexis went on, pacing a little in the small space. “Framing him, on the other hand... Well, that sends a real message. Doesn’t it? It says loud and clear that anyone who fucks with Slik will pay for it in the worst possible way.”

With this last thought, he grinned again, but just as quickly as he’d given her space, he closed it. Sofia, standing with her back practically against the wall, felt her whole body tense as he leaned down and whispered in her ear.

“And anyone who fucks with me is liable to do the same unless they cooperate.”

As Vexis pulled away, Sofia shuddered at the thought of what he might do to her. But everything he’d confessed over the last few minutes only served to strengthen her resolve. He was a killer—not only was he cold-blooded about it, but he actually seemed to enjoy it. She knew he needed to be brought to justice, no matter the cost. Even if it was her life.

“I’m cooperating. Aren’t I?” she asked defiantly as she came face-to-face with him again.

Vexis only smirked. “You’re not the one I’m worried about.”

With a parting glance, the Rikuan turned and strode out the door. As he closed it behind him, Sofia heard the telltale click of the lock sliding into place. Ordinarily, this would have frustrated her, but at that moment it was almost a comfort.

Exhausted by the interaction, she slid to the floor, feeling the soft pile of laundry cushion her body. Her heart was still racing as she forced herself to steady her breathing until she finally felt her heart slow. She was shaken, but she was still alive, and as long as she was alive, she could keep fighting this.

“Zaraq,” she whispered to herself, her heart suddenly aching at the thought of what might happen to him if he showed up there.

Sofia sat still for a second, straining her ears in the silence of the room. Outside she heard faint voices, but they sounded far away.

When she was sure no one was lingering at the door or trying to barge back in, Sofia rummaged through the pile for the wrist comm again. She dug through swathes of black shirts, gray pants, and more pairs of Vexis’s underwear than she cared to see. Finally, though, the shiny silver casing of the device appeared between the folds of a jacket.

The battery was concerningly low, but it had just enough juice to send Zaraq another message. She pressed the record button, hoping the tiny beep it emitted wasn’t audible through the laundry door.

“Zaraq,” she whispered urgently, a fresh wave of defiance coursing through her. “You have to clear your name. You have the proof to show you didn’t kill Ryka. Please, please just take that and get out of Rikuus. We worked too hard for Vexis to take it back.”

She sent the message but there was something else... those three words she wished she’d told him back in the hotel room before all this happened.

In her hand, she gripped the comm, debating whether to say it.

“I love you,” she whispered, but only to herself. The words, though she meant them, felt tacky in the context of a voice message.

She longed to tell Zaraq face-to-face. Leaning against the laundry wall, the pile of clothes beneath her, Sofia closed her eyes and remembered. She remembered her first

glimpse of Zaraq before she fell for him. It wasn't that long ago, yet it felt like a lifetime had passed since then.

The handsome alien that had surprised her in the catacombs had become so much a part of her life that she could hardly imagine it without him now.

The cold hard surface of the wall behind her dissolved, replaced by memories of her bed in the annex back on Thryal. The plush sheets that caressed her skin on that first night together, the warmth of Zaraq's skin on hers, the way he touched her, the way he made love to her.

The memory of Zaraq's kiss felt almost real, and when she opened her eyes, she realized she'd lifted her hand to her mouth. Her fingers absentmindedly traced the curve of her lips, as if she might grasp what was left of his kiss.

Sofia dropped her hand and let out a deep sigh. She glanced again at the comm still clutched in her other hand. It was obvious she needed to tell him how she felt, but after all they'd been through together, a comm message just wasn't going to cut it.

I'm gonna get out of here , she decided, pulling herself to her feet. I'm gonna get out of here. I'm gonna help Zaraq. And then, I'm gonna tell him I love him.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:25 am

Zaraq

Zaraq approached the tall obsidian doors that stood like a pair of ominous guards outside Vexis's house. For a brief second, it occurred to him that the dining room's glass door was still shattered and open to the garden. If he wanted to, he might be able to sneak around the side and take Vexis by surprise. He had Arccoo's blaster after all.

The weight of it in his back waistband was comforting, and for a second, he played through the idea. He imagined his feet deftly avoiding the shards of broken glass, entering the house undetected. Once he was inside the dining room, he'd climb silently over the toppled furniture and then into the living room where Vexis was probably holding Sofia.

With perfect aim, he'd take out Vexis and whoever else was in the room so fast they wouldn't have time to react. He imagined the look of gratitude and relief on Sofia's face as she turned to see him emerge from the shadows.

"Zaraq!" she'd cry, tears of joy welling in her eyes.

He'd run to her, hold her, and tell her everything was okay. That he'd come for her.

And then the two of them would escape together with the murder weapon still in their possession. They'd truly be free then. Free and in love.

The thought was intoxicating and, for a moment, Zaraq allowed himself to enjoy the fantasy of the life he'd always longed for but never had faith in.

But that was the problem. It was just a fantasy.

“No,” he whispered to himself, shaking his head as if to wash away the thought.

He knew Vexis and plenty of guys like him. A trade could only go one way, and the stakes here were higher than any he’d ever played with before.

Tempting as it was to play the hero, he knew anything other than the agreed-upon plan would put Sofia in danger. Just the thought of it made every muscle in Zaraq’s body tense.

He clenched his fists as he envisioned her imprisoned in that house somewhere, being threatened by Vexis. Or worse. No, the only way to ensure her safety was to play the game.

He glanced down to where he gripped his gray pack, the murder weapon giving it weight. Then, with one determined step, Zaraq approached the security panel he’d hacked his way through just a few hours before. The reader was now lying on the bed, back in the hotel room—not that it would do him much good now anyway. Vexis probably wouldn’t have appreciated a second break-in.

“I’m here.” His voice was somewhere between defiant and resigned, but he hoped Sofia could hear the intercom. He wanted her to know he’d come for her, that in spite of her admonition to stay away, he would never leave her.

The night was warm, and though he no longer wore the skin-tight blue suit, he still felt heat rising around his collar. It only grew hotter as he waited for a response.

Finally, a crackle came through the speaker, but before he could hear what was said, two pairs of hands grabbed him roughly from behind.

“Good of you to stop by,” came a familiar snarling voice, and Zaraq didn’t have to turn to know it was Joran speaking over his left shoulder.

Before he could react, the pack was snatched suddenly out of his right hand and the weedy guard from earlier that night stepped around him.

“And you brought gifts!”

The two men chuckled, their mirthless laughter dissolving into menace as the double doors slid open, and Zaraq was shoved inside. He felt his breath catch in his throat as he stumbled into the checkerboard foyer floor, though, because Joran had shoved him right where his blaster was concealed.

“Hey, what the fuck is this?” The guard’s meaty hands were already pulling up his shirt, and a second later Zaraq felt the scrape of the delta blaster against his skin as Joran pulled it out.

Zaraq spun around, but it was too late. Both guards were staring at him with menacing sneers. Joran’s yellow eyes practically bulged, looking sickly against his mauve skin as he held the weapon. Weedy reminded him of the animals called rodents he used to see in his dad’s studies of Earth.

“So, you upgraded,” Joran snarled, glancing down at the blaster. “I guess your little zapfa ray didn’t cause enough damage, so you came back to finish the job, huh?”

Zaraq felt his heart constrict as he realized the plan was already falling apart. In a vain attempt to get it back on track, he supplicated the guards.

“I wasn’t intending to use that,” he assured them, holding up his hands to show his innocence. “It was just for protection, just in case. But I’m here. I brought the sigma blaster, I’m making good on the deal like Vexis asked. I just want to take Sofia

home.”

Joran shot him a menacing grin and sniggered as if he knew a joke that Zaraq wasn't in on. Suddenly, the sound of heavy footsteps reverberated through the house, and for a second, Zaraq felt a surge of hope that at least he had done what he came to do—save Sofia.

When he turned around, though, he realized he was only hearing one pair of footsteps. And he could guess who they belonged to.

A rough hand from behind pushed him forward again—Weedy this time—and as Zaraq stumbled through the foyer, the truth dawned on him. The deal was never intended to go through. This was a trap.

From the dim shadows of the hallway, Vexis emerged, his face plastered in a look of triumph that made Zaraq's blood boil.

“For a boy who grew up in the slums, you're pretty fucking naive,” Vexis sneered.

Behind him, Zaraq heard Joran and Weedy chuckling.

Sycophants, he thought. But it did nothing to make him feel better.

Vexis stared at him for another moment, as if soaking in his victory, before shifting his gaze to the guards. Without a word, he lifted his hand, making a motion for them to hand over what they'd taken from Zaraq. Like two children eager to please their teacher, the guards hurried forward and presented the pack and the blaster, shoulder-checking Zaraq as they passed.

Zaraq watched helplessly as Vexis took Arccoo's blaster and smirked.

“Nice toy,” he said, turning the gun over in his hands. “I’ll be taking this in exchange for the zapfa gun you stole. I think that’s a fair deal. Don’t you?”

Again, Vexis’s cronies boosted their boss’s ego with a snigger. Zaraq remembered what that was like, pretending every word Slikrim said was holy scripture just so he wouldn’t get killed. It was a debased life, and despite the position he found himself in now, he was glad he answered only to himself now.

Vexis lay the weapon on the sideboard that ran the length of the hallway and turned his attention to the pack.

“But this is what you really owe me.” He snatched the bag from Weedy’s hand, tearing open the zipper and peering inside. His black eyes widened at what he saw.

Pulling out the sealed bag that still contained the murder weapon, Vexis smiled cruelly.

“You know, I haven’t used this since I got rid of Ryka,” Vexis revealed. The look in his eyes when he said it made Zaraq clench his jaw. It almost seemed as if Vexis was remembering the murder with fondness.

Zaraq, on the other hand, remembered it very, very differently. He remembered the silence in Ryka’s house the day he’d gone to visit. He remembered the stack of business papers he’d been holding proudly—everything they needed to start their own venture and free themselves from Slik’s reign of terror. He remembered calling out his friend’s name, wandering through each room until finally, he saw a denim-clad leg sticking out into the hallway.

He remembered running, the papers falling and scattering like leaves as his footsteps fell heavily, and then the thud as his knees struck the floor beside Ryka’s body.

And most of all, he remembered the wound—a gaping black hole in his friend’s chest, its edges singed and cauterized. He wished he remembered Ryka’s face, but when he tried to picture it in his mind, all he saw was the black hole where his friend’s heart should have been.

Anger, grief, and a grave sense of injustice swelled in Zaraq, but Vexis was smiling. He’d dropped the pack to the floor and was now inspecting the sigma blaster thoughtfully through the clear airlock bag.

“If you’ve never shot a sigma blaster, you don’t know what true power is,” Vexis mused, his black-hole eyes flickering up to meet Zaraq’s again. “I think you should have that chance.”

The words puzzled Zaraq for a second, and even Joran and Weedy appeared perplexed at Vexis’s words.

“If you’re the target, then sure,” Zaraq spat, his skin prickling with the rage that bubbled just below the surface.

Vexis let out a short, ugly laugh. “Not exactly what I had in mind.”

The Rikuan took a step forward, shortening the space between them. “See, nobody fucks with me and gets away with it. And I learned a thing or two from Slik. If you really want to get back at someone, you take away the thing they love the most. And then, you frame them for it.”

As the meaning of these words dawned on Zaraq, he was overcome with the urge to beat Vexis to a pulp, and he started forward. The sigma blaster in the Rikuan’s hands, the presence of the guards, the threat to his own life—these all meant nothing in the face of Sofia’s safety.

Within seconds though, Joran had him by the arms, his hands fastened painfully behind his back.

“You didn’t really think I was going to let either of you go. Did you?” As he spoke, Vexis’s lip curled up into a cruel smile. “Think about it. I have you, I have the girl, and I have the weapon. You handed me everything I needed to get rid of you for good.”

As Vexis spoke, Zaraq tried to formulate a plan. He tried to figure out how to stop Vexis from taking everything from him. The hallway was wide, but with Vexis ahead of him and Joran and Weedy behind him, Zaraq had nowhere to run.

Not only that, but he was without a weapon. Even if he could escape unscathed, he had no idea where Sofia was being held. He’d be dead before he could check the first door.

In his peripheral vision, he could see the darkened arched doorway leading into the living room. Maybe if he could break free from Joran’s grip, he could dash into the living room and snatch a weapon from the black gun cabinet—if it was even still open.

Even if it was open, the odds of getting there before Vexis and the guards opened fire were minimal. And even if he did, he’d still be one against three, and there was nowhere to take cover. Once again, he’d be dead long before he got to Sofia.

His only hope was Arccoo who, he assumed, was still waiting in the car for him. But the same rules applied—Arccoo would be walking into a death trap, and as much as he needed the help, part of him hoped his friend wouldn't come to the rescue.

No matter which way he looked at it, he couldn’t think of any way he’d get out of there alive, let alone rescue Sofia.

“So, here’s what I’m thinking,” Vexis continued, still stroking the bagged sigma blaster. “We wheel out your little whore, you say your last goodbyes, and then you get the honor of doing to her what I did to Ryka.”

“What the hell makes you think I’d do that?” Zaraq spat, straining toward Vexis even though it sent pain shooting through his restrained arms. “I’d sooner die.”

Vexis grinned again, but hatred shone in his eyes as he stared at Zaraq, almost eye-to-eye. “Where’s the fun in that?”

“You’re deranged!” Zaraq shouted, the anger coursing through him.

“No, I’m just very good at what I do. And don’t act like you’re innocent, either. You’re the one who used to go around shaking down Slik’s debtors and smashing kneecaps. At least I know what I am.”

Vexis’s words cut him deeply, but Zaraq refused to let the cretin get in his head.

“People can change,” he retorted, finally breaking free from Joran’s grasp. “I changed.”

“Not in the eyes of the law you didn’t.” Vexis seemed to be enjoying the reaction he was getting out of Zaraq, so he kept pushing. “In the eyes of the law, you’re a cold-blooded killer—the kind of man who kills his best friend over a business deal gone wrong. The kind of man who’ll kill his own girlfriend in a jealous rage after following her to her lover’s house.”

The Rikuan, pleased with himself, shot Zaraq a salacious smile.

“I guess she was unsatisfied,” he continued. “Came looking for some Rikuan cock since her Thryal boyfriend couldn’t give her what she wanted.”

Zaraq tried to control himself, but hearing Vexis talk about Sofia that way flipped a switch inside him.

“You shut your godsdamned mouth!” Zaraq shouted, getting right up in Vexis’s face.

Joran and Weedy gripped his shoulders again, but Vexis held up his hand to stop them.

“That’s the spirit,” Vexis told him, his voice low and threatening. “That’s the energy I want to see from you when the cops show up.”

The words bored right into Zaraq’s heart, and slowly, his defiance began to ebb. As much as he hated to admit it, he was beginning to realize that Vexis would win this. In fact, he had already won.

Zaraq was outnumbered and unarmed, and the story Vexis was spinning was just as believable as the truth. Maybe even more believable since Zaraq was the wanted criminal in this situation. The only proof he had to the contrary was the sigma blaster and that was now in Vexis’s possession again.

Zaraq felt the energy drain from him, his muscles going limp as he realized he had failed Sofia. There, in that marble-floored hallway, Zaraq had lost everything—his dignity, his faith, his chance at redemption. And most of all, he’d lost the only woman he’d ever loved.

He’d failed her, which was something he could never forgive himself for, as long as he lived.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:25 am

Sofia

The smell of Vexis's dirty clothes was beginning to give Sofia a headache, and she recoiled from the stench, her lips tilting down into a grimace. It smelled like a mixture of sour alien sweat, old sneakers, and something else—that same burning rubber and strawberry smell from the club.

She didn't want to think about what that might be. Instead, she stretched her legs out and braced against the wall. It was about time she got up off the laundry room floor, she decided. And besides, she needed to keep moving.

Just before her comm had died, it had blinked the time as 4:03 a.m. Despite the panic that had kept her awake until now, Sofia was beginning to feel the adrenaline wearing off and her body catching up to itself.

Her bones felt heavy, her muscles weak, and her wrist and arm where Vexis had grabbed her were beginning to bruise. Pushing herself off the wall, Sofia managed to stand. Her thoughts, of course, were fixed on Zaraq.

Even though she'd told him in no uncertain terms to stay away, if she was honest with herself, she knew he wouldn't. She wrapped her arms around herself, rubbing her bruised arm and missing his touch. What they had was real, that much was undeniable. And even if he was a criminal in his past life, he wasn't that person anymore. He wasn't a coldhearted and ruthless individual. He was kind, he was caring, and most of all, he loved her.

Those words flitted around her mind like butterflies, and Sofia smiled, despite

herself. He hadn't said it, but she was sure. He loved her the same way she loved him.

A swell in her heart told her Zaraq would never leave her there at Vexis's mercy, no matter what she'd told him about taking the weapon and getting away from all this. The thought made her more determined than ever to get out of there, though.

"If I can escape before he gets here..." she muttered to herself, letting her arms drop to her sides again. Although the chances seemed remote, she wasn't giving up hope. "But how the hell am I gonna get out of here?"

She paced as she pondered, her bare feet sticking and unsticking on the tiled floor. They brought her to a stop in front of the door—the only way in or out of the laundry room.

Sofia had paid attention when Vexis had dragged her kicking and screaming from the pod, through the house, and into the room. She knew that breaking through that door would bring her straight out into the long hallway that led to the foyer. But that meant she'd likely pass Vexis or one of his guards on the way to her freedom.

On the other hand, it was her only chance at escape.

It's worth a shot, she figured, stepping toward the door and laying her ear against it. The white-painted wood felt cool against her ear, cheek, and hands, and she closed her eyes to attune her hearing.

Outside she heard voices—at least two, maybe three men talking. But they were so far away that she couldn't make out any words.

Good, she thought. If they were talking, she figured they might not hear her trying to break out. It also meant they were nowhere near the laundry room door. Drawing her head away, she instead trained her eye on the lock.

Unlike the high-security panel on the front door, this internal lock was much simpler. It consisted of little more than a square silver panel set into the doorjamb that Sofia recognized as a basic key fob reader. That gave her hope, and she glanced around the laundry room for something that might help in her search for freedom.

“Come on, come on,” she whispered as her eyes scanned what was probably once a gleaming white room but was now grimy and dirty. She vaguely wondered how much blood had been washed out of Vexis’s clothes in the black washer and dryer that took up one wall.

She suddenly shuddered at the thought that she may have been sitting in clothes soiled with the same sordid substance the entire time she’d been there. Her wide eyes flickered to the pile, squashed and indented with the shape of her body.

Just as quickly, they flickered away. She decided she didn’t want to know.

Instead, she set her sights on the rest of the room, sure that she’d be able to find something to bypass the lock.

On the wall opposite the machines, an open set of shelves overflowed with detergents and powders. Sofia crossed the room quickly, rummaging through its contents. She rifled past a packet of dryer sheets, tipped over a box of whitening powder, and got her hands sticky with some kind of heavy-duty blue stain remover, but nothing looked useful.

Finally, she turned to the washer and dryer set, which were half-obscured by yet another pile of dirty clothes. Out of desperation, she flung open the door to each, but they were empty, save for a single sock forgotten in the depths of the dryer’s barrel.

“Come on, there has to be something.” She said this last part a little too loudly and clapped her hand over her mouth in panic.

For a second, Sofia stood stock-still, her heart pounding in her chest. The last thing she needed was Vexis barging back into the room and harassing her some more. Or worse, figuring out her plan and binding her hands and feet for good measure. As the seconds ticked by, though, nothing happened.

Just to be sure, she crept toward the door again. When she pressed her ear there, she heard the men's voices still echoing down the hall from the other side of the house. A deep exhale escaped her lips, and she turned back to the room once more, determined not to give up.

Apart from the washer, the dryer, that shelf, and way too many dirty clothes, though, there was nothing else in the room. Sofia paced anyway, hoping something would come to her, but every time her bare feet connected with the cold tile floor, she grew more and more frustrated.

Zaraq's kind face flashed before her eyes, and she could almost feel his lips again. Worse, she could almost see him arriving at the house, could almost hear Vexis's cruel laugh, and could almost see the hope drain from Zaraq's eyes when he realized he'd given up his last chance at redemption.

Sofia shook her head. She couldn't let that happen, but she didn't know how to stop it, either. A surge of hopelessness rose in her, and in a sudden burst of pure frustration, she kicked at the clothes piled up in front of the washer, sending them skidding across the floor.

"Oh my god," she gasped, her hands coming up to her mouth.

Her green eyes, which had been scrunched almost closed in her frustration, were now wide open and staring. With more than a little trepidation, she stepped forward, crouching in front of the drawer beneath the washer that had been obscured until now.

When she'd kicked the pile of clothes, the drawer had been pulled partly open, and her heart pounded as she caught a glimpse of something shiny inside.

The fragile hope that the sight of the drawer had fostered only grew in her as she pulled it open, and it burst into full bloom when her gaze landed on a collection of mismatched and rusty tools.

“Oh my god, yes, yes, yes,” she whispered to herself. It felt like her whole body was alive again. All the despondency she'd felt just moments before was now cast aside in the light of what she decided was ostensibly a miracle.

As she inspected the tools at her disposal, she chuckled quietly. It was obvious Vexis had severely underestimated her. To him, she was not a whole, complex, intelligent individual. Instead, she was just a woman, a bimbo, a piece of ass to be used and then discarded.

And what's more, she was an Earthling.

Zaraq had told her, the day she'd gone to the casino, that she should be aware of the way her kind was viewed on Rikuus. The general consensus, according to Zaraq, was that Earthlings were something of a lesser species—harmless but generally uneducated, especially when it came to space travel.

Quietly pulling a pair of pliers from the drawer, Sofia had to agree with that last part at least. Compared to the things she'd learned since meeting Arcceo, landing on the moon and sending a couple of rovers to Mars seemed like child's play. And that was more or less how the citizens of Rikuus treated them—like well-meaning but ignorant children.

Sofia shook her head, smirking. She might not come from a planet with an advanced space program nor a leg-up in galactic trade or high-tech weapons, but at the very

least, they did have pliers. That and chisels, which she also extracted from the drawer with care.

With a grin still plastered on her face, she went to get up, only to turn again as something caught her eye. There, right beside the drawer and half-covered in a crusty sock, was something that looked an awful lot like a clothespin.

Sofia swapped the tools to her left hand and with her right, picked it up and inspected it.

Yep, definitely a clothespin. She grinned even wider. The small metal coil that held the thing together might be the missing piece to her plan.

With tools and the pin in hand, Sofia scurried over to the door. Her heart was pounding again, and one last time, she held her ear to the cool white wood. Only this time, she heard something that made her blood run cold.

She still couldn't make out the words, but the voices were louder now. And not because they were closer. She heard yelling as two or three men shouted at each other, and she was certain—more than certain—that one of them was Zaraq. She'd know that voice anywhere. Even from behind the door of a laundry room in the house of the man who had ruined Zaraq's life and seemed intent on twisting the knife.

Now more than ever, she knew she had to get out of there. But even though she wanted to hurry, it was clear that the only way to do this was to do it right. Taking a deep breath, she pulled her ear reluctantly away from the door and instead concentrated on the security panel.

She wished Elena could be there with her, but at the very least, some of her sister's engineering know-how had rubbed off on her. With as much patience as she could muster, Sofia slipped the chisel under the cover of the panel and twisted. It took a few

tries, but finally, the metal lid popped off.

For a second, it flipped through the air, away from the doorjamb, and Sofia's heart jumped into her throat. She managed to catch it just before it clattered onto the floor, and the room remained in perfect silence. Except for the thundering in Sofia's chest.

She promised herself to be more careful, setting down the cover and the chisel with infinite care. Inside the panel, a series of wires connected to a small white card.

It looked almost exactly like the circuit boards she'd seen back in high school when her science teacher had taught a whole class on electronics. Nothing from that class had stuck in her mind, and for a second, she panicked, wondering if she was fooling herself.

But then, Elena's enthusiasm came flooding back to her, along with the memories of the rainy afternoon her sister had shown her a circuit she'd been working on. Though she was lightyears away from Sofia on the topic, Elena had managed to explain things in a way that really did make it sound interesting, and Sofia picked up the pliers, hoping she'd absorbed enough of those lessons over the years.

The circuit board had a series of glyphs labeling different connections, but they were all in Rikuan and without her comm to translate, she was flying blindly. As her eyes scanned the characters, though, they stopped on something that looked familiar.

A series of three round symbols stuck out to her, and she realized she'd seen them before. In fact, she'd seen that exact combination of glyphs in that exact order every single day since she'd been on Rikuus. It was the word that appeared every time she'd swiped open her hotel room door.

Opposite that was another symbol and she was sure she'd seen that one, too. It was the word that appeared on her hotel card reader once the door closed again.

An enormous grin spread over Sofia's face as she marveled at her own luck.

Setting down the pliers again, and leaving the circuit board to hang loose at the wall, Sofia picked up the peg. She extracted the metal coil, bending the wire into a two-pronged shape. As she brought the wire up to the circuit board, willing her hand not to shake, she held her breath.

As carefully as she could, she held one prong to what she guessed was the power supply and the other to the glyphs for "open."

The small click that rang through the laundry room almost made Sofia cry with relief. Instead, she let out the deep breath she'd been holding and made a mental note to give Elena an enormous hug when she got out of here.

As quickly as she could, she turned off the laundry room light and edged open the door. Outside, the hallway was dark, but she could hear the voices much clearer now.

"Do whatever you want to me, but I swear to the gods if you lay a finger on Sofia, it will be the end of you!"

Sofia's breath hitched in her throat as Zaraq's voice came echoing up the hall. Slowly, she peeked around the corner, her hand closing around the chisel as she did so. The only light was coming from the living room, spilling its warmth into the foyer and showing the silhouettes of four men. She could make out Vexis's profile closest to her, his bald head round and stark against the light.

Her heart pounded as she gripped the chisel tighter, and she steeled herself. She had to take him down. She knew that. She wondered if the chisel was sharp enough to do any real damage, though. And what about the others?

Keeping her eyes trained on Vexis, she ran her finger across the tool's edge. It was

old and dull, scratchy with rust. She knew it would never work.

But she also knew she couldn't live with herself if she didn't try. With a deep breath, she stepped into the hallway, her bare feet still silent on the tiled floor.

That's when she saw it.

On a small table in the hallway, a tasteful stone figure stared back at her. Some sort of angel, or at least the Rikuan equivalent. Its eyes seemed to gaze straight at her, but that was not what Sofia was looking at.

At the statue's feet was a handbag. Even in the dark of the night, Sofia could see what color it was. Bright pink.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:25 am

Zaraq

Zaraq could feel his heart racing, his face growing hot, his hands trembling with rage. All concern for his own wellbeing had fallen away. Now, all that mattered was Sofia.

But with Vexis and his lackeys surrounding him on all sides, and his weapon snatched away, there was little he could do.

“Just let her go!” he shouted into Vexis’s face as a last-ditch attempt to save her. “She’s done nothing but what I asked of her. I’m the one you want!”

Vexis’s dark eyes creased at the corners as he laughed. “You’re not in a position to be making demands.”

Zaraq scowled, drawing himself up to his full height. This brought him a few inches taller than Vexis and he looked down at him with as much authority as he could muster, given the situation.

“I told you, I’m not playing your game.” His voice was low now, more controlled than it had been, even though a river of anger still coursed through him, just beneath the surface.

For a split second, Vexis’s veneer faltered, his eyes showing a brief flicker of doubt. But then he squared his shoulders, looking Zaraq dead in the eye.

The sound of crinkling plastic and several thuds drew Zaraq’s attention, and he saw out of the corner of his eye that Vexis was lifting and dropping the sigma blaster,

feeling its weight.

“What if I just get rid of both of you then? If you’re not playing my games. Or better yet, I get rid of you, and your girlfriend becomes my own personal plaything.”

The salacious grin that crossed Vexis’s face made Zaraq start forward instinctively, his fist pulled back. Everything in him wanted to end the Rikuan, and he felt his muscles tense like a spring, ready to uncoil.

But then he felt something else. A hard jab of metal into his solar plexus.

“Wrong move,” Vexis snarled, holding the sigma blaster to Zaraq’s chest.

Zaraq’s fist was still raised, and for a second, the two men stared at each other, a stalemate that Zaraq knew could only end one way. He was at the worst disadvantage possible, and the only way he was leaving that apartment was in a body bag, no matter what he did.

He was debating whether or not the punch would be worth hastening his own death when a sudden blast filled the hallway with bright orange light.

“Aaaah!” Vexis’s scream rang through the house, bouncing off the marble floors.

For a second, Zaraq thought Arccoo had snuck in through the broken glass door, but as Vexis bent down and clutched his calf in agony, Zaraq saw a familiar figure emerge from the shadows.

“Zaraq!” Sofia cried, sprinting toward him. The blaster he had given her was gripped tightly in her hand.

In the split second after Sofia’s shot, three things went through Zaraq’s mind, as if

everything else was moving in slow motion.

His first thought was to push past Vexis and run to Sofia, to take her in his arms and tell her over and over again that he loved her. He wanted her to know everything he hadn't said before, everything he'd held back.

His second thought was to wrestle the sigma blaster out of Vexis's hands before the cretin could regain his composure. That weapon was his only chance at freedom, but he'd have to get it before the guards had the chance to turn on him. Judging from the rough hand he felt grabbing his shoulder, though, that wasn't all that long.

And his third thought was simple—grab the delta blaster.

Ripping himself away from Joran's grip, Zaraq lunged forward, his heart thundering in his chest as he reached for the gun still lying on the sideboard. As his fingers closed around it, he saw Vexis starting to rise from where he crouched.

The look on his face was unlike anything Zaraq had seen from him until now. It was the pure, unadulterated fury of a man who was used to being in control and had suddenly had that ripped away from him. In his hand, Vexis still gripped the sigma blaster in its airlock bag, and now he tore the bag away with a scowl.

“Look out!” Sofia's voice rang through the hallway from behind Vexis.

But Zaraq's stomach dropped as he saw Vexis spin around to follow her voice, the sigma blaster in his hand and the airlock bag floating to the floor. Zaraq raised his blaster to shoot the Rikuan, but suddenly he felt the telltale press of a blaster at his temple.

“Sofia, run!” he yelled, his adrenaline pumping. In a risky move, he knocked the guard's gun away from his head, spinning around before Joran could react.

With a triumphant yell, Zaraq brought the butt of his own blaster down into the Rikuan guard's temple. Joran's yellow eyes rolled back in his head, and his heavy frame collapsed to the floor with a thud.

Behind him, Zaraq heard blaster fire and yelling, but he couldn't turn around. Weedy was snarling at him, his snakelike features curled into a look of contempt.

"Get the fuck down!" the guard yelled, brandishing his blaster shakily at Zaraq.

The look in his eyes told Zaraq he was on shaka, and a high gunman was even scarier than a sober gunman. Zaraq took a step back, but with a strangled yell, Weedy fired haphazardly.

The blast grazed Zaraq's hand.

"Aah!"

More than the pain of his injured fingers, he was yelling for his weapon. The blast knocked it out of his hand and skidded across the shining black and white marble of the floor. It came to rest by Joran's side, who remained unmoving.

Before Weedy could fire again, Zaraq retreated, bolting toward the arched door of the living room where he hoped to take cover. As he ran, he heard more blaster fire from the end of the hallway and caught a brief glimpse of searing white light.

That wasn't a delta blaster, with its telltale orange glow. It was something else entirely. Something he hoped he'd never have to see, especially aimed at the woman he loved.

He couldn't stop, though, and dove through the doorway, seeking momentary refuge behind the couch. Even as he escaped from Weedy's new barrage of haphazard shots,

Zaraq's blood ran cold. He needed to get to Sofia, but he was trapped without a weapon.

More blasts rang through the house, and in spite of everything, Zaraq figured that was a good sign.

As long as two guns are being fired, Sofia is still alive.

"Get out of there, you coward!" Weedy yelled, blasting three more shots into the couch.

Zaraq felt the furniture shudder, but the blasts didn't make it through, thankfully. He figured if he could just get to the gun cabinet, he might make it to Sofia's aid. As quickly as he could, he scurried to the other end of the couch, preparing himself to make a run for it.

He had to have faith that Weedy's shakiness would come in handy this time.

Just as he was about to dash to the cabinet, another blast rang out, followed by a strangled cry and a thud.

"Zaraq?"

Arccoo's voice was panicked, but the sound of it was music to Zaraq's ears. He jumped out from behind the couch to see the Thryal prince's concerned features dissolve into relief but then shift back to concern again.

"And Sofia?"

Another series of blasts ringing from the back of the house answered Arccoo's question, and without another word, the two of them ran past Weedy's body and

toward the sound. Zaraq's heart raced as he stooped mid-run to snatch the weapon lying by Joran's unconscious body.

The sound of distant blaster fire mingled with Zaraq and Arccoo's echoing footsteps as they raced down the hallway. Past several darkened doorways, past a Rikuan chorangel statue that toppled to the ground as they scrambled toward the sound, and finally through another arch that led into the depths of the house.

"Over there!" Zaraq shouted, pointing toward a distant flash of orange light that was accompanied by a cry. Sofia's cry.

The two Thryals dashed through what, in the dark, looked to be a large leisure room. Zaraq almost ran into a card table and knocked over several bottles of liquor as he ran, but none of it registered. All he cared about was getting to Sofia before it was too late.

The leisure room gave way to another long hallway, and finally, the sound of yelling became clearer.

"Get the fuck out of there, you whore!" came Vexis's voice, hoarse and breathy. "You can't hide forever!"

As Zaraq rounded the corner, Arccoo hot on his heels, he saw the Rikuan taking cover behind a long marble island in a vast industrial kitchen. It was obvious food was not the only thing being cooked there. The benches were littered with beakers and pipettes, burners and tubs of chemicals, and the whole place emanated with the stench of shaka.

At the far end, pale shafts of light poured from a huge walk-in freezer, its door hanging off its hinges and punctured with scorched black holes. They were the same kind he'd seen in Ryka's chest.

As Zaraq soaked in the scene, Vexis turned to face them, his mouth turned into a scowl. Dark green blood oozed down one cheek where he'd been grazed by a blast, and even in the dim light, his eyes burned with hatred.

In a flash, Vexis had raised the sigma blaster to the two Thryals, but Zaraq was faster. His injured finger was already squeezing the trigger of his weapon and in a flash of orange light, Vexis dropped to the ground.

A pool of green formed around him, and those black eyes held no more hatred, no more malice, no more scorn. They held nothing. But Zaraq didn't linger.

"Sofia!" He rushed forward, throwing his weapon on the kitchen island as he went.

The pain in his finger all but disappeared as he grabbed the freezer door and hefted it away on its one remaining hinge. Light streamed out, making Zaraq suddenly blink as his eyes grew accustomed to the brightness.

"Sofia?"

Zaraq's voice balanced perfectly on the precipice between fear and hope as his vision slowly adjusted, but he felt her before he saw her. He felt the weight of her body as she threw herself into his arms, felt the chill of her skin that matched the coolness of the freezer, felt her breathe deeply and hold him tightly.

And he felt his heart beat faster as he wrapped his arms around her.

"Oh my god, Zaraq." Her words came out as a cry of relief, her breath warming his neck as she buried her face in his shoulder.

"Are you okay? Are you hurt?" Zaraq asked, reluctantly drawing away.

When he did, he saw her brilliant green eyes gazing at him with such adoration he thought he might collapse there and then. As he adjusted to the sight of her, though, Zaraq saw how the battle had taken its toll on her. Sofia's face was streaked with cold sweat, her auburn hair matted and falling over her face, her tight black dress ripped in places, and finally, her bare feet turning blue.

"Mostly just cold," she admitted with a laugh that told him how lucky she was to be alive.

Zaraq smiled, hurrying Sofia out of the freezer while wrapping an arm around her.

"Thank the gods you're okay," Arccoo said once they'd reentered the kitchen proper. The prince stepped forward and embraced Sofia himself.

"The gods had nothing to do with it. That was all you two," she joked, smiling up at Arccoo and then at Zaraq. The moment she pulled out of Arccoo's hug, she slipped herself beneath Zaraq's arm again, pressing her body into his side.

But her words struck something in him. "Sofia, no," he told her softly, drawing away to look her in the eye. "You saved me. You both did. And if it wasn't for you, I would have been long-dead by now. Vexis was this close to shooting me in the chest with the sigma gun."

The thought of it sent a shudder through him, and judging from the tension in Sofia's body, the thought had a similar effect on her.

"Lucky for you, your girlfriend's pretty sneaky then, huh?" Her wary smile told Zaraq she was trying her best to lighten the mood, but the word girlfriend made his heart beat erratically.

Arccoo had stepped back again and was busying himself inspecting Vexis's body. At

that moment, Zaraq knew he couldn't wait another second to tell Sofia how he felt.

"Sofia," he told her solemnly. "I need you to know—"

"Wait! Don't touch anything!" Sofia cried out, her eyes shooting over Zaraq's shoulder.

Zaraq followed her gaze to where Arccoo was frozen, his purple eyes looking up at them questioningly. His hand was outstretched, just inches from the sigma blaster.

"Right now only Vexis's prints are on the gun. Right?" Sofia continued, stepping forward and looking between Arccoo, Zaraq, and Vexis's body.

Arccoo straightened up and looked at Zaraq for clarity. He nodded, realizing where Sofia was going with this.

"Right," he added, grateful once again that he had such an intelligent and capable woman on his side. "We can finally prove Vexis was responsible for Ryka's death and for—" He gestured around the kitchen. "All of this."

Sofia turned to him again with a smile. "You're finally free." The look in her eyes was the purest relief, and Zaraq felt it, too. Almost.

"We have to call the planetary authorities first," Zaraq told her, but his heart was beginning to slow, for what felt like the first time in years.

"You should do the honors," Sofia told him, stepping a little closer and sliding her hands inside his jacket. "You've been running from them long enough."

In the cold white light of the kitchen, Zaraq smiled down at Sofia and then at Arccoo.

“Thank you, both of you.” He felt like a weight was finally dropping off him, and the immense wave of gratitude that replaced it made his heart swell. “You had no reason to help me.”

“We’re family now,” Arccoo said with a wink. “We had every reason to help you.”

Sofia nodded, grinning up at him and letting her fingers play affectionately on his lower back.

“Now stop stalling and get on your comm. The police are gonna love this.”

The mischief in her bright green eyes made him want to kiss her and tell her he loved her, but she was right. They needed to clean this up first. Besides, another idea was forming in Zaraq’s mind.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:25 am

Sofia

“And how exactly did you fend him off?”

“Do you have sigma blasters on Earth?”

“What about Zaraq? Weren’t you scared of him at first?”

The reporters’ questions washed over Sofia like a flood as the police ushered her away from Vexis’s house. A throng had gathered in the early hours of the dawn but after what she had been through, Sofia was only vaguely aware of the commotion. What really mattered to her was that everything would be okay now.

The morning sun warmed her toes, still shoeless, as she was led to the paramedics who were already tending to Zaraq. In the chaos that had unfolded after Zaraq called the cops, the three of them had been separated, and Sofia felt a rush of life course through her again as she rushed forward to meet him.

“Careful!” Zaraq told her, holding out his arm to embrace her.

The other hand was being bandaged by a yellow alien that reminded her of a crustacean. It was using several spindly appendages to deftly wrap the strip of cloth around Zaraq’s injured finger. The sight of his blue blood soaking through the bandage made Sofia wince.

Zaraq caught her staring. “It’s fine. Don’t worry. It was only a graze.”

Sofia nodded, tearing her eyes away and instead gazing into Zaraq's deep purple eyes. "I don't know what I would have done if anything happened to you," she breathed, pressing her forehead to Zaraq's.

"Likewise." His warm breath tickled Sofia's lips, and she leaned into him, kissing him softly.

"Ahem," came a voice.

Sofia turned around and realized the cop who had accompanied her away from the reporters was still lingering there. "I'll need to ask you both a few questions."

"And we'll need to keep cuddling while you ask them," Sofia quipped before Zaraq could answer.

She saw the Rikuan cop stifle a smile as he cleared his throat again. "Fine. Now you." He pointed at Zaraq. "Start from the beginning."

As Zaraq took a deep breath and began to recount the story, Sofia took a moment to breathe. She could hardly believe what had happened over the last few days and she finally felt how tired she was. The warm morning sun was creeping over her, and the comforting warmth of it made her want to curl up in bed with Zaraq and sleep for days and days.

"And that's when you fled Rikuus?" the cop asked, typing something in his comm as he spoke."

"Right," Zaraq answered, before continuing his tale.

Sofia sat beside him on the edge of the medic-pod, letting her mind wander again. The fatigue had her in a state of calm, even while all around her was chaos. Police

and what she assumed were forensics officers were filing past the tall tree that rose from Vexis's front yard, and through the two black doors just barely visible from the street. Reporters, cam-operators, and affluent neighbors had formed a crowd. Many of them, Sofia noted, were still in their pajamas, gossiping among themselves.

Vaguely, she wondered how many were criminals themselves and if any of them were tied up in Vexis's schemes. Or even Slikrim's.

Her thoughts reeled back in when she heard her name being called.

"And that's when you came in, Ms. Flores?"

"Yes, but what about Slikrim?" she asked suddenly.

"I just need to hear your story for now." The officer looked at her expectantly, his fingers hovering above the wrist comm as he waited for her to continue the plot where Zaraq had left off.

But Sofia frowned and shook her head. "Look, Slikrim is really behind all this, Vexis was just second-in-command. Aren't you doing anything to get the guy at the top?"

The officer faltered, his dark eyes flickering slightly as if he didn't have the answer to that. Sofia took the opportunity to keep talking.

"Look, he owns the biggest casino in Rikuus. Doesn't he? He has the money and the connections to flee the second he hears about what's going down here." She gestured to Vexis's house, her gaze firm.

"She's right," Zaraq chimed in, taking her hand and giving it a supportive squeeze. "If you don't already have someone picking him up, I suggest you do it now."

The cop glanced between them again, the fingers that hovered over his comm twitching ever so slightly. Finally, he nodded, pressing a button on the device.

“I need all available units covering the Constellation Casino. You’re looking to apprehend Slikrim Kachor. Consider him armed and dangerous.”

Affirmative chatter came back over the comm, and the officer gave them another nod.

“You can go for now,” he told them, suddenly distracted. “We’ll follow up for an official interview in the next day or two.”

With that, he left them and Sofia breathed a sigh of relief, folding herself into Zaraq.

“This might actually be over,” she told him, letting her hand rest gently against his chest.

The comfort of his arm around her almost put her to sleep, and the moment the paramedics cleared them both to leave, they did.

“Arccoo!” Sofia cried as a police escort took her and Zaraq to a black pod that was parked across the street. The prince was leaning against it, and when he heard his name he looked up, shooting them a relieved smile.

“I wondered where you’d gone,” he told them, embracing Sofia and giving Zaraq a shortened version of the greeting of solidarity. “The second the police realized I was a prince, they whisked me away from all this.”

He waved a hand at the crowds and when Sofia looked, she realized a swarm of cops had created something of a buffer between Arccoo and the general public.

“I guess they figure an intergalactic faux pas would be bad for the press.” Sofia

winked. “Now let’s go home, please.”

Arccoo nodded. “Oh, definitely. Carmen’s going to kill me if we don’t get back soon. Get in the back, both of you. I can play royal poddy.”

Sofia shot him a grateful smile before sliding in the back. When Zaraq slid in next to her, she nestled up in his arms. It felt like only a second later the pod was rolling to a halt.

“Did I fall asleep?” Sofia asked, blinking drowsily up at Zaraq.

He smiled down at her. “You deserve the rest.”

Entering the hotel, Sofia realized this was the first time since they’d stepped foot on the planet that Zaraq didn’t need to worry someone might recognize him.

The receptionist shot them all a shocked look, glancing from them to her desk comm and back again.

Of course, this is all over the news by now , she thought sleepily as they made their way up to their rooms.

Carmen and Elena were all over them the minute they stepped foot in the hallway, and it looked like neither of them had slept, either. It was a good fifteen minutes of tight hugs, relieved tears, and exclamations of gratitude before Sofia and Zaraq were allowed to retreat to their own room.

“I could sleep for days,” Sofia told Zaraq, and when they collapsed in each other’s arms, she did.

The group finally checked out of the hotel a full forty-eight hours later. Sofia felt

revived, the days lounging in bed, ordering room service, and taking long, luxurious showers having done her good. But now, she was ready to get out of Rikuus and so, it seemed, was Zaraq.

The police interviews ended up being unnecessary. In between naps, Carmen, Elena, and Arccoo had delivered the news that was playing on every device on the planet.

It seemed Joran, who had regained consciousness right as the police stormed the building, had made a plea deal. He'd given up Slik, including the casino mogul's secret safehouse, plus more than enough evidence to clear Zaraq for good. Which meant nothing else was holding them on Rikuus.

"Are you happy to go back to Thryal?" Sofia asked as she and Zaraq followed the others toward Arccoo's ship. The warmth of the sun had somehow managed to cut through Rikuus's haze, and for a second, she wondered if Zaraq would miss the planet that had been home for so long.

"I don't care where I am, as long as I'm with you."

Sofia smiled and reached out to squeeze Zaraq's hand. She still hadn't told him what she'd been longing to admit, and now she felt her heart swell with the love that had only grown since their ordeal at Vexis's house.

Somehow though, it hadn't felt like the right time. They were both still recovering, and though she knew she loved Zaraq, she didn't want that confession to be made hastily. She wanted to take her time.

The whole ride back to Thryal, though, the words kept aching to be said. Sofia could feel them expanding inside her every time she opened her mouth, and she promised herself that once they got settled back at the annex she would tell him.

The warm, rich colors of her bedroom greeted them after a celebratory dinner with Arccoo, Carmen, and Elena. Sofia felt her heart flutter as she stepped inside.

Now's the time .

As she turned to finally admit how she really felt, Zaraq hesitated at the doorway.

“Why don't we go for a walk in the gardens?” he asked, surprising her a little.

He must have seen the look on her face because he shrugged and explained. “After being cooped up in that hotel, and all the ugliness on Rikuus, I wouldn't mind some fresh air.”

It was a good reason, and Sofia couldn't think of any excuse to keep him there that didn't sound mean. Instead, she stepped forward again and slipped her hand into Zaraq's.

“Can't argue with that,” she admitted, trying to keep the disappointment out of her voice. He led her out of the room again and down the back steps into the cool of the night.

The stars were stunning out there, and for a second, Sofia forgot her mission as she looked up at the twinkling night sky. Her feet stilled and Zaraq stared back at her, but she couldn't tear her eyes away from the heavens.

“God, it's so beautiful here,” she whispered.

Zaraq was right. After a week of Rikuus's grimy, gray streets and blank light-polluted sky, Thryal was a wonder.

The sound of the planet's various night birds made her smile. She still didn't know

the names of most of them, but she thought she heard a sirulet. The lilting song soared and dipped, filling the stillness.

“Come on,” Zaraq said finally, tugging at Sofia’s hand. He led her gently through the garden, his hand warm against the cool night air.

“Where are we going?” Sofia had come so close to telling him how she felt about him under the stars, but Zaraq seemed to be on a mission. She wondered for a moment where he was taking her, but suddenly the answer made itself apparent.

A soft glow ahead grew steadier as she followed Zaraq through the royal grounds. When he gently guided her around a copse of pink-leafed trees, Sofia’s eyes landed on a candlelit picnic blanket laid out within a semicircle of bright white flower bushes.

Their fragrance wafted toward her, gentle and sweet. It reminded her of roses.

“What is all this?” she asked, incredulous. “And how did you even...”

“Don’t worry about that,” Zaraq told her with a grin. “Just enjoy it.”

Sofia’s usual sarcasm melted away, and she had to admit, the gesture made her giddy. She’d never, ever been romanced like this and the novelty of it, as well as its unexpectedness, made her stomach fill with butterflies.

She let Zaraq lead her to the blanket, and when they sat down, he gave her a look that made her heart race.

“Sofia,” he told her, his purple eyes catching the warmth of the candles that flickered at the edges of the blanket. “I still can’t believe I found you. Someone like me should never have gotten a chance at love, but against all odds, you proved me wrong.”

Sofia felt her breath catch in her throat at the word love, and she suddenly knew what was happening. All she could do was stare at Zaraq, though, as he gazed back with adoring eyes.

“I love you, Sofia. I wanted to tell you so many times. I’m in love with you, and I have been from the start.”

The words soaked into Sofia, and she felt herself expanding. “I love you, too,” she told him. It spilled out of her like a tidal wave, a release, a joy that she’d been holding inside. “I love you so much.”

With this, she leaned forward, planting her lips on Zaraq’s in a lingering, loving kiss. Zaraq’s hands reached for her waist, and for a second, it seemed like time was standing still.

When they finally pulled away, Sofia saw something else in Zaraq’s eyes.

“You nearly died for my sake,” he told her, his voice heavy with emotion. “And it made me realize I don’t want to spend another second of my life without you. I want to commit to a future with you.”

The candlelight showed the sincerity on Zaraq’s face, revealed the soft smile on his lips, and, once again, showed the love in his gaze.

“What do you mean?” Sofia’s voice sounded strange to her, as if it couldn’t possibly contain all the excitement, happiness, and anticipation she was feeling at that moment.

“It means I want to take you as my mate. Or as the earthlings would say, marry you.”

From his pocket, Zaraq produced a gold ring covered in ancient symbols, but Sofia

hardly saw it. Instead, she was gazing at Zaraq.

Time stood still for another long moment as that tidal wave of happiness mounted in Sofia's chest again.

"Oh my god, yes!" She nodded, and unable to contain herself, she kissed him again, deeply, lovingly.

Around them, the night birds continued, the sirulet singing its happy, lilting song as if in celebration. Sofia didn't think she'd ever been that happy in her life.

"I love you," Zaraq whispered again, pressing his forehead to hers.

"I love you, too."

When she finally looked at the ring, she realized it was some kind of relic, and she looked up at Zaraq again with a wide grin.

"This is so perfect," she told him, holding out her hand.

"I looked into human traditions," he explained, slipping the ring onto her finger with gentle hands. "But something told me you might prefer a less traditional approach."

"You nailed it," she said, grasping his hand. "Now I think you oughta nail something else."

Zaraq gave her a puzzled look, and Sofia just laughed, almost relieved he didn't get that one. "Let's go back to the room, huh?"

Zaraq nodded, and they hurried back along the garden path, Sofia grinning all the way.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:25 am

Zaraq

Zaraq felt a strange sense of freedom after so many years of being on the run. Now, with his name cleared, he was free to pursue his life with Sofia.

And that was exactly what he wanted.

He closed the bedroom door with a snap, eliciting a gleeful cry of excitement from her. Her eager fingers reached for him, and he lost no time in tearing her clothes from her body. Today was for them, for him, to celebrate what had been lost for so long.

He took his time lavishing her body, starting with her breasts. He pressed gentle kisses upon the delicate skin, trailing his lips down to the valley between them. Sofia's sighs stirred the air around him, a soft melody that filled him with the need to hear more. He continued his love litany, every touch a word, every kiss an exclamation.

His hands traced the arc of her hips before dipping lower to touch the secret places that made her gasp and cling tighter to him. She was a work of art under his fingers, a masterpiece of curves and hollows that he never tired of exploring.

Overcome with desire, Zaraq pressed himself against her as if he could meld their bodies into one. His lips found hers in a searing kiss that echoed through their joined bodies.

Hesitant fingers tugged at his clothing, and he chuckled softly against her lips. He drew back, allowing her hands room to move. Her fingers were nimble, stripping him

of his garments until they were both bared to each other's gazes.

Their eyes locked, burning with an almost palpable intensity. This was them. This was Sofia and Zaraq, lovers intertwined, free at last from the chains of their past.

He lowered himself between her legs, eager for a taste. He sucked her sensitive bud into his mouth, using his tongue to trace circles on it. She arched and moaned beneath him, but he held her in place while he continued his assault on her pussy.

The sound of her pleasure was music to his ears. The warmth of her body was a balm to his soul. He relished the taste of her, a flavor that had been denied to him for far too long. He had dreamed of this moment for days, and now it was better than anything his mind had conjured.

Sofia's hands tangled in his hair, pulling him closer as she lifted her hips off the bed. The move only encouraged him, and he dove deeper, lapping at her sweetness with fervor. He drew out each gasp, each moan, each plea until Sofia was a writhing mess beneath him.

His name fell from her lips like a fervent prayer repeatedly whispered in a sacred temple. The sound strummed along his senses, urging him to explore her deeper, to make her lose herself in the harmony of their bodies' rhythm.

Zaraq's fingers slid lower, tracing the slick heat of her entrance before sliding inside. The feeling of her clenching around him nearly undid him. He withdrew slowly and then added another finger, delighting in the way she gasped and ground against his hand. She implored him for more, her body tensing beneath his ministrations as he increased his pace.

Their symphony of sounds filled the room as he continued worshiping Sofia with every inch of his being. This was them at their most raw and primal, stripped bare of any pretenses or fears. The only thing that mattered within those four walls was their

mutual desire, their shared pleasure.

His own arousal throbbed in demand, but he held back. He wanted to draw this out, to engrave this moment deep into their beings. He needed Sofia to fall apart beneath him first.

Zaraq's ministrations had her writhing, her fingers curling into the sheets beneath them. Her body shuddered with each touch of his tongue, a chorus of sighs and moans filling the room. He drank in every sound and every reaction she gave him.

His fingers slid along the soft folds of her skin, exploring every inch. Delving deeper, he stroked within her, his fingers dancing upon the velvet walls of her inner sanctum. Her responsive gasp fueled his ardor, encouraging him to pursue further heights of pleasure for her.

His persistence yielded a delightfully wicked cry from Sofia, the sound vibrating through him like a feral call to his primal instincts. It stirred an irresistible hunger within him, one that only she could satiate. Zaraq felt her fingers tangle in his hair, urging him on with soft whimpers and pleasurable gasps.

She came then, and it was like watching a celestial event unfold right next to him. It was breathtakingly beautiful and untamed. Her body convulsed with waves of pleasure as cries of ecstasy echoed throughout the room. It was an expression of pure rapture.

He needed to feel something from her. He grabbed her gently by her hair, urging her head downward. He needed to feel the warmth of her mouth enclosed around him.

Sofia obliged immediately, her fingers tracing his length before her lips closed around him. She kissed his hardness with fervor, taking him deep into her mouth. The sensation sent shivers down his spine, and he moaned in response.

Her tongue danced along his length with a tantalizing rhythm that had his knuckles whitening where they gripped the bed sheets. His breath hitched as he felt her take him to the hilt, the sensation overwhelming in its intensity.

He watched as her head bobbed up and down over him, her dark hair spilling over his thighs. Her eyes met his, sparkling with mischief and desire. Such an erotic sight pushed him closer to the precipice of pleasure.

The tension within him coiled tighter, like a spring wound up for release. He could feel in every fiber of his being the build-up of an impending climax that promised to devour him whole.

The sensation was exquisite, a potent mix of warmth and tight pressure that had him seeing stars.

Her tongue traced veins along his length, causing his body to shudder with each passing second. He could feel the ripple of pleasure coursing through him. Each moan she elicited was like an electric shock that ran straight to his core. The grip he had on her hair tightened, an unconscious response to the overwhelming sensations coursing through him.

In response, Sofia quickened her pace, matching Zaraq's desperation with her own eagerness. Sofia took him deeper into her mouth, savoring the way he filled her senses completely. His grip on her hair tightened as he urged her to take more of him. She acquiesced willingly, eager for his pleasure.

As Sofia's movements grew more fervent, harmony resonated between them in a rhythm established through shared desires and heated passion.

Zaraq could feel the mounting pressure building within him, an impending tempest held back by sheer willpower alone. He wanted nothing more than to surrender himself fully, but not before ensuring Sofia had tasted every inch of him.

His breathing grew ragged as he neared his peak, each swirl of Sofia's tongue sending waves of ecstasy coursing through him. But more than his release, he wanted to be inside of her.

He pulled her to her feet and entered her with a primal growl, their bodies finally becoming one as he held on to Sofia tightly. Zaraq's cry echoed Sofia's, their voices bouncing off the vaulted ceilings and dissipating into the still air.

Their shared pleasure reverberated through their entwined bodies, echoing in every corner of their being. The world outside ceased to exist in these moments. There was only them, raw and exposed under the pale glow of the moonlight filtering through the window.

Every thrust sent them spiraling higher, each breathless moan strumming chords of ecstasy and fervor. He looked down at Sofia beneath him, her face flushed with satisfaction and yearning.

Her eyes were glazed with pleasure, her lips slightly parted as she tried to catch her breath. Something felt deeply satisfying about the sight, the knowledge that he had caused this sublime wrecking of composure.

His thrusts became more pronounced, more primal, driving them both closer to the pinnacle of release once again. Sofia's hands gripped his arms, the nails digging into his flesh as her body arched toward him. He felt a crescendo building within her, a wave ready to crash onto the shore of pleasure. He needed to be part of that release, needed to feel her unravel around him.

He kissed her hard, swallowing her gasps and moans as his rhythm increased. Their bodies moved in perfect harmony, their shared rhythm taking them higher and higher until they were teetering on the edge of climax. Her walls tightened around him in anticipation, and he felt his control slipping away.

He quickened his pace. He wanted to engrave this moment deep within them, to forever remember how they fit together so perfectly. How she clenched around him, how he throbbed within her.

With one final thrust, Zaraq let himself go. A primitive growl tore from his throat as waves of pleasure washed over him. His vision blurred momentarily as he clung to Sofia, anchoring himself to reality.

Sofia cried out beneath him, her body arching off the bed as she screamed his name once more. Her body convulsed against his, matching his release with her own.

As they spiraled down from their climax, Zaraq cradled Sofia protectively against him. Their breathing eventually slowed as they lay entwined in each other's arms. The adrenaline rush faded into a warm afterglow as they savored the closeness of their bodies, the gentle rhythm of their hearts playing a sweet lullaby.

Zaraq brushed a few strands of hair from Sofia's face, tucking them behind her ear. He traced a path down the side of her face, the gentleness of his touch contrasting the roughness of their earlier escapades. Sofia closed her eyes and leaned into his touch, a content sigh escaping her lips.

He watched as she drifted off to sleep in his arms, her chest rising and falling in peaceful rhythm with his own. The moonlight streaming through the window bathed her in an ethereal glow, highlighting every curve and edge of her body like a masterpiece unveiled. He felt a surge of possessiveness course through him at the sight. She was his, and he was hers in this intimate dance.

And she always would be.

Keep reading for a little more about Elena and Rylan's story...

This scientist didn't believe in destiny. But the stars disagreed.

When Elena Flores packed up her Earth life to join her sister on the alien planet Thryal, she expected some culture shock. But these aliens treat her like she still believes in flat planets and magic potions!

When a crisis hits Thryal's moon colony, suddenly her "primitive" Earth perspective doesn't seem so worthless. Now she's stuck on a failing agricultural station with Rylan, the frustratingly brilliant—and gorgeous—alien lead scientist who actually listens to her ideas.

She thought she came to Thryal to be closer to her sister. Turns out, the universe has a different hypothesis about where she belongs!

But when their success draws them back to the capital, can their budding relationship survive the spotlight of Thryal's scientific elite?

Or will Elena's fears send this experiment in love crashing back to Earth?