

Close Obsession

The Krinar Chronicles: Volume 2

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate Close Obsession to my family, especially my husband, whose tremendous patience and support made this book possible. (Thank you, sweetie, for putting up with my own obsession and being such a wonderful partner and collaborator in the creation of this work!) As with Close Liaisons, most of the credit for plot development, scientific elements, and general editing belongs to him.

I would also like to thank the rest of my family for being so wonderful and for always believing in me. I'm particularly grateful to my niece – the only other person I know who loves romance novels – for reading my first book and letting me know how AWESOME she thought it was.

And again, I would like to give special thanks to my friends T and L for being my beta readers and proofreaders. You girls are the best!

Prologue

The Krinar stared at the image in front of him, his hands clenching into fists.

The three-dimensional hologram showed Korum and the guardians approaching the hut on the beach. One of the guardians raised his arm, and the hut blew into pieces, fragments of wood flying everywhere. The fragile human-built structure was clearly no match for the basic nano-blast weapon all guardians carried with them.

The K raised his hand and the image shifted, the flying recording device approaching the wreckage to take a closer look. He didn't worry that the device would be spotted; it was smaller than a mosquito and had been designed by Korum himself.

No, the device was perfect for this task.

As it hovered over the hut, the K could see the drama playing out in the basement, which had been exposed by the blast. The guardians jumped down there, while Korum appeared to be carefully studying the remnants of the hut above ground.

Of course, the K thought, his nemesis would be thorough. Korum would want to make sure nothing and no one escaped from the scene.

The Keiths – the K had started calling them by that name in his mind as well – were panicking, and Rafor stupidly attacked one of the guardians. A foolish move on his part, the K thought dispassionately, watching as the invisible protective shield surrounding the guardians repelled the attack. Now the black-haired Krinar male was jerking uncontrollably on the floor, his nervous system fried from contact with the deadly shield. Had he been human, he would've died instantly.

The guardians didn't let him suffer for long. At the command from their leader, one of the guardians swiftly knocked Rafor unconscious with the stun weapon embedded in his fingers.

The other Keiths were smart enough to avoid Rafor's fate and simply stood there as the silvery crime-collars were locked into place around their necks. They looked angry and defiant, but there was nothing they could do. They were now prisoners, and they would be judged by the Council for their crime.

After a couple of minutes, Korum jumped down into the basement as well, and the K could see that his enemy was furious. He'd known he would be. The Keiths were as good as gone; Korum would show them no mercy.

Sighing, the K switched off the image. He would watch it in greater detail later. For now, he had to figure out some other way to neutralize Korum and implement his plan.

The future of Earth depended on it.

Chapter 1

“Welcome home, darling,” Korum said softly as the green landscape of Lenkarda appeared beneath their feet, and the ship landed as quietly as it had taken off.

Her heart hammering in her chest, Mia slowly got up off the seat that had cradled her body so comfortably. Korum was already up, and he extended his hand to her. She hesitated for a second, and then accepted it, clutching his palm with a death grip. The lover she’d thought of as the enemy for the past month was now her only source of comfort in this strange land.

They exited the aircraft and walked a few steps before Korum stopped. Turning back toward the ship, he made a small gesture with his free hand. All of a sudden, the air around the pod began to shimmer, and Mia again heard the low humming sound that signified nanomachines at work.

“You’re building something else?” she asked him, surprised.

He shook his head with a smile. “No, I’m un-building.”

And as Mia watched, layers of ivory material appeared to peel off the surface of the ship, dissolving in front of her eyes. Within a minute, the ship was gone in its entirety, all of its components turning back into the individual atoms from which they’d been made back in New York.

Despite her stress and exhaustion, Mia couldn’t help but marvel at the miracle she’d just witnessed. The ship that had just brought them thousands of miles in a matter of minutes had completely disintegrated, as though it had never existed in the first place. “Why did you do that?” she asked Korum. “Why un-build it?”

“Because there’s no need for it to exist and take up space right now,” he explained. “I can create it again whenever we need to use it.”

It was true, he could. Mia had witnessed it herself only a few minutes ago on the rooftop of his Manhattan apartment. And now he had un-created it. The pod that had transported them here no longer existed.

As the full implications of that hit her, her heart rate spiked again, and she suddenly found it hard to breathe.

A wave of panic washed over her.

She was now stranded in Costa Rica, in the main K colony – completely dependent on Korum for everything. He had made the ship that had brought them there, and he had just unmade it. If there was another way out of Lenkarda, Mia didn’t know about it.

What if he had lied to her earlier? What if she would never see her family again?

She must’ve looked as terrified as she felt because Korum squeezed her hand gently. The feel of his large, warm hand was oddly reassuring. “Don’t worry,” he said softly. “It will be all right, I promise.”

Mia focused on taking deep breaths, trying to beat back the panic. She had no choice but to trust him now. Even back in New York, he could do anything he wanted with her. There was no reason for him to make her promises that he didn’t intend to keep.

Still, the irrational fear gnawed at her insides, adding to the unsavory brew of emotions boiling in her. The knowledge that Korum had been manipulating her all along, using her to crush the Resistance, was like acid in her stomach, burning her from the inside. Everything he'd done, everything he'd said – it had all been a part of his plan. While she had been agonizing over spying on him, he had probably been secretly laughing at her pathetic attempts to outwit him, to help the cause he'd known was doomed to failure from the very beginning.

She felt like such an idiot now for going along with everything the Resistance had told her. It had seemed to make so much sense at the time; she'd felt so noble helping her kind fight against the invaders who had taken over her planet. And instead, she'd unwittingly participated in a power grab by a small group of Ks.

Why hadn't she stopped to think, to fully analyze the situation?

Korum had told her that the entire Resistance movement had been wrong, completely misguided in their mission. And despite herself, Mia had believed him.

The Ks hadn't killed the freedom fighters who had attacked their Centers – and that simple fact told her a lot about the Krinar and their views on humans. If the Ks had truly been the monsters the Resistance portrayed them to be, none of the fighters would have survived.

At the same time, she didn't fully trust Korum's explanation of what a charl was. When John had spoken about his kidnapped sister, there had been too much pain in his voice for it all to be a lie. And Korum's own actions toward her fit much better with John's explanation than with his own. Her lover had denied that the Ks kept humans as their pleasure slaves, yet he'd given her very little choice about anything in their relationship thus far. He had wanted her, and, just like that, her life was no longer her own. She'd been swept off her feet and into his TriBeCa penthouse – and now here she was, in the K Center in Costa Rica, following him toward some unknown destination.

As much as she dreaded the answer to her question, she had to know. "Is Dana here?" Mia asked carefully, not wanting to provoke his temper. "John's sister? John said she's a charl in Lenkarda . . ."

"No," Korum said, shooting her an unreadable look. "John was misinformed – I'm guessing, deliberately – by the Keiths."

"She's not a charl?"

"No, Mia, she was never a charl in the true sense of the word. She was what you would call a xeno – a human obsessed with all things Krinar. Her family never knew that. When she met Lotmir in Mexico, she begged to go with him, and he agreed to take her for some period of time. The last I heard, she got someone else to take her to Krina. I imagine she's quite happy there, given her preferences. As to why she left without a word to her family, I think it probably has something to do with her father."

"Her father?"

"Dana and John haven't had a very happy childhood," Korum said, and she could feel his hand tightening on hers. "Their father is someone who should've been exterminated long ago. Based on the intelligence we've gathered about your Resistance contact, John's father has a particular fetish that involves very young children –"

"He's a pedophile?" Mia asked quietly, bile rising in her throat at the thought.

Korum nodded. "Indeed. I believe his own children were the primary recipients of his affections."

Sickened and filled with intense pity for John and Dana, Mia looked away. If this was true, then she couldn't blame Dana for wanting to get away, to leave everything connected with her old life behind. Although Mia's own family was normal and loving, she'd had some interactions with victims of domestic and child abuse as part of her internship last summer. She knew about the scars it left on the child's psyche. When they got older, some of these children turned to drugs or alcohol to dull their pain. Dana had apparently turned to sex with Ks.

Of course, this was assuming that Korum wasn't lying to her about the whole thing.

Thinking about it, Mia decided that he probably wasn't. Why would he need to? It's not like she could break up with him even if she found out that Dana was held here against her will.

"And what about John?" she asked. "Is he all right? And Leslie?"

"I assume so," he said, and his voice was noticeably cooler. "Neither one has been captured yet."

Relieved, Mia decided to leave it at that. She had a suspicion that talking to Korum about the Resistance was not the smartest course of action for her right now. Instead, she refocused on their surroundings.

"Where are we going?" she asked, looking around. They were walking through what seemed like an untouched forest. Twigs and branches crunched under her feet, and she could hear nature sounds everywhere – birds, some kind of buzzing insects, rustling leaves. She had no idea what he had in mind for the rest of the day, but she just wanted to bury her head under a blanket and hide for several hours. This morning's events and the resulting emotional upheaval had left her completely drained, and she badly needed some quiet time to come to terms with everything that happened.

"To my house," Korum replied, turning his head toward her. There was a small smile on his face again. "It's only a short walk from here. You'll be able to relax and get some rest once we're there."

Mia shot him a suspicious look. His answer was uncannily close to what she had just been thinking. "Can you read my mind?" she asked, horrified at the possibility.

He grinned, showing the dimple on his left cheek. "That would be nice – but no. I just know you well enough by now to see when you're exhausted."

Relieved, Mia nodded and focused on putting one foot in front of another as they walked through the forest. Despite everything, that dazzling smile of his sent a warm sensation all throughout her body.

You're an idiot, Mia.

How could she still feel like this after what he had put her through, after he had manipulated her like that? What kind of a person was she, to fall in love with an alien who had completely taken over her life?

She felt disgusted with herself, yet she couldn't help it. When he smiled like that, she could almost forget everything that happened in the sheer joy of simply being with him. Underneath all the bitterness, she was fiercely glad that the Resistance had failed – that he was still in her life.

Her thoughts kept turning to what he'd said earlier . . . to his admission that he'd grown to care for her. He hadn't intended for it to happen, he'd said, and Mia realized that she'd been right to fear and resist him in the beginning – that he had indeed regarded her as a plaything at first, as a little human toy he could use and discard at his leisure. Of course,

“caring” was far from a declaration of love, but it was more than she’d ever expected to hear from him. Like a balm applied to a festering wound, his words made her feel just a tiny bit better, giving her hope that maybe it would be all right after all, that maybe he would keep his promises and she would see her family again –

A squishy sensation under her foot jerked her out of that thought. Startled, Mia looked down and saw that she had stepped on a large, crunchy bug. “Eww!”

“What’s the matter?” Korum asked, surprised.

“I just stepped on something,” Mia explained in disgust, trying to wipe her sneaker on the nearest patch of grass.

He looked amused. “Don’t tell me . . . Are you afraid of insects?”

“I wouldn’t say afraid, necessarily,” Mia said cautiously. “It’s more that I find them really gross.”

He laughed. “Why? They’re just another set of living creatures, just like you and me.”

Mia shrugged and decided against explaining it to him. She wasn’t sure she fully understood it herself. Instead, she resolved to pay closer attention to her surroundings. Despite growing up in Florida, she wasn’t really comfortable with tropical nature in its raw form. She much preferred neatly paved paths in beautifully landscaped parks, where she could sit on a bench and enjoy the fresh air with minimal bug encounters.

“You don’t have any roads or sidewalks?” she asked Korum with consternation, jumping over what looked like an ant hill.

He smiled at her indulgently. “No. We like our environment to be as close to its original state as possible.”

Mia wrinkled her nose, not liking that at all. Her sneakers were already covered with dirt, and she was thankful that the wet season in Costa Rica had not officially begun yet. Otherwise, she imagined they would be trekking through swampland. Given the highly advanced state of Krinar technology, she found it strange that they chose to live in such primitive conditions.

A minute later, they entered another clearing, a much larger one this time. An unusual cream-colored structure stood in the middle. Shaped like an elongated cube with rounded corners, it had no windows or doors – or any visible openings at all.

“This is your house?”

Mia had seen structures like this one on the three-dimensional map in Korum’s office earlier today. They’d looked very strange and alien to her from a distance, and that impression was even stronger now that she was standing next to one. It just looked so incredibly *foreign*, so different from anything she’d ever seen in her life.

Korum nodded, leading her toward the building. “Yes, this is my home – and now it’s yours too.”

Mia swallowed nervously, her anxiety growing at the last part of his statement. Why did he keep saying that? Did he really intend for her to live here permanently? He’d promised to bring her back to New York to finish her senior year of college, and Mia desperately clung to that thought as she stared at the pale walls of the house looming in front of her.

As they approached, a part of the wall suddenly disintegrated in front of them, creating an opening large enough for them to walk through.

Mia gasped in surprise, and Korum smiled at her reaction. "Don't worry," he said. "This is an intelligent building. It anticipates our needs and creates doorways as needed. It's nothing to be afraid of."

"Will it do that for anyone or just you?" Mia asked, stopping before the opening. She knew it was illogical, her reluctance to go in. If Korum intended to keep her prisoner, there was nothing she could do about it – she was already in an alien colony with no way to escape. Still, she couldn't bring herself to voluntarily enter her new "home" unless she was sure she could leave it on her own.

Apparently intuiting the source of her concern, Korum gave her a reassuring look. "It will do it for you as well. You'll be able to go in and out whenever you want, although it might be best if you stayed close to me for the first few weeks . . . at least until you get used to our way of life and I have a chance to introduce you to others."

Exhaling in relief, Mia looked up at him. "Thanks," she said quietly, some of her panic fading. Maybe being here wouldn't be so bad after all. If he really did bring her back to New York at the end of summer, then her sojourn in Lenkarda might prove to be exactly that – a couple of months spent at an incredible place that few humans could even imagine, with the extraordinary creature she'd fallen in love with.

Feeling slightly better about the situation, Mia stepped through the opening, entering a Krinar dwelling for the first time.

The sight that greeted her inside was utterly unexpected.

Mia had been bracing for something alien and high-tech – maybe floating chairs similar to the ones in the ship that had transported them here. Instead, the room looked just like Korum's penthouse back in New York, right down to the plush cream-colored couch. Mia flushed at the memory of what had taken place on that couch just a little while ago. Only the walls were different; they seemed to be made of the same transparent material as the ship, and she could see the greenery outside instead of the Hudson River.

"You have the same furniture here?" she asked in surprise, letting go of his hand and taking a step forward to gape at the strange sight. She couldn't imagine that furniture stores made deliveries to K Centers – but then he could probably just conjure up whatever he wanted using their nanotechnology.

"Not exactly," Korum said, smiling at her. "I set this up ahead of your arrival. I thought it might be easier for you to acclimate if you could relax in familiar surroundings for the first couple of weeks. After you feel more comfortable here, I can show you how I usually live."

Mia blinked at him. "You set it up just for me? When?"

Even with rapid fabrication – or whatever Korum had called the technology that let him make things out of nothing – he probably still needed a little time to do all this. When would he have had a chance to even think about this, given the events of this morning? She tried to picture him making a couch while capturing the Keiths and almost snickered out loud.

"A little while ago," Korum said ambiguously, shrugging a little.

Mia frowned at him. "So . . . not today?" For some reason, the timing of this gesture seemed important.

"No, not today."

Mia stared at him. "You were planning this for a while? Me being here, I mean?"

"Of course," he said casually. "I plan everything."

Mia took a deep breath. "And if I hadn't been in danger from the Resistance? Would you have still brought me here?"

He looked at her, his expression indecipherable. "Does it really matter?" he asked softly.

It mattered to Mia, but she wasn't up to having that discussion right now. So she just shrugged and looked away, studying the room. It *was* somewhat comforting to be someplace that at least looked familiar, and she had to admit that it was a thoughtful thing to do – creating a human-like environment for her in his house.

"Are you hungry?" Korum asked, regarding her with a smile.

Making food for her seemed to be one of his favorite activities; he had even fed her this morning when she'd been afraid he would kill her for helping the Resistance. It was one of the things that had always made her feel so conflicted about him, about their relationship in general. Despite his arrogance, he could be incredibly caring and considerate. It drove Mia nuts, the fact that he'd never truly acted like the villain she'd thought him to be.

She shook her head. "No, thanks. Still full from the sandwich earlier." And she was. All she wanted to do was lie down and try to give her brain a rest.

"Okay then," Korum said. "You can relax here for a bit. I have to go out for an hour or so. Do you think you'll be all right by yourself?"

Mia nodded. "Do you have a bed somewhere?" she asked.

"Of course. Here, come with me."

Mia followed Korum as he walked down a familiar hallway to the bedroom that was identical to the one he had in TriBeCa. She noted the location of the bathroom as well.

"So everything here is stuff I know how to use?" she asked.

"Yes, pretty much," he said, reaching out to briefly stroke her cheek. His fingers felt hot against her skin. "The bed is probably more comfortable than you're used to because it utilizes the same intelligent technology as the chair in the ship and the walls of this house. I figured you wouldn't mind that. Don't be scared if it adjusts to your body, okay?"

Despite the tension squeezing her temples, Mia smiled, remembering how comfortable the seat in the aircraft had been. "Okay, that sounds good. I'm looking forward to trying it."

"I'm sure you'll enjoy it." His eyes gleamed with some unknown emotion. "Take a nap if you want, and I'll be back soon."

Bending down, he gave her a chaste kiss on the forehead and walked out, leaving her alone in an intelligent dwelling inside the alien settlement.

* * *

Less than a mile away, the Krinar watched as his nemesis arrived with his charl.

The gentle way Korum held her hand as he led her toward his house was so out of character that the K almost chuckled to himself. This was an interesting development, the involvement of a human girl. Would it change anything? Somehow, he doubted it.

His enemy would not be swayed from his course, certainly not by some little human.

No, there was only one way to save the human race. And he was the only one who could do it.

Chapter 2

Mia woke up in total darkness.

She lay there for a moment, trying to figure out the time. She felt incredibly well-rested, every muscle in her body relaxed and her mind completely clear. Right away, she knew she was in Korum's house in Lenkarda, lying on his "intelligent" bed. Stretching with a yawn, she wondered how Korum had managed to sleep on a regular human mattress back in New York. She couldn't imagine wanting to sleep anywhere other than this bed for the rest of her life.

The sheets were wrapped around her body, caressing her bare skin with a light, sensuous touch. She was neither cold nor hot, and the pillow cradled her head and neck in exactly the right way. Whatever tension she'd felt earlier was completely gone.

She had not intended to fall asleep, but the rest had definitely done wonders for her state of mind. After Korum had left, she'd showered and climbed into bed with the goal of resting for a few minutes. As soon as she'd gotten in, the sheets had moved around her, wrapping her in a gentle cocoon, and she'd felt subtle vibrations under the most tense parts of her body. It was as though soft fingers were massaging away the knots in her back and neck. She remembered loving the sensation, and then she must've fallen asleep because she couldn't recall anything else.

Apparently sensing that she was awake, the room gradually got lighter, even though there was no obvious source of artificial light.

It was a clever idea, Mia thought, to have the light turn on so slowly. Bright light after complete darkness was often painful to the eyes, yet that's how most human light fixtures worked, simply on and off – disregarding the fact that light-dark transitions in nature were far more subtle.

Reluctant to leave the comfort of the bed, Mia lay there and tried to figure out what to do next. The sick, panicky feeling of earlier was gone, and she could think more clearly.

It was true that Korum had used and manipulated her.

But, to be fair, he'd done it to protect his own kind – just as she'd thought she was helping all of humanity by spying on him. The sense of betrayal she'd felt yesterday had been irrational, out of place considering the nature of their relationship and her own actions toward him. The fact that he hadn't really done anything to punish her for *her* betrayal spoke volumes about his intentions.

She'd been wrong to paint him with such a dark brush before. If he hadn't hurt her for what she'd done thus far, he probably never would.

However, he clearly had no problem disregarding her wishes. Case in point: she was here in Lenkarda. Yet, if he'd spoken the truth, she would still be able to go visit her parents soon, and even come back to New York to finish college.

All in all, her situation was much better than she'd feared this morning, when she'd thought he might kill her for helping the Resistance.

Still, the circumstances she found herself in were unsettling. She was in a K Center, where she didn't speak the language, didn't know anyone except Korum, and had no idea

how to use even the most basic Krinar technology. As a human, she was the ultimate outsider here. Would the Ks think she was dumb because of what she was? Because she couldn't understand the Krinar language or read ten books in a couple of hours, the way Korum could? Would they make fun of her ignorance and her technological illiteracy? She wasn't exactly tech-savvy even by human standards. In general, was Korum's arrogance simply a part of his personality, or was it typical of his species and their overall attitude toward humans?

Of course, agonizing about all this didn't change the facts. Whether she liked it or not, she was in Lenkarda for at least the next couple of months, and she had to make the best of it. And in the meantime, there was so much she could learn here –

The bedroom door opened quietly, and Korum walked in, interrupting her thoughts. "Hey there, sleepyhead, how are you feeling?"

Mia couldn't help smiling at him, forgetting her concerns for the moment. For the first time since she'd known him, Korum was dressed in Krinar clothing: a sleeveless shirt made of some soft-looking white material and a pair of loose grey shorts that ended just above his knees. It was a simple outfit, but it did wonders for his physique, accentuating his powerfully muscled build. He looked mouthwateringly gorgeous, his smooth bronze skin glowing with health and those amber eyes shining as he looked at her lying on his bed.

"The bed is awesome," Mia confided. "I don't know how you slept on anything else."

He grinned, sitting down next to her and picking up a strand of her hair to play with. "I know. It was a real sacrifice – but your presence made it quite tolerable."

Mia laughed and rolled over onto her stomach, feeling absurdly happy. "So what now? Do I get to meet other intelligent objects? I have to say, your technology is very cool."

"Oh, you have no idea just how cool our technology is," Korum said, looking at her with a mysterious smile. "But you'll learn soon."

Bending down, he kissed her exposed shoulder and then lightly nibbled on her neck, his mouth warm and soft on her skin. Closing her eyes, Mia shivered from the pleasant sensation. Her body immediately responded to his touch, and she moaned softly, feeling a surge of warm moisture between her legs.

He stopped and sat up straight.

Surprised, Mia opened her eyes and looked at him. "You don't want me?" she asked quietly, trying to keep the hurt note out of her voice.

"What? No, my darling, I very much want you." And it was true; she could see the warm golden flecks in his expressive eyes, and the soft material of his shorts did little to hide his erection.

"Then why did you stop?" asked Mia, trying very hard not to sound like a child deprived of candy.

He sighed, looking frustrated. "A friend of mine is coming over to meet you. He'll be here in a few minutes."

Mia looked at him in surprise. "Your friend wants to meet me? Why?"

Korum smiled. "Because he's heard a lot about you from me. And also because he's one of our top mind experts and can help you with the adjustment process."

Mia frowned slightly. "A mind expert? You want me to see a shrink?"

Korum shook his head, grinning. "No, he's not a shrink. In our society, a mind expert is someone who deals with all aspects of the brain. He's like a neurosurgeon, psychiatrist, and therapist combined – literally an expert on all matters having to do with the mind."

That was interesting, but didn't really answer her question. "So why does he want to see me?"

"Because I think there's something he can do to make you feel more at home here," Korum said, his fingers trailing down her arm, rubbing it softly.

He liked to do that, Mia had noticed, to just randomly touch her during their conversations, as though craving constant physical contact. Mia didn't mind. It was that chemistry he had talked about before; their bodies gravitated toward each other like two objects in space.

She forced her attention back to the conversation. "Like what?" she asked, feeling slightly wary.

"Well, for instance, would you like to be able to understand and speak our language?"

Mia's eyes widened, and she nodded eagerly. "Of course!"

"Have you ever wondered how I'm able to speak English so well? And every other human language? How all of us speak like this?"

"I didn't know you spoke other languages besides English," Mia confessed, staring at him in amazement. She had briefly wondered how he knew such perfect American English, but she'd always assumed Ks had simply studied everything before coming to Earth. Korum was incredibly smart, so she'd never really questioned the fact that he knew her language and was able to speak it without any accent. And now he was telling her that he spoke a bunch of other languages as well?

"So you speak French?" she asked. At his nod, she continued, "Spanish? Russian? Polish? Mandarin?" He made an affirmative gesture each time.

"Okay . . . What about Swahili?" asked Mia, sure that she had caught him this time.

"That too," he said, smiling at her astounded expression.

"Okay," said Mia slowly. "I gather you're about to tell me that it's not just pure smarts on your part."

He grinned. "Exactly. I could've learned the languages on my own given enough time, but there's a more efficient way – and that's what Saret can do for you."

Mia stared at him. "He can teach me how to speak Krinar?"

"Better than that. He can give you the same abilities that I have – instant comprehension and knowledge of any language, be it human or Krinar."

Mia gasped in shock, her heart beating faster from excitement. "How?"

"By giving you a tiny implant that will influence a specific region of your brain and act as a highly advanced translation device."

"A brain implant?" Her excitement immediately turned to dread as everything inside Mia violently rejected the idea. He had already embedded tracking devices in her palms; the last thing she needed was alien technology influencing her brain. The ability he had described was incredible, and she desperately wanted it – but not at that price.

"The device is not really what you're picturing," Korum said. "It's going to be tiny, the size of a cell, and you will not feel discomfort at any point – either during insertion or afterwards."

"And if I say no, that I don't want it?" Mia asked quietly, alarmed at the idea that Korum already had the mind expert on the way here.

"Why not?" He looked at her with a small frown.

“Do you really need to ask?” she said incredulously. “You *shined* me – you put tracking devices in me under the pretext of healing my palms. Did you really think I would be okay with you putting something in my brain?”

Korum’s frown deepened. “This doesn’t have any extra functionality, Mia.” He didn’t seem the least bit repentant about shining her in the first place.

“Really?” she asked him acerbically. “It doesn’t do anything extra? Doesn’t influence my thoughts or feelings in any way?”

“No, my darling, it doesn’t.” He looked vaguely amused at the thought.

“I don’t want a brain implant,” Mia said firmly, looking at him with a mutinous expression on her face.

He stared back at her. “Mia,” he said softly, “if I had truly wanted to put something nefarious in your brain, I could’ve done it in a million different ways. I can implant anything in your body at any time, and you wouldn’t have a clue. The only reason why I’m offering you this ability is because I want you to be comfortable here, to be able to communicate with everyone on your own. If you don’t want this, then that’s your choice. I won’t force it on you. But very few humans get this opportunity, so I would advise you to think really hard before you turn it down.”

Mia looked away, struck by the realization that he was right. He didn’t need to inform her or get her consent for anything he wanted to do to her. The panic that she thought she had under control threatened to bubble up again, and she squelched it with effort.

Something didn’t quite make sense to her. Taking a deep breath, Mia turned her gaze to his face again, studying his inscrutable expression. It bothered her that she still understood him so little, that the person who had so much power over her was still such a big unknown.

“Korum . . .” She wasn’t sure if she should bring this up, but she couldn’t resist. The question had tormented her for weeks. “Why did you shine me? I hadn’t even met the Resistance at that point, so it’s not like you needed to keep tabs on me for your big plan . . .”

“Because I wanted to make sure I can always find you,” he said, and there was a possessive note in his voice that frightened her. “I held you in my arms that day, and I knew I wanted more. I wanted everything, Mia. You were mine from that moment on, and I had no intention of losing you, not even for a moment.”

Not even for a moment? Did he realize how crazy that sounded? He had seen a girl he wanted, and he’d made sure her location would always be known to him.

The fact that he thought he had the right to do this was terrifying. How could she deal with someone like that? He had no concept of boundaries when it came to her, no respect for her freedom of will. He had just casually admitted to a horrible and high-handed act, and she had no idea what she could say to him now.

At her silence, Korum took a deep breath and got up. “You should get dressed,” he said quietly. “Saret will be here in a minute.”

Mia nodded and sat up, holding the sheets to her chest. Now was not the time to analyze the complexities of their relationship. Taking a deep breath of her own, she pushed aside her fear. There was no way she could change her situation right now, and focusing on the negative would only make things worse. She needed to find a way to get along with her lover and figure out how to better manage his domineering nature.

“What should I wear?” Mia asked. “I didn’t bring any clothes . . .”

"Do you want your usual jeans and T-shirts, or do you want to dress like everyone else here?" Korum asked, a smile appearing on his face. Some of the tension in the room dissipated.

"Um, like everyone else, I guess." She didn't want to stick out like a sore thumb.

"Okay, then." Korum made a small gesture with his hand and handed her a light-colored piece of material that hadn't been there only a second ago.

Wide-eyed, Mia stared at the piece of clothing he just gave her. "More instant fabrication?" she asked, trying to act like it wasn't still a huge shock to her to see things materializing out of nothing.

He grinned. "That's right. If you don't like this, I can get you something else. Go ahead, try it on."

Mia let go of the sheet and climbed out of bed, feeling comfortable with her nakedness. For all his faults, Korum had done wonders for her body image and self-confidence. Because he repeatedly told her how beautiful he found her to be, she no longer worried about being too skinny or having frizzy hair and pale skin. He would've been a boon during her insecure teenage years.

No, scratch that thought. No teenager should be subjected to someone so overwhelming.

Taking the dress, she put it on, making sure that the low-cut portion was in the back. "What do you think?" she asked, doing a small twirl.

He smiled with a warm glow in his eyes. "It looks perfect on you."

His shorts now had a bulge in them, and Mia smiled to herself in satisfaction. Despite everything, it was nice to know that she had that kind of effect on him, that his need was as strong as hers. At least in this, they were equals.

Curious to see how the dress looked, she walked over to the mirror on the other side of the bedroom.

Korum was right; the outfit was very pretty. Similar in style to the ones she'd seen the female Keiths wear, it was a beautiful shade of ivory with peach undertones, and draped over her body in exactly the right way. Her back and shoulders were mostly exposed, while her front was modestly covered, with strategic pleats around her chest area concealing her nipples. The length was exactly right for her too, with the floaty skirt stopping a couple of inches above her knees.

When she turned around, he handed her a pair of flat ivory sandals, made of some unusually soft material. Mia tried them on. They fit her feet perfectly and were surprisingly comfortable.

"Nice, thanks," she said. Then, remembering one last crucial item, she asked, "What about underwear?"

"We don't really wear it," Korum said. "I can make it for you if you insist, but you might want to try wearing just our clothes."

No underwear? "What if the dress rides up or something?"

"It won't. The material is intelligent as well. It's designed to adhere to your body in exactly the right way. If you move or bend in a certain direction, it will move with you so that you will always be covered."

That was handy. Mia thought of the countless wardrobe malfunctions in Hollywood that could've been prevented with K clothing. "Okay, then I'm ready, I guess," she said. "I have to use the restroom, and then I'm good to go."

“Excellent,” Korum said, smiling. “I’ll see you in the living room.”
And with a quick kiss on her forehead, he exited the room.

* * *

“I like what you’ve done with the place. Very twenty-first-century American.”

Korum’s friend had just walked in and was looking around with a smile. An inch or two shorter than Korum, he was just as powerfully built, and had the darker coloring typical of the Ks. His face was rounder, however, and his cheekbones sharper, reminding her a bit of someone with Asian ancestry.

“What can I say? You know I have good taste,” said Korum, getting up from the couch where he had been sitting with Mia to greet the newcomer. Approaching him, Korum lightly touched his shoulder with his palm, and the other K reciprocated his gesture.

Mia wondered if that was the K version of a handshake.

Turning toward her, Korum said, “Mia, this is my friend Saret. Saret, this is Mia, my charl.”

Saret smiled, his brown eyes twinkling. He seemed genuinely pleased to see her. “Hello, Mia. Welcome to our Center. I hope you’ve been finding it to your liking so far?”

Mia got up and smiled in return. It was strange to be meeting another K. With the exception of a couple of brief encounters with Korum’s colleagues, her lover was the only Krinar she’d interacted with thus far.

“It’s been very nice, thank you.”

Should she offer to shake his hand? Or do that shoulder thing Korum had just done? As soon as the thought occurred to her, she decided against it. She had no idea what the K rules on physical contact were, and she didn’t want to accidentally cause offense.

“Have you had a chance to go anywhere in Lenkarda so far? Korum told me you arrived only this morning.”

Mia shook her head regretfully. “No, I haven’t. I’m afraid I spent most of the day sleeping.” What time was it, anyway? Through the transparent walls of the house, she could see that it was dark outside. It had to be late in the evening, or maybe even the middle of the night.

“Mia was jet-lagged and exhausted from what happened earlier,” Korum explained, walking back toward her and placing a proprietary hand around her back. He pulled her down on the couch next to him, and Saret sat down on one of the plush armchairs across from them.

“Of course,” Saret said, “I completely understand. It had to be very traumatic for you, learning the truth that way.”

Mia stared at him in surprise. How much did he know? Had Korum told him everything, including her role in the Resistance attack on their Centers? She had no idea how her actions would be viewed by the Krinar. Would she be punished somehow for aiding the Resistance earlier?

“Well, the good thing is that it’s over,” Korum said, taking one of Mia’s hands into his and softly rubbing her palm with his thumb. Turning toward her, he promised, “You don’t have to worry about any of this again.”

“Actually,” Saret said with a regretful look on his handsome face, “I’m afraid there might be one more thing that Mia has to do.”

Korum's face darkened. "I already told them no. She's been through enough."

Saret sighed. "There was a formal request from the United Nations –"

"Fuck the United Nations. They don't get to request anything after this fiasco. They're damn lucky we didn't retaliate –"

"Be that as it may, the majority of the Council believes it's important to extend this gesture of goodwill to them."

Mia listened to them arguing with a cold feeling in the pit of her stomach. The United Nations? The Council? What did any of this have to do with her?

"The Council can go fuck itself too," Korum said in an uncompromising tone. "There's absolutely no need for this, and they know it. She's my charl, and they don't get to tell me what to do."

"She's not just your charl, Korum, and you know it. She's one of the witnesses in what will be the biggest trial of the last ten thousand years, not to mention the human proceedings –"

Mia wanted to throw up as she began to understand where the conversation was leading. "Excuse me," she said quietly, "what exactly is needed from me?"

"It doesn't matter," Korum said flatly. "They can't make you do anything without my permission."

Saret sighed again. "Look, the Council wants her testimony as well. It really would be for the best if you just let her do it –"

Staring at them, Mia began to feel angry. They were talking about her like she was a child or a pet of some sort. Whatever it was that they wanted from her, it should be her decision, not Korum's.

"She doesn't need this right now," Korum said firmly. "They have plenty of evidence, and I'm not putting her through any additional stress –"

"Excuse me," Mia said coldly. "I want to know what the fuck you're talking about."

Clearly startled, Saret laughed, and Korum gave her a disapproving look.

"I think your charl is gutsier than you give her credit for," Saret said to Korum, still chuckling. Turning toward Mia, he explained, "You see, Mia, the traitors that you helped us catch – the Keiths, as your Resistance friends called them – will be tried according to our laws. While our judicial process is fairly different from what you're used to, we do require all available evidence to be presented – and testimony from all the witnesses. Since you were involved throughout, your testimony could play a role in whether they get convicted and how serious their punishment will be."

"You want me to testify in a Krinar trial?" Mia asked incredulously.

"Yes, exactly, and we have also received a formal request for your presence from the United Nations Ambassador –"

"She's not doing it, Saret. Forget it. You can go back to Arus and tell him it's not happening."

"Look, Korum, are you sure you want to do this? We're so close to getting the approval . . . You know this is not going to be viewed favorably –"

"I know," Korum said. "I'm willing to take that chance. It won't be the first time they were pissed at me."

Saret looked frustrated. "Okay, but I think you're making a big mistake. All she has to do is get up there and talk –"

"You know as well as I do that if she gets up there, the Protector will try to take her apart. I will not put her through that. And I don't want her anywhere near the United Nations right now – that's far too dangerous. Besides, human media might sniff out the story, and Mia doesn't need the whole world watching her testimony at the UN. Her family doesn't even know anything yet."

Her anger forgotten, Mia squeezed Korum's hand in gratitude. She couldn't help but be touched by his protectiveness. It was hard to say what appealed to her less – the idea of appearing in front of the Krinar Council or at the United Nations with the whole world watching.

"Arus said they can make other arrangements for her. The UN hearing can take place behind closed doors, with nothing leaked to the media. And the Council has agreed to accept her recorded testimony for the trial."

"Tell Arus that he can talk to me himself if he's so determined to make this happen," said Korum quietly, his eyes narrowed with anger. "She's my charl. If he wants her to do something, he needs to ask me very, very nicely. And then, if Mia says she's okay with it, I will maybe consider it."

Saret smiled ruefully. "Sure. You know I hate to be in the middle like this. You and Arus can talk it out. I was asked to deliver a message, and that's where my responsibility ends."

Korum nodded. "Understood."

The expression on his face was still harsh, and Mia shifted in her seat, feeling uncomfortable about the role she had inadvertently played in this disagreement. She needed to learn more about this trial and what it all meant, but she didn't want to ask more questions in front of Saret. Instead, wanting to lighten the tension in the room, she asked cautiously, "So how do you two know each other?"

Saret smiled at her, understanding what she was doing. "Oh, we go way back. We've known each other since we were children."

Mia's eyes widened. If they had been children together, then she was in the presence of two aliens who measured their age in thousands of years. "Were you classmates or something?" she asked in fascination.

Korum shook his head, his lips curving slightly. "Not exactly. We were playmates. Our children are educated very differently than humans – we don't have schools like you do."

"No? Then how do your children learn?"

Saret grinned at her, apparently pleased by her curiosity. "A lot of it is play-based. We let them develop most of the key skills they need through socialization and interaction with others, be it children or adults. Later on, they do apprenticeships in various fields with the goal of honing their problem-solving and critical-thinking abilities."

Mia looked at him in fascination. "But how do they learn things like math and history and writing?"

Saret waved his hand dismissively. "Oh, those are easy. I don't know if Korum has talked to you about this before –"

"I haven't yet," Korum said. "You got here as soon as Mia woke up. All I had time to do was mention the language implant."

"Oh, good." Saret sounded excited. "Would you like to get that done tonight, Mia?"

Mia hesitated. If Korum wasn't lying to her, then she would be an idiot to pass on this opportunity. "Can you please explain to me again what exactly this implant is and what it does?" she asked, looking at Saret.

Korum sighed, looking exasperated. "Yes, Saret, please tell Mia exactly what the implant is. She doesn't seem to trust my explanation."

"Can you blame me?" she asked Korum, trying to keep the bitterness out of her tone.

Saret's eyebrows rose, and he grinned again. "Still some unresolved issues, I see."

Korum shot him a warning look, and Saret's grin promptly disappeared. "Never mind," he said hastily. "I don't know what Korum told you, Mia, but the language implant is a very simple, very straightforward device that many Krinar get upon maturity – once our brain is fully developed. It's a microscopic computer made of special biological material that essentially acts as a highly advanced translator. Its function is to convert data from one form into another – thought pattern to language and vice versa. It acts on one area of the brain only and has absolutely no harmful side effects."

"Does it ever malfunction?" asked Mia. "Or can it do something else to me?"

"Like what?" Saret looked perplexed. "And no, this technology has been in existence for over ten thousand years, so it's been fully perfected. It doesn't malfunction, ever."

"Can it make me think something that I don't want? Or broadcast my thoughts?" Now that she'd said it out loud, Mia could hear how ridiculous that sounded.

Saret shook his head with a smile. "No, nothing like that. It's a very basic device. What you're talking about is far more advanced science. Mind control and thought reading are still in theoretical stages of development."

"But it is theoretically possible?" Mia asked in amazement, the psych major in her suddenly salivating at the prospect of learning even a tiny sliver of what the Krinar knew about the brain. Now that she wasn't so nervous, it occurred to Mia that the K sitting across from her was probably a veritable treasure trove of knowledge about her field of study.

Saret nodded. "Theoretically, yes. Practically, not yet."

Mia opened her mouth to ask another question, and Korum interrupted, looking amused at her unabashed interest, "So does this make you feel more comfortable about getting the implant?"

Mia considered it for a second. How much should she trust them? Korum had already proven himself to be a master manipulator, and she had no idea what Saret was like. But then again, like Korum said, they didn't really need her permission to do this. The fact that they were giving her a choice is what ultimately convinced her.

"I think so," she said slowly.

"Okay then, Saret, can you please do the honors?"

"Um, wait," Mia said, her heart starting to beat faster, "you mean I can get it right now? Is there an anesthetic or anything?"

Saret smiled. "No, nothing like that. It's very easy – you won't even feel it."

"Okay . . ."

Korum got up, still holding Mia's hand. Saret stood up also and approached them. "May I?" he asked Korum, reaching for Mia.

Korum nodded, and Saret extended his right hand, brushing Mia's hair back behind her left ear. She shuddered a little at the unfamiliar touch. Her nails dug into Korum's hand, and she fought the urge to flinch. Even though they'd told her it wouldn't hurt, she couldn't help her primal reaction.

"That's it." Saret stepped back.

"What?" Mia blinked at him in shock.

"It's done. You have the implant. We'll give it about a minute to sync with your neural pathways, and then we'll test it out."

"But how? Where did it go in?"

"It went in through the skin," Korum explained, smiling at her. "You didn't feel it, right?"

"No, I didn't feel anything." Were they playing a joke on her?

Saret laughed, enjoying her reaction. "Good, you weren't supposed to. The device itself has analgesic properties, so you shouldn't have felt the tiny cut it made in the thin skin behind your ear."

Mia raised her left hand, feeling for the wound, but there was nothing.

"So tell me, Mia, do you feel any different? Are you thinking any thoughts you shouldn't be thinking?" Korum asked her with a mocking gleam in his eyes.

Mia shook her head, frowning at him slightly. She didn't appreciate his making fun of her ignorance.

And then her breath caught in her throat.

Korum had just spoken to her in Krinar – and she had understood his every word.

"Wait a second," she said, and the words that came out of her mouth were strange and unfamiliar. Yet she knew exactly what they meant, and her facial muscles seemed to have no problem forming the sounds. "You just spoke in Krinar!"

Korum smiled. "And so did you. How does it feel?"

Mia blinked at him. It felt strange, yet effortless. "It seems to be okay," she said again in Krinar. "I just don't understand how it works. What if I want to say something in English?"

"If you want to say something in English, you just have to think English, and you'll switch languages," Saret explained. "Right now, your brain's natural response is to speak in Krinar because that's the language in which we're addressing you. You have to actively think that you want to speak in English in order to do so when confronted with Krinar speech. However, later on, when you get used to the implant, switching back and forth will be automatic and won't require any extra thought on your part. This is really not all that different from being multilingual. I'm sure you know people who speak several languages fluently – and now you have that same ability, just taken to a different level."

Mia listened to his explanation, the reality of it seeping in. "Wow," she breathed softly, "so I can really, truly speak any known language now? Just like that?"

She wanted to jump up and run around the room, screaming with glee, and she controlled herself with effort, not wanting to appear like a silly kid in front of Korum's friend. It was just so unbelievably amazing. She had always been good with languages in school, studying Spanish and French throughout high school, but she'd never managed to become fluent. And now she could speak whatever language she wanted? Her earlier reluctance forgotten, Mia could now only think of the mind-blowing possibilities.

"Just like that," Korum confirmed, looking down at her with a smile, and Saret nodded as well.

Struggling to appear dignified, Mia fought back the huge grin that threatened to split her face. "Thank you," she told Saret. "I really appreciate it."

“You’re welcome, Mia. I hope to see you soon.” And with that, he touched Korum’s shoulder again and left, the wall to their right disintegrating to grant him passage.

Chapter 3

Once Saret was gone, Mia couldn't contain her elation any longer. She felt like she would choke from the sheer delight that filled her from within, and she knew that she was grinning now, probably looking like an idiot. But she couldn't bring herself to care anymore, her excitement too strong to be restrained.

She was now a polyglot!

She tried to picture herself speaking Cantonese, and the words suddenly came to her. Opening her mouth, she heard the harsh tonal sounds coming out as she told Korum, "I can't believe this is real." Promptly switching to Russian, she continued, "I can't believe I can do this!" And then again in German, nearly jumping from excitement, "Oh my God, I can speak them all!"

He grinned at her, his face glowing with pleasure. Letting go of her hand, he brought his palm up to her face, curving it around her cheek. Looking down at her, he said in English, "I'm glad you're excited. There's so much I want to show you, darling . . ."

Mia stared up at him, her excitement over her newfound ability suddenly transforming into something else. He was so beautiful, and the warm expression on his face as he gazed down at her made her heart squeeze. "Korum," she said softly, "I . . ."

She didn't know what she could say, how she could express what she was feeling. There was still so much unresolved between them, but in this moment, she couldn't bring herself to care about the way their relationship had started, about all the mutual lies and betrayals. In this moment, she knew only that she loved him, that every part of her longed to be with him.

Reaching up, she wrapped her hand around the back of his neck and tentatively brought his face down toward her. Rising up on her toes, she kissed him on the mouth, her lips soft and uncertain on his. She rarely made the first move – he was usually the one to initiate sex in their relationship – and she could feel the sudden tension gripping his body at her touch.

He kissed her back, his mouth hot and eager on hers, and she found herself lifted up into his arms and carried somewhere. The destination turned out to be the bedroom, and they ended up on the bed, his powerful body covering her own, pressing her into the mattress with its weight. Mia's hands frantically tore at his shirt, trying to find a way to get it off him, to feel his nakedness against her own. She felt like she was burning, her skin too sensitive and the barrier of clothing between them was simply unbearable. Wanting more, she kissed him harder, catching his lower lip between her teeth and biting on it lightly.

Korum sucked in his breath, and she felt him abruptly pull away. Before she could do more than blink, he reared up on the bed and swiftly pulled off his shirt and shorts, revealing his large erection. Mia's mouth watered at the sight of his naked body, all toned muscle covered with that smooth golden skin, his chest lightly dusted with dark hair – and then he was on her, tearing off her dress and leaving her lying there, spread out and exposed before his eyes.

Crawling on top of her, he kissed her again, more aggressively this time, and his hand found its way down her body and toward the junction between her legs. Mia moaned into his mouth, arching her hips toward his hand, and his fingers stroked her folds softly before one finger found its way inside her opening and pressed deep, causing her inner muscles to tighten with the sudden rush of pleasure. "I love how wet you are," he murmured, penetrating her first with one finger and then two, stretching her, preparing her for his possession. Mia cried out, her head falling back, and felt the moist heat of his mouth on her neck, licking and nibbling the sensitive area.

There was something else too, a strange but pleasant sensation that registered somewhere in the back of her brain, a warm vibration that felt like massaging fingers sliding over the back of her body, stroking and caressing her shoulders, the curve of her spine, gently squeezing her buttocks and the backs of her thighs.

The bed, she realized dimly, it had to be the intelligent bed, and then she forgot about it, too immersed in what Korum was doing to pay attention to anything else. His fingers had found a rhythm, two thrusts shallow, one thrust deep, and his thumb was now circling her clitoris in a way that drove her insane. Her nails dug into his back, her entire body shaking with need, and then his thumb pressed on her clit directly and she came apart, convulsing in his arms, waves of pleasure radiating all the way down to her toes.

After the last aftershock was over, Mia opened her eyes and looked at him. He was staring at her with such burning hunger on his face that her breath caught in her throat and her stomach clenched again with answering desire. His fingers were still inside her, and he took them out slowly, causing her to shiver with pleasure.

Bringing his hand up to his face, Korum licked the fingers slowly, clearly savoring her taste. Mia stared at him, mesmerized, unable to look away even as she felt his knee parting her thighs and the hardness of his penis pressing against her vulnerable folds.

He began to enter her, still looking into her eyes, and Mia gasped from the sensation. Even though they'd had sex only a few hours earlier and he had prepared her with his fingers, her body still needed a moment to accommodate him, to stretch around the organ penetrating her so relentlessly. There was something incredibly intimate about being with him like that, feeling his bare skin against her breasts, his shaft inside her vagina, while meeting his gaze with her own. It was as if he wanted to possess more than just her body, Mia thought vaguely, as if he wanted something more than just the sex.

Still looking at her, he began to move his hips, slowly at first and then at a faster pace, each stroke adding to the tension that had again begun to coil inside her. Giving in to the sensations, Mia moaned and closed her eyes, feeling each thrust deep within her belly. He lowered his head, and she felt the warmth of his breath against her ear as he tongued it lightly, making her shiver again. And then his pace picked up again, his hips now driving into her with such force that she was pushed into the mattress, barely able to catch her breath between each powerful stroke.

Her entire body tightened, and Mia screamed as another orgasm hit, her inner muscles squeezing him tightly. As her pulsations eased, she could feel his penis swelling up inside her, and then he came with a hoarse yell, grinding against her loins until his contractions were fully over.

Breathing hard in the aftermath, Mia lay there, his body feeling heavy on top of her. Apparently realizing it, he rolled off her and pulled her against him, hugging her from the back. His hand found its way to her breast, and he just held her like that, pressed up against

his body. As her galloping heartbeat slowed, she felt languid, relaxed . . . and incredibly contented.

“Are you sleepy?” Korum whispered into her hair, stroking her nipple lightly with his thumb, causing it to peak against his palm.

“No,” she whispered back. She felt like every muscle in her body had turned to mush, but she wasn’t sleepy. Her lengthy nap earlier had taken care of that. “What time is it, anyway?”

“It’s about eleven in the evening.”

“I slept the entire day?” No wonder she felt so refreshed.

“You must’ve been exhausted,” he murmured, raising his hand to move her hair to the side. The curls were probably tickling his face, Mia realized with some amusement.

“So Saret makes house calls this late?” she asked, her thoughts returning to her new and amazing ability. A huge grin appeared on her face as she imagined demonstrating her skills to her family and friends. They would be so envious . . .

“It’s not that late for us,” Korum explained, turning her around in his arms so that she was facing him. “You know we don’t sleep as much as humans. Any time before one in the morning and after 5 a.m. are considered regular working and visiting hours.”

Mia blinked at him, her grin fading. It made sense, of course, but this was yet another way she would be an outsider here. If she tried to keep their “regular” hours, she would quickly find herself sleep-deprived.

“You must’ve been bored in New York,” she said quietly, “with me sleeping all the time, and few places open in the wee hours of the night.”

He smiled and shook his head. “No, not at all. That’s when I would usually get my work done, when you slept so sweetly in my bed.”

“What kind of work? The designs?” Mia inquired with curiosity. There was still so much she didn’t know about him, about how he spent his days – and nights – when he wasn’t with her. It had been enlightening, observing his interactions with Saret today. She had caught a small glimpse of who Korum was outside of their relationship, and she was hungry to know more.

“Yes, I often work on the designs – that’s my passion, that’s what I really love to do,” he answered readily, regarding her with a warm look in his eyes. “I also have to run my company, which takes up a big chunk of my time. I have a number of talented designers working for me, both here and on Krina, and there’s always something that requires my attention –”

“You have people working for you on Krina?” Mia asked in surprise. “How do you communicate with them or oversee them?”

“We have faster-than-light communication,” Korum explained, “so it’s not that much more difficult to communicate with Krina than with, say, China from here. Of course, I can’t see them easily in person, but we do have what you would call ‘virtual reality,’ where we can have meetings that very closely simulate the real thing. You experienced it a little bit with the virtual map –”

Mia nodded, staring at him attentively. She suspected very few humans knew what he was telling her right now.

“Well, the map is a very basic version of that technology. What we use to conduct cross-planetary meetings is far more advanced.”

“Is that also your design? The virtual reality, I mean?” Mia asked, wondering how far his technological reach extended.

“Some of the latest versions, yes. The basic technology has been around for a very long time; it far predates both me and my company.”

Mia’s stomach suddenly growled. She flushed, feeling embarrassed, and he grinned in response, handing her a tissue for clean-up.

“Of course, you must be hungry after sleeping all day. Why don’t we eat and continue our conversation over dinner?”

“That sounds good,” Mia said, realizing that she was starving.

He got up, pulling her out of bed as well. Before she could even ask for it, he handed her a brand-new outfit that he’d managed to create in a matter of seconds. It was another dress, similar in style to the one that was now lying torn on the bed. This one was pale yellow in color, and Mia gladly put it on, loving the feel of the soft material against her skin. Korum pulled on his shorts and shirt from earlier, which had somehow survived their sex session.

“Ready?” he asked, and Mia nodded. Taking her hand, he led her toward the kitchen.

Like the living room and bedroom, the kitchen was similar in appearance to the one in his TriBeCa apartment. Further evidence of Korum’s attempt to make her feel comfortable here, thought Mia. Walking over to one of the chairs, she sat down and looked at Korum eagerly. He was an amazing cook – part of his passion for making things – and even his most basic creations were more delicious than anything Mia could come up with herself.

“What would you like?” he asked her, walking toward the refrigerator.

Mia shrugged, uncertain how to answer that. “I don’t know. What do you have?”

He smiled. “Pretty much everything. Do you want to try some foods native to Krina or would you rather stick with familiar tastes for now?”

Her eyes widened. “You have foods from Krina here?”

“Well, they’re not imported from Krina – they’re grown right here, in Lenkarda and our other Centers – but we did bring the seeds from our planet.”

“I’d love to try them,” Mia said earnestly. She was an adventurous eater and loved to taste new things. Thanks to her Polish heritage, Mia had grown up eating foods that were not normally part of the standard American diet, and she now had an open mind when it came to enjoying different cuisines.

Korum grinned, looking pleased by her enthusiasm. Taking a few things out of the refrigerator, he quickly chopped up some strange-looking plants and roots and put everything in a pot to cook.

“How do you usually cook here?” she asked him, watching his actions with fascination. “I can’t imagine you use all these appliances normally . . .”

“You’re right, we don’t. In fact, we usually don’t cook,” Korum said, taking out some red leafy plants that vaguely resembled lettuce. “Remember when I told you that our homes are intelligent?”

Mia nodded.

“Well, one of their functions is to always keep us supplied with food and to prepare it in whichever way we like it.”

Mia gasped, unable to contain her excitement. "Seriously? Your house makes food for you whenever you want?"

He smiled, amused at her reaction. "I can see how that would be appealing to you." Mia's cooking abilities were nonexistent – a fact that her mom frequently lamented – but she loved to eat.

"Appealing? It's amazing!" Why would anyone bother cooking when they could just have their house make food for them?

"It's all right," he said with a slight shrug. "It's convenient and it definitely saves a lot of time, but sometimes I get the urge to make something on my own, to see if I can improve on the recipes the house has in its database."

"Is that how you learned to cook so well? By tinkering with those recipes?"

Korum nodded, his hands now massaging the red leafy vegetables in a way that made an orange substance emerge from the leaves. "More or less. Cooking is a fairly recent hobby of mine – I've only gotten into it since coming to Earth. And it's really only in the last few months that I've learned to use the human appliances instead of just programming the house to tweak the recipes it uses."

Mia stared at her lover in disbelief. He had an intelligent house that could make whatever food he wanted, and he was wasting time learning how to use the oven? Chopping vegetables using knives instead of utilizing their fancy technology? That was something she would never understand, Mia thought to herself. Not that she minded, of course; it was only because he had this strange hobby that she'd enjoyed so many delicious dishes back in New York.

He finished squeezing the orange liquid out of the red leaves, washed his hands, and took out a long yellow plant that looked a little like a zucchini with a shiny skin. Quickly cutting it up, he added it to the bowl where the red leaves were now swimming in the orange liquid, and then sprinkled some greenish powder over the entire dish. Placing the bowl in the middle of the table, he put a few spoonfuls of the bright-colored salad on Mia's plate and a larger helping on his. The utensils that he used were unusual, resembling some type of tongs with one flat side and one curved side.

"Try it," he invited, watching her expectantly.

A smaller version of the same utensils were lying next to Mia's bowl. Mimicking his earlier actions, Mia grabbed some of the leaves with her tongs and took a bite. The flavor exploded on her tongue, a perfect combination of sweetness, saltiness, and a tangy bite of spiciness underneath. "Oh my God, this is so good. What is it?" she managed to say once she'd swallowed. Her mouth was almost tingling from the overabundance of sensations.

He smiled. "It's a traditional dish from Rolert – the region of Krina where my family is from. It's very easy to make, as you saw, but the trick is to squeeze the *shari* well – that's the red plant – so it releases all the flavors and nutrients."

Mia listened to his explanation while gobbling down the rest of her portion. As soon as she finished, she immediately reached for a second helping. He grinned and polished off the salad on his own plate.

"That was amazing. Thank you," Mia said when the salad was completely gone.

"I'm glad you liked it," Korum said, carrying away the dishes. Instead of putting them in the dishwasher, he simply held them near a wall. An opening appeared, and he placed them there. And just like that, the dirty dishes were gone.

Seeing the surprised look on Mia's face, Korum explained, "I don't like to clean up, so I *am* using some of our technology to take care of that part."

"So the dishwasher is strictly decorative?"

"More or less. You can use it if you like, but you saw what I just did, right?"

Mia nodded.

"You can do the same thing if you're here on your own. Or just leave the dishes on the table, and the house will take care of them after a few minutes." Walking back to the table, he sat down across from her and smiled. "The main dish will be ready in a couple of minutes."

"I can't wait to try it," Mia told him, smiling back in anticipation.

So far, being in Lenkarda was proving to be a fantastic experience in every way, and she felt an intense wave of happiness washing over her as she stared at Korum's beautiful face. It was hard to believe that only this morning she thought he would be deported to Krina, and now she was sitting in his house in Costa Rica, conversing with him in Krinar language, and enjoying the food he'd prepared for her again.

As her mind drifted to the earlier events, her smile slowly faded. She could've lost him today, she realized again. If Korum was right about the Keiths' intentions, then he could've been killed if the Resistance had succeeded. A sickening cold spread through her veins at the thought.

It hadn't happened, she told herself, trying to focus on the present, but her mind kept wandering. Even though the rebels had failed, the fact was that she'd participated in the attack on the K colonies. And now they wanted her to testify, she remembered with a chill going down her spine, to go in front of their Council and the United Nations and talk about her involvement. Korum seemed to think that he had the power to protect her from the Council, but she didn't understand how something like that worked.

"What's the matter?" Korum asked, apparently puzzled by the suddenly serious expression on her face.

Mia took a deep breath. "Can we talk about what happened this morning?" she asked cautiously. "And about what happens now?"

His expression cooled slightly, the smile leaving his face. "Why?" he asked. "It's over. I want us to move past it, Mia."

She stared at him. "But -"

"But what?" he asked softly, his eyes narrowing. "Do you really want to talk again about how you betrayed me? How you nearly sent me to my death? I'm willing to let it go because I know you were scared and confused . . . but it's really not in your best interests to keep bringing this up, my sweet."

Mia inhaled sharply, trying to hold on to her temper. "I only did what I thought was best," she said evenly. "And you knew everything all along - and you *used* me. And now it seems like your Council wants to use me too, so excuse me if I'm not quite ready to 'move past it.'"

"The Council doesn't have any say where you're concerned, Mia," Korum said, looking at her with an inscrutable amber gaze. "They can't tell you what to do."

"And why is that?" Mia asked, her heart beginning to beat faster. "Because I'm your charl?"

"Exactly."

She stared at him in frustration. "And what does that mean? That I'm your charl?"

He regarded her levelly. "It means that you belong to me and they don't have any jurisdiction over you."

Before Mia could say anything else, he got up and walked over to the pot on the stove. Lifting the lid, he stirred the contents slightly, and an unusual but pleasant aroma filled the kitchen. "It's almost ready," he said, coming back to the table.

The two-second pause helped Mia gather her composure. "Korum," she said softly, "I need to understand. You, me – I feel like I'm part of some game where I don't know the rules. What exactly is a charl in your society?"

He sighed. "I told you, it's our term for the humans that we're in a relationship with."

"So why doesn't your Council have jurisdiction over charl? It's like your government, right?"

"Yes, exactly," Korum said, answering the second part of her question. "The Council is our governing body."

"And you're part of it?" Mia remembered John telling her something along those lines once.

"When I choose to be. I'm not a big fan of politics, but it's unavoidable sometimes."

"How can you choose something like that?" Mia asked, staring at him in astonishment. "Are you an elected official or does it work differently on Krina?"

"It's very different for us." Korum got up and walked over to the stove again. "We don't have democracy the way you do. Who gets to be on the Council is determined based on our overall standing in society."

Mia's eyebrows rose. "What do you mean? Like you're born into the upper class or something?"

He shook his head. "No, not born. Our standing is earned over time. It's based largely on our achievements and how much we contribute to society. Our government is almost like an oligarchy of sorts – but based on meritocracy."

This was fascinating and somewhat intimidating. Korum must've contributed to the K society quite a bit, to have as much influence as he did.

"So how many of you are on the Council?" Mia asked, watching him ladle the stew-like dish into bowls for both of them. It didn't look as exotic as the shari salad, although she could see something purple among the reddish-brown vegetables.

"Currently, there are fifteen Council members. The number fluctuates over time – it's been as high as twenty-three and as low as seven. About a third of us are here on Earth, and the others are still on Krina."

Bringing the bowls back to the table, he sat down and moved one bowl toward her. "Go ahead," he said, "I'm curious if you'll like this also."

Temporarily shelving her questions, Mia tried a spoonful of the stew. To her surprise, it tasted rich and savory, as though it contained some kind of meat products. "This is all plant-based?" she asked, and Korum nodded, observing her reaction with a smile. His expression was warm again.

Mia tried another bite. The texture was soft and a little mushy, almost as if she were eating potatoes, but the flavor was completely different. It reminded her a bit of Japanese food with its subtle seaweed-like undertones, just much more nuanced. After the second bite, Mia suddenly felt ravenous, her tastebuds craving more of the rich flavor, and she quickly downed the rest of the food on her plate. "This is really good," she mumbled between the bites, and Korum nodded, finishing his own portion.

After they were finished, he repeated the process with the dishes, bringing them toward the wall and letting the house take care of cleaning them. Mia observed him carefully, taking note of his exact actions. It didn't seem difficult, the technology even more intuitive than some of the newer iPads, and she hoped she remembered how to do it if she ever needed to clean the dishes herself.

"Thank you – that was delicious," she said when Korum was done.

"You're welcome," he replied casually, sitting back down at the table. The look on his face was amused and slightly mocking, as if he suspected exactly what she was going to say next.

Mia's temper began to simmer again, and she decided not to disappoint him. "So why are charl not within the Council's jurisdiction?" she asked him stubbornly.

"Because that's the way it's always been, Mia," he replied softly. "Because humans are only accepted in Krinar society on those terms – as belonging to one of us. The only exception are those like Dana, who choose to leave their former life behind in order to become pleasure givers on Krina. So you see, my sweet, the Council cannot go to you directly; they have to go through me because, under Krinar law, you're mine."

Mia sucked in her breath, feeling like there was insufficient air in the room. "So I was right," she said quietly. "The Resistance didn't lie to me – you did."

He leaned toward her, his eyes turning a deeper shade of gold. "They did lie to you. A charl is not a pleasure slave, or whatever it was they told you. It's very rare for us to have a charl, and when we do – these are genuine and caring relationships."

"How can a genuine and caring relationship exist when the two people are not considered equals in your society?" she asked bitterly.

He laughed, looking genuinely amused. "Those types of relationships exist all the time, Mia. Just look at your human society. Are you going to tell me that you don't care for your children, your teenagers, or even your pets? Not to mention that your so-called developed nations have only recently accepted the idea of women's rights, while many regions of Earth still don't –"

"Is that what I am to you? A pet?" Her stomach churned as she waited for his answer.

He shook his head, looking at her intently. "No, Mia, you're not a pet. You're a twenty-one-year-old human girl who still has quite a bit of growing up to do. I wish I could leave you alone, so you could meet someone like that pretty boy from the club –"

He was talking about Peter, Mia realized, surprised.

"– but I can't."

Getting up, he walked around the table and sat down on a chair next to her. Raising his hand, he gently stroked her cheek while Mia stared at him, unable to look away from the golden heat in his eyes. "You've gotten under my skin," he said softly, "and now I want you, in ways that I never thought were possible. I know you still have a lot to learn about me, about your new home here, and I will do my best to make things easier for you, to help you with your adjustment. But you need to stop worrying so much and fighting me at every

turn. It can be very good between us, Mia . . . especially if you give it a chance.”