The Hostage of Argossyne

by amphisbaenawormlizard

Summary

People of 28th century colonised new planetary systems leaving the Earth to animals but before the exodus began something wrong happened. Women lost all their rights, most probably because of the religious reasons. Now no religions exist but the order they helped to build remained. The inhabited planets make the interplanetary organisation called The Federation, save for only one peripheral globe, where the small egalitarian group of people took refuge. On Argossyne women can live independent lives and shape the planet’s civilization together with their companions. The Argossyne is rich neither in fertile soils nor mineral resources so it was left in peace by the men-ruled Federation, if not counting the slavers kidnapping young women to sell them to the wealthy Federation citizens.

One day the paths of two people cross. He is the Universe famous scientist from Galdanede and she the newly captured Argossynian girl, the younger sister of one of their leaders.

It's an alternative reality to the universe described in The XY Zone Evil Empire but you don't need to read it to know what's going on here.

Notes

"The many-worlds interpretation (MWI) is an interpretation of quantum mechanics that
asserts that the universal wavefunction is objectively real, and that there is no wavefunction collapse. This implies that all possible outcomes of quantum measurements are physically realized in some 'world' or universe." - the definition taken from Wikipedia.

For the people reading any part of the XY Zone Evil Empire, who may roam here - you will meet many familiar names but I will place some of those people in different roles. The way I build this universe is nearly the same as in the series but not exactly the same, some details will differ.
The prologue: In the Dungeon

Chapter Summary

The first meeting of our protagonists.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I will take care of you. Will you let me, please?”

The man talking to her was most enchanting and beautiful creature Vivianne ever saw. But appearances may be misleading. He could be a psychopath, a murderer or sadist.

“It’s okay. I won’t let them hurt you more.”

“Do I have a choice?” She asked in a hoarse voice.

“Of course you have. I won’t buy you without your explicit permission. You can stay with these people. They will send you to a so-called slave-house to serve with your body until it’s young and fresh. When you won’t be able to satisfy your clients anymore, they will kill you or throw away to live on a street to beg and die of hunger.”

“H… how… how can I know you won’t do exactly the same?” Vien asked.

“Clever girl, unfortunately I cannot give you a guarantee. Surely you understand why. You have to believe me. Or we can ask my slaves what kind of master I am.”

In her dire situation she shouldn’t feel disappointed because her interlocutor wasn’t single but, strangely, she was. “Slaves?”

“Yes, darling. I’ve got slaves already, but it’s nothing personal. I don’t love them or anything. The thing is, the man of my status must possess some available females in his household. Two was an absolute minimum, to offer their services for my friends and other men visiting me especially after I have received an official function.”

“And how it is better than a brothel you mentioned?” Vien ventured.

“My home is not a brothel and my girls serve me willingly,” he said. There was something deeply disturbing in his calmness. She just offended him and the man stayed unmoved. It was a stark contrast to the intimidating presence at his side; the man wore under the belt awfully long and shiny neurowhip. The terrible thing was similar to those her captors were using but far more ornate and probably very expensive.

The male saw the way her eyes roamed and smiled.

“Oh, don’t mind this. It’s just a jewellery, nothing more. The symbol of my authority.”

Vien couldn’t hide she was trembling. It was exhaustion, pain and a lack of sleep. Besides, the rags her clothes turned into barely covered her beaten body. The man sighed.
“I guess you’re in no shape for making any life defining decisions. You know what? I’ll take you with me but we will finish all formalities later, when you won’t be hurting.”

It was risky to agree but could it be much worse than the state she was in? And besides pleasing one man must be easier than many.

“I’ll go with you, mister,” Vien whispered.

Vien and Artri Kennert are my OTP. I basically live with them as a part of my imaginary family and I love to invent new stories about them either by daydreaming or writing it down, usually in my native language. English is not my first one so if you find any mistakes please, please let me know. Besides any constructive criticism is always welcomed.
Artri left the cell to issue the newest orders to his people. The scientist didn’t expect the situation he met, so he had to improvise. The matter was pressing but they can’t take the girl without preparing her for a short journey to the Cycads Valley.

After calling for the boys, Artri went to the office to take care of the necessary formalities. It should not last long, Artri wasn’t buying the slave yet, only borrowing her for a probationary period.

As Artri expected they didn’t dare to say no to him. She was useless for them. Either she knew nothing or was that tough. And if Bart Rennell himself could extract nothing important from her, nobody will. Well, maybe there was such a person once, but they quit the job long time ago distancing themselves from the mistakes of youth.

When Artri was leaving the place, he ran into the guy he was thinking of.

“Hi, Bart, long time no see.”

The physicist loved to taunt the dumbass. There was something in the man Art couldn’t stand. It was hard to imagine his own colleague, otherwise snobbish and refined Curtis Dwight, could befriend an individual of that kind. And yet the redhead used to spend much time with the chap. Artri could not forbid him the acquaintance or throw Kert out of his team because of his bizarre taste in men, but the deep disgust remained.

The additional bone of contention was the fact Rennell’s appearance resembled Art’s to a great extent. His still youthful features were crude in comparison but if not Bart’s brown eyes instead of green, they could be mistaken one for another, especially in the dark. That’s why the girl, Vivianne, her name was Vivianne, flinched seeing Art for the first time. Poor baby should not wait for a relief much longer. Luckily Greg said they were on their way. Artri could hire local servants but preferred his own, proven ones. The girl wasn’t dying yet. She was stronger than her keepers expected.

“Good morning, Mr Kennert,” Rennell bowed the black head. He was wearing his hair shorter than Artri but still it was an imposing mane. Even if the disdain was mutual, the violentologist had to show a proper respect to the older male of a highest standing.

“I guess for you it’s not that good,” Artri noticed.

“What do you mean, sir?” The bloke spat the last word as if it burned his tongue.

“Well, were you not outsmarted by the young, defenseless girl? Are you getting mellow or…”

“I am not done with her yet. I bet the wench will open up soon. All I need is more time.”

“And in this presumption you are mistaken, Bart,” Art responded with an unveiled satisfaction.

Hearing the conversation the office manager approached them.

“It’s true, Bartie, Mr Kennert had shown his interest in that woman. Your job with her is over, I’m afraid.”

“I see.” It was all Rennell could say. “Excuse me then, I have to return to my other duties.”
“Very ambitious, this one,” the manager said when Bart left. “They aren’t particularly happy when their charges escape them before they’re finished.”

“I’m glad he has to settle for defeat this time,” Artri summed up, “but you must excuse me too. My boys have arrived.”

The manager knew what to do. He dispatched the guard to oversee the transfer of the hostage. Artri thanked him warmly and hurried to the cellar.

When the black-haired beauty returned, he wasn’t alone. His companions brought the water, a lot of disinfectants and clean clothes for Vien.

“We must wash you a little before we go,” he said coming closer.

“What do you want to do?” Vivianne stiffened looking with a horror at the man who was already rolling up his sleeves.

He seemed totally surprised by her reluctance.

“Why, you have agreed to…”

“No, no, but not to this. I can do it by myself!”

“Oh, okay if you so wish.”

Vien gave out the sigh of relief when the male didn’t press her to obey. It was a nice feeling to divest herself of the grime that covered her body. Vivianne cleaned herself as best as she could, regarding circumstances. Hopefully, there will be the proper bath where he was taking her, for now the basic hygiene had to do.

When Vien was more or less clean, she put on the robe and soft shoes. The rags she left behind were the last thing that linked her to the Argossyne and Vivianne’s past. It was the closed chapter now.

“I’m ready,” Vien called when finished.

Vien’s benefactor returned with those other men. They had a stretcher with them. “So you won’t faint,” he explained. Vien hesitated a bit but complied. She didn’t want to be too difficult lest he will leave her on a mercy of her tormentors.
The First Night

Chapter Summary

The first night in Cycad's Valley.

Even the stretcher was more comfortable than the floor in her former prison but Vien didn’t expect such a luxurious abode as the one in which Vivianne’s new caretaker ordered to install her. If Vien wasn’t wasted by the days spent in the dreadful institution under the supervision of sadistic interrogators, she would appreciate the view even more. The dense vegetation comprising palms and tree ferns surrounded the dwelling. There were picturesque pools hidden among greenery and beds full of unfamiliar flowers. Now though the only thing she craved for was undisturbed sleep.

“What’s wrong?” the host asked seeing her hesitation.

“I don’t know, mister. These sheets, I may soil them with the way I am,” Vien said eying the impeccable silken bedclothes. “Maybe better give me something more modest as befits my miserable state?”

Smiling, he looked even more gorgeous. “My dearest child, you should not concern yourself with such trifle matters. If you’ll stain the linens, bots will change them. It’s as simple as that. You can hardly see straight. Come, I’ll help you.”

This time Vien didn’t object. She sat on the bed letting him take off her shoes. After she accepted the cup of mineral water to hydrate herself, the man laid her down on the cool bedding.

“The physician will examine you tomorrow, now rest. You have food and more drink on the table.” Then he presented her with a brand new communicator.

“If you’ll need anything more, summon me with this. I’ll be always nearby.”

The man left wishing Vien the peaceful night.

The bed was soft and comfortable and Vien couldn’t resist the exhaustion any longer. Her last conscious thought before falling asleep was the realisation she haven't learned her host’s name yet, but he had to be someone influential. Vien promised herself to ask about it first thing in the morning.

Vien woke up when it was still dark. At first panic overwhelmed her. The young woman couldn’t recognise the place until she noticed the comm ready for use.

“I see you are not sleeping. Something wrong? Need any help?” the soft masculine voice inquired.

“No, thank you,” Vien answered. So he had to watch her closely all the time. It was disturbing realisation. Yesterday she could not think clearly but now the doubt started to nag her. Vivianne was in the might of a virtual stranger, mysterious and unpredictable.

“Calm down,” she told herself, “if he wanted to harm you, you won’t be sleeping in that sumptuous apartment. If this is a typical place for where the male keeps his women than, maybe, slavery is not always a bad thing.” She scolded herself quickly for such silly thoughts. Owning other individuals was wrong and always will be even if this particular slave owner acted polite and sympathetic.

Vien got up and went to the bathroom. The girl gasped when she saw herself in a big mirror. It was
the first mirror she could look into since the moment of her capture by the slavers. Vivianne didn’t like the view.

“Holy shit,” she mumbled, “I look like a scarecrow.” It was not only the aftermath of beatings. Her hair was greasy and agglutinated with stale blood and other unidentified substances. Those beautiful pillows must stink from her touch now.

It took awhile to figure out how everything works but when Vien did, she poured the water to the bathtub. The shower would do but she wanted to soak her body to get it thoroughly cleaned. The bath was almost ready. Vien took off the robe, bent down to check the temperature of the fluid and then everything went black.

Vivianne regained full consciousness in the arms of the long-haired male. The noise she made while falling had to summon the master of the house.

“Sweetling, you should be more careful,” he said with a hint of reproach, “did you want me to find my rescue girl drowned already? See, you gave yourself another bruise, as if what my compatriots left was not enough.”

“I, I’m sorry, I…” she rambled. It got even worse when Vien realised she’s naked. “Please, no,” she groaned stiffening.

“It’s okay. I have seen tens of naked females so it doesn’t excite me. You couldn’t be safer in your mother’s womb.”

Strangely Vien believed him.

“I wanted to wash my hair,” she said relaxing. “I know I look terrible.”

“After weeks of torture nobody would look better. Let’s go to bed, okay?”

The man never was that close. For the moment Vien let herself admire the astounding harmony of his features, slightly longish face, straight, long nose, full lips and the eyes of most amazing shade of green in the frame of black eyelashes. His pale, unblemished face was indisputably masculine but with more than a touch of androgynous. No living creature had the right to be that perfect and yet the black-haired deity was holding her now. Vien blinked. “But I am dirty!”

She made him laugh.

“Are all Argossynians as stubborn as you? Okay if you really need this I may agree but only if you will let me assist you. Don’t worry. I’m on heavy inhibitors so I could not harm you even if I wanted.”

Vien didn’t know exactly what he meant by this but her instincts were telling her she can trust him.

“I think I’ll reschedule our appointment with doctor Salter,” Artri said taking the empty plate from her. Because his name was Artri Nathoo Kennert. Yes, that famous physicist, one of top Federation’s scientists, well known on Argossyne too. Vien could not recall any images of the man from the past though, so at first she thought it was a joke. Such a big fish playing the nurse to an insignificant girl from nowhere? It seemed impossible but Artri sworn solemnly he doesn’t lie.

And it made sense, the easy way he whisked her from their detention center, respect his people were showing him, this beautiful estate. Vien laid her dizzy but clean head on the pillow. After the bath and with a full belly she felt the drowsiness returning.
Vien was a bit anxious before the doctor’s visit. She was afraid Mr. Kennert will want to be present during the examination but after introducing them one to another the scientist disappeared. The rest of her reservations were unnecessary too. Percy Salter turned out to be a sympathetic, older man and his calm demeanour reminded Vien of her host. He was exceedingly polite, soft-spoken and very delicate with the way he dealt with his patient. Vien found herself instantly at ease in his company, especially after he asked her to call him by name only.

“I can’t see any lasting damage,” Percy said letting her put the clothes on. “These bastards know how to inflict as much pain as possible while keeping their victim alive for the prolonged torture. I’m sorry they were the first men you met after being brought here. Hopefully, my boy treats you well?”

“Your boy?”

“Ha ha, no, it’s not what you think. We are not related. I just welcomed him in the world and his father was a friend of mine. Yes, you’ve heard me, was. Not anymore after what he had done to Artri’s mother.”

“And it was?” Vien asked dreading the answer.

“Well, Vari suspected Klea of infidelity and sold her when Artri was yet a little baby. After that she perished without a trace. He tried to find her after coming of age but to no avail.”

Vivianne felt the sudden surge of sympathy toward her rescuer. She had lost her mothers very early, so it was something they both had in common.

“But you haven’t answer me. Is my boy good to you?”

“I… yes, I have nothing to complain so far,” Vivianne admitted.

The doctor smiled. “I’m glad he is,” he said, “but you must be careful, kid.”

Vien shrugged faking indifference.

“I guess every Argossynian girl must be careful in the XY Zone.”

“The XY Zone? Is that how you call us? But I mean with Artri. People too often lose their minds trying to please him and to stay in his good graces. He’s used to be adored by his peers and worshipped by women.”

“Why are you telling me this? I’m not yet his slave, Mr. Salter, Perry. It wasn’t decided if I’ll stay here for longer. It’s scarcely my second day in this mansion.”

Percy looked at her as if he knew something she was unaware of but before Vivianne had a time to ask what it was, Artri Kennert returned.

“I hope my charge is not in that bad a shape,” he inquired. After their encounter in the night the man didn’t touch her anymore.
“You saved her just in time. I have prescribe some lotions for her injuries and painkillers to use if need be. Besides, I recommend a lot of rest and good food to regain the strength.”

“It will be a pure pleasure to provide for my lovely guest.” Artri’s smile was kind and warm but strangely distant. “But doesn’t she need a psychological help too?”

“No, thanks,” Vivianne was the first to answer. “I don’t want to talk to anyone. It would only deepen the trauma I wish to forget.”

“You can always change your mind,” Percy said. “You seem to be in a surprisingly good condition as for the person coming from that place but don’t hesitate to call me if you’ll ever feel worse.”

“I knew you will like him,” Artri said when Salter left for his carries.

“Good old Perry treats his patients as if they were his own daughters. And now according to the doctor’s prescriptions I suggest returning to bed.”

Artri left the bedroom after Vivianne fell asleep. He added a mild hypnotic to her food to be sure the girl won’t get up to roam around during his absence. The physicist ordered his servants to monitor her all the time and got into the carries heading for the Centre.

It was Tommy Fisher who welcomed him as first. “My, my, people are already talking about your newest choice,” he said. Tommy was Artri’s best friend and his deputy in their team of theoretical physics known as The Galdanedian Group.

“Journalists are kicking themselves for not paying proper attention to your last visit in the detention center. Now they will have to wait for the next occasion nobody knows how long.”

Fisher didn’t need to tell this, but he was eager for the news no less than paparazzi. Luckily for the blond-haired physicist Artri was ready to deliver. There were no secrets between them since they met in Gavin Alverren’s school the great many years ago.

“I could not believe my eyes when I saw her. A poor youth was bruised and dirty but under all the misery she looked like Vai resurrected. The same fawn hair, pale blue eyes, the face I could kill for. Mother nature was kind returning my love to me.”

Tommy looked at him sceptically.

“Calm down, Nat. This girl may look similar but she is not Vai.”

“Oh, but she’s much, much better! Vaicia would die first moment the one like Bart Rennell approached her. She had not only survived his interrogation telling them nothing, but outwardly refused psychological support. First night I took her she attempted to wash her hair. Poor thing fainted, and I had to rescue her again but it gave me a perfect occasion to see her naked. As you may expect my charge has a most perfect body. If I wasn’t on inhibitors, I would devour her all without thinking.”

Tommy laughed aloud. “My little brother is clearly smitten! Should I be jealous?”

Artri ignored his interjection.

“And she’s intelligent. Far more than Vai ever was. I have to be extraordinarily careful to not scare her prematurely but I think the final reward is worthy all possible sacrifices.”
“So you won’t tell her?”

“Oh, about her predecessor? No way. One day, maybe, when it won’t hurt anymore.”

“And what if she’ll find out by herself? Most wild rumours are still circulating.”

“My people won’t dare to share a word and all the content she may have access to is meticulously filtered. She will find out only about my career, my native planet, my current slaves, things like that.”

“But not that you once had a slave who…”

“Now you calm down, Tommy! It’s irrelevant. The past is in the past and I must think about the future. The purpose of my coming here is to arrange things in the Centre so I could take a longer break. I will need your help, brother.”

“And do I have a choice, coordinator?”

Tommy smiled sarcastically.

Chapter End Notes

I have about 5 concepts of what may happen to Vai in this universe and haven't chosen yet.
Freckles

Artri returned home as quickly as he could.

“How is my guest of honour?” he asked the guard he met as first.

“She started to stir but didn’t wake up yet,” Jon Carroll answered. He was relatively new among Kennert’s crew; his cousin recommended the guy. Carroll was a bit too soft but Artri agreed to keep him. It was hard to find the man more inconspicuous than the guy standing now before the physicist in the stark contrast to the master of the house. He had a shoulder length hair of a dirty brown colour, hazel-grey eyes and rather pale complexion. His features were easy to forget and, besides, the guy let himself to groom the beginning of a stubble. The stubble! As if he never heard about facial hair growth inhibitors! Maybe Artri should tell him about their existence but it wasn’t his duty to educate his people about personal esthetics.

In some circles things like hairy jaws were perceived as manly but for Art it was a ridiculous notion. He never felt less masculine because of his looks. Rather opposite. People used to underestimate his physical abilities, and it was a pleasure to prove them wrong.

“That’s great,” Artri said, “I’ll go to her at once.”

“But Mr Kennert, sir, should I look for the new home for your charge?”

“Surely not, Carroll, I have never expressed such wishes. Take care of your security duties now. I dismiss you.” The man nodded and departed according to his orders.

Before meeting the girl Artri visited his own apartments to leave a neurowhip in the closet. There was no need to show her most ostentatious symbol of a male domination. Vivianne will get used to them eventually but no rush. The worst thing would be to spook her in the very beginning. It’s unfortunate enough Rennell who tortured her to extract information about Argossynian forces looked very much like Artri’s less brilliant younger brother. It may take months to forget about the sorry bastard’s transgressions. If only Artri found out earlier what a treasure Bart’s companions held in their dirty hands!

When the physicist entered Vivianne’s eyes were already opened. Early afternoon rays of the Galdanedian star gave her fawn hair the reddish glow. She looked cute in the handmade, richly embroidered dress showing a small patch of uncovered skin on her decolletage. Artri spotted a few freckles there. How could he not notice them before? Another thing she and Vai had in common. He was grateful again for his inhibitors.


“No, you fell asleep after Perry’s visit so fast you had no time to change a dress for a nightgown. I hope it didn’t cause you any discomfort?”

“No, no, not at all. It’s so pretty and soft. I’d love to not get it off at all.”

“Darling, you have many more clothes in your disposal. This one is nothing but exceptional.”

“How come?” Artri’s declaration confused her visibly.

“Well,” Artri said in a casual tone, “dressing such lovely ladies is the favourite hobby of mine. Every possible occasion is good for indulging myself and if my guest is satisfied too, it’s only a
bonus. You know, the man can’t live on physics alone.”

Vien gave him a questioning look.

“You like to dress people and keep slaves to entertain your friends. Does it mean you… Do you prefer men instead, perhaps?”

Artri laughed. “I don’t deny I find some boys attractive and I love to kiss my beautiful friend Tommy Fisher. You will meet him soon. But it’s not where my deepest satisfaction lies.”

After Artri spoke, the girl blushed prettily.

“I’m sorry, Mr Kennert, I didn’t want to be nosy,” she whispered but despite an obvious embarrassment Artri saw she liked the answer. Theoretically they were enemies, but it looked like she wasn’t impermeable to his charms.

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting to be well informed. I’m ready to forgive the intrusion if you will let me invite your sweet person to a short tour around the estate. You are my guest, not a prisoner, so I’d love to take you outside.”

The thing Artri didn’t tell was that he hoped for more freckles after the direct contact of her skin with the sun.

“With pleasure!” the girl exclaimed. “But let me freshen up myself first. And what about a little snack before the walk?”

Art could not help but smile. “Whatever you wish. It’s great you have a good appetite. It will hasten your return to health.”

When Vivianne was in the bathroom Artri prepared a meal for them. She was accustomed to him enough to let Artri help her with applying the regenerating lotion on her back, in the places she could not reach by herself. It was hard not to kiss the fading bruises. For now though, Art had to settle on thinking about what he will do one day to the people who left them on that precious skin.

Vien giggled seeing the table set for her.

“Mr Kennert, I was talking about a snack, not the whole feast!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll send leftovers to the boys. Nothing will go wasted,” Artri assured her.

Vien nodded and took the seat. She wore a navy blue and yellow dress Art has chosen for her. It looked like a tailor made. Unbelievable how perfectly she fitted into the gown made for another many years ago. Unaware of a turmoil she was causing in her companion the girl reached for the food.
When Vien joined her host to go for an afternoon stroll, she found out Mr Kennert has prepared the wheelchair to spare her the exertion of walking. Being honest it didn’t look like similar things Vien knew from Argossyne. Despite the same function it was moving not on wheels but by levitation using some kind of air cushion.

“Have you ever saw the personal carries?” the man asked smiling. “I have invited you for a walk but nearly forgot you aren’t okay yet and won’t be for some time. And therefore I have decided to use a little help to make it more pleasant and safe for my guest. Don’t worry, you don’t need to do anything, just sit and I will direct your vehicle where it needs to go.”

Vien eyed the chair suspiciously but didn’t protest. After the scientist’s gesture the thing lowered itself and touched the floor. Vien took a seat and adjusted the colourful skirts around her feet.

“You won’t be sitting with me?” she asked.
“There’s enough space for two on this thing.”

The scientist shook his head.
“I’d love to serve you however you wish me to, but it’s much too early for such a closeness. I don’t want to invade your personal space for no important reasons and make you uncomfortable. I’ll rather walk beside you.”

“Mr Kennert, are you always that restrained when dealing with women?” she inquired keeping her tone casual.

“It depends on the woman involved,” Artri said sending her one of those green looks.
“And now better hurry lest we won’t make it before the sunset.”

Vien didn’t realise how large terrain belonged to the estate until they started to explore the surroundings. When Artri’s people had brought her to the Cycads Valley yesterday, she could barely see anything from the stretcher. Now Vivianne had the first opportunity to admire the picturesque setting in all its glory, the copse of trees and bushes, gently rolling hills with the outcrops of layered rocks and small springs with crystal clear water. The good part of her host’s property was left in a wild state and only the grounds closer to the mansion were turned into the park, adorned with the artificial pools and flower gardens. Among them were placed satellite buildings for the staff and guests who would want more privacy during their stay.

For Vien everything was new and interesting. On Argossyne, coming through the glaciation phase, the climate was much colder and subtropical plant species could not survive. Not knowing them from home Vien could not stop marvel at abundant cycads, palms and tree ferns.

Soon she got bored with gliding in her strange vehicle and demanded to walk freely. In this paradise like place her memory of the detention centre seemed to be a bad dream, something that never really happened. And the man who saved her from the nightmare was walking beside her smiling indulgently when she voiced her enthusiasm over the unknown life forms she was discovering.

“Mr Kennert,” Vien said after tasting the water from yet another hidden spring, “how is it possible one can possess so much land?”
“Well, people value my work. It enriches the whole humanity that longs for the knowledge only the likes of me can deliver. The society promptly rewards us for our struggles to unveil the fabric of reality. Producers must share the profits from selling inventions based on our discoveries, this humble chair included. Besides as the only child I govern the greater part of my family’s heirloom. The Cycads Valley is not the only one.”

“Not the only one?!” Vivianne exclaimed. “Mr Kennert, you must be filthy rich! It’s immoral to hoard that much wealth in one hands. If my compatriots could have their way with your property, we would turn these hills and valleys into the fields. There’s a constant lack of arable land where I live. Nobody’s starving but in worse years we have to ration the food.”

Artri looked at her with interest. “Were you subjected to this practice too? I mean isn’t your family privileged among yours?”

“No, no, not at all. To be the leader is a great honour, but it doesn’t mean the one deserves to have it better than the others. It would be unjust to count for more when we have the limited resources and pretty much the same stomachs.”

Artri laughed at her exasperation. “My little socialist! I think it’s beyond adorable. Unfortunately, not all your people share such egalitarian views and therefore some are ready to sell themselves for a better living.”

The unpleasant thought hit her. “Do you mean... me?” she whispered.

“Darling, come on! Of course not. Your choice was between staying in the might of your abusers and saving yourself. I meant the spies and confidantes who for a rich reward help the Federation keep your rebellious people in line. Like the one who had sold you to us.”

Something like a shadow of regret appeared on his beautiful face. “I’m sorry I didn’t plan to talk about it just yet. Forgive me my sweet child for spoiling your fun.”

Vien felt as if someone filled her insides with a crushed ice. It had to be one of her close friends; she didn’t know that many people. But who? Melanie, Engeria? It was beyond crazy. “You must tell me or I won’t move from here!”

Artri sighed heavily. “His name was Ian McAyers but you probably know him as Wotan Retlidge.”

Sweet Goddess, it was too much. Vien sat where she stood to avoid the fainting. Suddenly the wounds almost healed by the magical lotions the good doctor prescribed her started to ache anew. Wotan! Of all the people it had to be him? But it made sense. Wotan knew her alias under which she embarked on the excursion to the Veneeran Mountains. She named herself Effie Milton to avoid the recognition. Only Christine, Rhea and Retlidge alone knew about her plans. Vivianne’s sister and her partner were beyond suspicion so it left only Wotan as a possible culprit. The man whom Vien had chosen to get rid of her virginity, gentle and caring lover was the one who betrayed her. The XY Zone spy.

“Are you okay?” Artri kneeled beside Vien looking at her with worry.

“Yes, yes,” the girl answered mechanically even if her whole body was shaking.

“May I take you home? It’s getting late. And I’m so sorry to upset you.”

Vien attempted to smile.
“No, please don’t be. It’s better that I know. And I am grateful for everything you have done for me.”

Artri summoned the carries and waited until Vien was ready to take a seat again. This time he didn’t refuse to share the bench with her and when Vien asked him to hold her the man fulfilled this wish without objection.

Chapter End Notes

About the world building:
When I started to invent my stories as a child I have decided to give most of the persons appearing in them typical English names because it seemed cool to me at that time. It wasn't entirely conscious decision but it stuck and I can't imagine changing it now.
Loric is okay

Artri walked Vivianne to the door of her apartments but stopped at the threshold. Was he waiting for an invitation? They barely talk through all the way home but his presence gave her the consolation she needed. Even now Vien smelt his perfumes on her gown and skin. Their predominant scent was both leafy and spicy, closest to the flagroot but a bit more sharp. It reminded her of a lake warmed by the sun in a few hot days of the short Argossynian summer. The aroma made Vien imagine the man standing beside her wasn’t the world-famous scientist. With his flowing black hair, the slim figure and the eyes dark green in the dim light he could be some kind of water fairy. His face seemed as ageless as befits the immortal spirits of the woods and nature. It was hard to shake off the feeling of something strange and unusual going on.

“Are you all right, darling?” Artri asked seeing her daydreaming, and it broke the spell.

“I am okay, only tired,” Vien assured the man. “I’ll better go to bed.”

“Maybe you want me to sit beside you until you fall asleep?”

Vien resisted the temptation to agree. “No, thank you. I am a big girl and can manage by myself. There’s no need to peruse your courtesy. Goodnight, Mr Kennert.”

“Goodnight, child.”

He waited until Vien entered and closed the door behind herself. The room seemed lonely without him in sight. It was so easy to get used to the good things. Luckily not all men were like her captors and that bastard Retlidge.

Despite the shock after discovering Wotan’s betrayal Vien slept well and without nightmares.

“How was your night?” Artri asked when they were eating breakfast on a verandah. “I cannot stop regretting telling you the truth without a warning. It was so inconsiderate of me. Can’t say what I was even thinking.”

“No need to apologise, Mr Kennert. It’s always better to know than to stay in the dark. I thank you for telling me about him. The only thing that worries me is the bastard may try again after it came out I had no information they hoped to extract. They may soon try to capture my sister or her partner who don’t know whom Retlidge is serving.”

Artri was listening intently about her reservations and when Vien finished he spoke. “Promise me it will stay between us but maybe I have the cure for your troubles.”

It was unexpected. Vien realised she’s gawking as if seeing her saviour for the first time.

“I’ll do everything to warn Christine of the danger. Anything you want me to!” she cried, and it was true. There was no such a thing Vien couldn’t do to keep her loved ones safe.

Artri covered her hand with his long fingers. “Easy darling, the only reward I look for is your comfort and the peace of mind.”

Vien wanted to ask why he was so eager to help her against his people’s interests but she was too afraid to alienate him or to be seen as ungrateful for such a generous offer. Even if it was a lie Vien
had nothing to lose. But why should he lie? Vien was in his might, he didn’t need her consent to take whatever he wanted. No elaborate intrigues were necessary to make her his plaything.

“My only demand is not asking about the details and not mentioning our secret to anyone. If you will promise me that, your sister will soon receive the message of a warning and confirmation that you are alive and safe. She will also be able to send her answer so you may know it’s not all fake.”

Vivianne was aware she was blushing. How could he know she was thinking about the possibility of him being a liar? Was she that easy to read?

“Darling? It’s important to keep a secret. If my enemies knew about me helping Argossynians, my position, my good name would be gravely endangered. We are talking about a treason here.”

It was no time to hesitate lest Mr Kennert will change his mind.

“Yes, dear sir, please help me if you can. I will be silent as a grave.”

Artri Kennert stood up. “It’s all I needed to hear. Please prepare the text for your family and I will take care of sending it as soon as possible.”

When the physicist left Vien realised she just addressed him with the honorific Galdanedian slaves had to use when talking to their masters.

Vivianne spent her time waiting anxiously for her host’s return. She tried to read but could not focus on the words she saw or anything else.

At last Artri was back. Vien jumped from the bed.

“It’s done,” he said, “but do not thank me yet. It can take time for the message to reach its destination and even more until the reply arrives. It must go very twisted route to avoid blowing the cover. Besides it’s all encrypted and the code will be sent independently for the additional safety measure. Please don’t ask for more. I have told you too much already.”

Vivianne didn't know how it happened. One minute she was standing in front of the beautiful scientist and the next they were in a close embrace. Artri’s response for her impulsive gesture was reluctant at first but then he sighed and his arms tightened around her waist. It didn't last long, maybe a second or two when he pushed her back delicately.

“Haven't I told you to wait with your thanks?” the man said, his tone teasing.

The girl didn't want to be obtrusive so she stepped back.

“It doesn't matter,” she said feeling her ears getting hot from the embarrassment. “I am grateful for the attempt alone. I didn't expect to find so much kindness anywhere in the XY Zone.”

Vien received the message from Christine the day after. Only three words.

“Loric is okay.”
The Unexpected Turn of Events

Seeing the well-known pass phrase Vien felt immense relief because it meant Vivianne’s family learned about her fate. At the same time they were aware who Wotan Retlidge was and could neutralise the threat the man was posing. It was the first advantage of her kidnapping to the XY Zone and, hopefully, not the last one. Vien will never forget who made it possible. Maybe there was a hope for the world left yet if such people existed among the Federation citizens. Clearly Artri Kennert was engaged in some kind of deep conspiracy because otherwise how could he reach successfully to the Argossynian leadership?

Vien had so many questions but the promise she made kept her silent. She could not talk about what happened nor ask about the details. Luckily there was one thing left not forbidden to her.

It was fairly late but the lights in his apartments were still on so Vien decided to try her luck.

“Mr Kennert, may I enter?”

“Of course, darling. I was certain you will be asleep now. You don’t feel well or need something?”

The physicist emerged from his office to meet her in the living room. It was Vivianne’s fourth day in the Cycads Valley and she should be long used to her host’s look, especially after they spent most of this time together. And yet his immaculate, otherworldly beauty could not stop to impress her.

The man wore the rainbow shirt with broad sleeves tied above the wrists with ribbons. In a stark contrast to that splash of bright colours were anthracite trousers and the shock of black hair. The scientist was without the makeup and most of his usual jewellery of which he retained only one silver ring with nigrite crystal. Despite the late hour he looked fresh and ravishing.

“If all is fine what has led you here?” he asked moving closer.

She should say something, anything but her wits left the Argossynian girl completely.

“And why aren’t you in your nightgown yet? Little girls should be in their beds already.”

From the beginning of their acquaintance Artri was treating her patronisingly but Vien didn’t complain. He was much older, so it was okay when he called her his darling, sweetie or a child and she addressed him as Mr Kennert not because she considered herself inferior but out of respect for his age and accomplishments as a scientist. Now it suddenly started to irritate her. Vivianne wanted him to admit, however young and inexperienced, she is an adult, not a little baby. Didn’t she come through the torture many men from her native planet could not endure?

Vien held her head high and meeting the emerald gaze with pride she declared at last.

“You were so kind to me therefore I came to reciprocate the favour. I don’t want you to think Argossynians aren’t capable of showing gratitude.”

“Ah, I understand,” he said in the casual tone. “And what exactly do you mean by that?”

“Why, I have nothing to offer in bargain but my body. Everything else I owe your magnanimity, sir, but this one thing is mine to give. It can be yours in an instant.”

Not waiting for the answer she started to loosen the straps of her dress. When Artri touched her
fingers fumbling with the clothing, Vien was sure he wanted to help her get rid of the cover faster. But it wasn’t his intention.

“No, no, stop it. Stop it please at once and sit,” the scientist demanded pointing toward a plastochair. Vien had no choice but to comply. Mr Kennert remained standing. “Let me guess. You don’t really want this but felt obliged to reward me. I assure you I have willing bed partners in abundance. I don’t need the one coming to me solely out of duty or whatever you think you owe me.”

So that was it. Vien has been rejected. Artri Kennert didn’t want her. She blinked the tears of shame and disappointment.

“Did I offend you?” Vivianne asked with a voice lacking its former conviction.

“No, no, I don’t feel offended. Do you remember when I wanted to help you wash yourself and you were clearly appalled with my attempt at such a close contact? That moment reminded me you are not like our girls. And I’m okay with that.”

“So, if... if you don’t want this then why you took me?”

“My sweet darling girl, do you really think all men have only one thing in their minds?”

Now Vien blushed. He must think her terribly naïve, or worse, rude.

“Listen,” he said not waiting for the answer, “You’re more desirable than any woman I know but it’s not the primary reason of saving you from Rennell’s hands.”

“No? Then what it was?” Vivianne groaned. She has compromised herself enough to not care how pathetic it may sound.

“It’s an old story and unpleasant. Are you sure you want to hear it?”

Vien nodded vigorously. Then she cradled her knees under the chin and listened to Artri’s confessions.

Returning to her bedroom Vien was in a sour mood. She was sure Artri Kennert had chosen her because of the personal attraction. Now her naïve convictions were laid in smoking ruins. It came out helping women in trouble was some kind of noble hobby of the wealthy and influential scientist. He was buying them but instead of keeping for himself sent each one to the chosen men who took further care of the physicist’s rescues. Artri said he’s doing it to pay the debt to his deceased mother and to make it up for his own sins of the youth. Because as a young man, already famous for explaining Childer’s-Rother’s paradox, he used to work in a torture house.

Yes, he was doing the same job as Bart Rennell et consortes. It was his favourite leisure activity, and he prided himself of being better than most trained violentologists. So he basically implied to be born a monster. It was his genetic burden, the result of the modification, some part of male population went soon after they left the Earth. It was meant to make men as resilient and biologically fit as females. The enhanced Y chromosome worked much better than its predecessors but all advantages went with the price, making modified individuals highly aggressive and dominating.

In him, the late descendant of these pioneers, negative tendencies were exceptionally strong. To live with them, not posing the threat for the others Artri was taking meds almost constantly. They
had a stabilising effect on his temper but could not cure him entirely. Deep inside the beast was still alive and dangerous.

The girl tried to sleep but every time she closed her eyes all they saw were green irises, long fingers and the big black stone in the silver ring. Vivianne could not help but think how it would be to have those fingers buried deep inside her or those tempting lips on her breasts. She wanted that man and badly, monster or not, it didn’t matter.

The morning found her sleepless. Vien groaned seeing how late it was. She would love to stay in bed all day to not meet the man who spurned her but such a solution was out of question. The girl didn’t want to act childish or to be seen as ungrateful. Mr Kennert owed her nothing. It wasn’t his fault she didn’t fit in his long-term plans.

After more procrastinating Vien got up and went to the bathroom, then dressed herself neatly ready to face her host and another day in the Cycads Valley.
When Vien went out, she couldn’t find Artri anywhere. Not feeling hungry the girl sat under the tree thinking what should she do with herself. And how to convince the physicist to not send her away.

There he found her. She didn’t notice the intruder at first. He had to attract Vivianne’s attention, calling her by the name.

“Vien, I’m sorry for how it turned out yesterday,” he said taking the seat close to the girl.

“I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. In fact, I felt incredibly honoured by your generous offer...”

Vivianne huffed in barely concealed annoyance. She didn’t call for his pity in the disguise of courteous words. “You can save yourself unnecessary effort, mister. Better say I’m not your type and it will be all. I’ll understand.” She shouldn’t let herself be driven by the bitterness and self regret and yet Vivianne did just that.

Artri laughed, and it was even worse. Vien felt such a mortification she wanted to run away, but then he spoke again.

“I cannot say such a thing. It would be a lie.”

Vien pouted. “Then why? It’s only sex. I didn’t expect you to marry me or anything. Just a moment of fun in bed... or elsewhere.”

Artri sighed. “Please come here, okay?”

Despite still holding the grudge Vien did not refuse to fulfil his request, even if she had enough of that paternal, platonic kindness the scientist was showing her since the beginning. But even this was better than nothing.

“You may be right,” Artri said stroking her hair. She felt so comfortable in his embrace. How could he be a monster? Was it all a fake to deter Vien from engaging in the relationship with him?

“You may be right,” the physicist repeated, “but I know from my huge experience, people with whom we sleep tend to presume it will lead to far more than just occasional intercourse. I don’t want to give you the false hope because I’m not a partner for you.”

“Because you’re older?”

“That too. But also because of the great many things I have told you about.”

“Mmm, but those... things, they don’t stop you from keeping the slaves. So how is it different with me?”

“It’s a good question, but the answer is simple. My girls are nothing like you. They are home-raised women taught since birth to serve and obey. For them it’s a natural state of things. But you are different. You were born free and will revolt against demands and restrictions the position of my personal slave entails. Nobody trained you to carry that burden.”

“And you won’t let me even try?” Vivianne asked seeing her chance.
Artri shook his head and laughed. “You don’t take no for the answer, do you? See, it is what I was talking about. The good Galdanedian slave would say something like ‘you know better, my lord’ and it would be the end of discussion or rather no discussion at all.”

This time Vien laughed. “Oh no, don’t tell me, my lord, you would like to live with a mindless zombie or a robot. And I think the slaves of yours are no spineless puppets too. They may hide their passions well but I’m certain they have them.”

For some time the young woman and her companion were sitting in silence. Artri was so close, Vien could only raise the head a little to touch the full lips of the man with her mouth. It was tempting to try how they tasted. The thought alone made her giddy from the anticipation but she shied away in the last moment too afraid of another rejection.

“So, Mr Kennert, when do you plan to send me to my eventual destination? Is the fellow chosen for me already?” she asked instead faking indifference, letting him think she gave up the resistance.

“We have ran out of suitable matches, I’m afraid, so you will have to wait until I find someone worthy your person. You’re so special it won’t be an easy task. Until that hour you’ll stay with me, for a few weeks at least.”

It sounded not so bad. In fact, it sounded fantastic. The delay in the transfer will give Vien enough time to change her caretaker’s mind. And if not, then maybe at least she will be able to find the path to his bed and not so fatherly embraces. The breath of the optimism she so needed made her realise her stomach is rumbling. Artri heard that too.

“You haven’t been eating today? If so, it’s a grave oversight and neglect of the doctor’s orders. Come, I think we may do something about it.”

The black-maned took Vivianne by the hand to lead her inside. It looked like there was a bit of teasing in this otherwise innocent gesture. Maybe the man wasn’t that indifferent as he tried to convince her.

They spent an interesting day together. For the first time Artri was discussing his latest works with her and Vien felt incredibly privileged to hear about them from his own mouth.

Vivianne’s compatriots had only a vague, basal knowledge about the field of the Federation physicists’ research. They tried to cultivate all kinds of pure science but the constant lack of funds led to the stagnation in this field. Argossynians had no means to test more advanced theories and were no match for their rivals when high energy physics was concerned. Vien was probably the first of her people to hear about many things Artri was talking about; some of them weren’t published yet.

Until this day Vien had no idea how close to the Planck’s scale Mr Kennert and his fellow scientists already were. It was fascinating but also sad, reminding her how sorely her folk is cut off from what should be the heirloom of all humanity.

Another thought followed. Being Artri’s slave she would be close to the position of power, closer than any other Argossynian citizen ever was. If she will be shrewd enough than maybe Vien can persuade him to work toward the change of that pitiful state. She can’t let the chance to slip through her fingers. There is far more at stake than only her personal satisfaction but who says you can’t mix business with pleasure?
Caught by the wave of dreams about her future gains Vien temporarily lost the grasp on reality. “Darling, you seem to float somewhere far. Did I bore you with my speech?” Artri’s voice called her back.

“Oh no no, it was all very exciting,” Vien assured him. “I was only thinking how wonderful it would be to share what you have shown me with my natives. We can rarely afford to do the science on that level. And not because there aren’t great minds on Argossyne. It’s just too often we must all concentrate on a simple survival.”

Artri looked at Vien thoughtfully as if seeing her for the first time. And then he smiled. “I so wish I could change it one day, if only to please you. Unfortunately, it can’t happen overnight and you seem tired already.”

But Vien didn’t want to be dismissed again. “Mr Kennert, may I ask you about something before I go to sleep?”

“What is it, darling?”

“I want to know. Did you lie to me when you stepped into my prison cell for the first time?”

Artri looked shocked by her question. “And why do you think so?”

“You’ve asked me to be your slave. And now you say it was not your true intention. Either you lied then, or I have made something to change your mind.”

“Don’t be silly. I have told you already how the whole rescue service works. And you were in pain so I could not waste the time for elaborate explanations. The priority was to take you out of the harm’s way and think about the details later.”

This answer didn’t satisfy Vien, but she gave up, knowing already this path will lead her to nowhere. She must find another way to reach her goals before it’s not too late.

Chapter End Notes

The queen = physics (and mathematics is her handmaden).

And, besides, it's my birthday chapter :)
The heroine pleasures herself and meets one big surprise.

A few more days passed and nothing had changed. Artri was sweet and caring as always, the perfect friend and companion whatever Vivianne wanted to do, the talking, exploring the estate and its surroundings, learning about the rules of the XY Zone, discussing various scientific problems, tasting new dishes about which Vien never heard about and many more equally pleasurable things.

Through all this time the physicist’s behaviour was strangely and annoyingly asexual. Vien knew he definitely cannot be the ace person. The long story of his past erotic endeavours denied that. Moreover, the man admitted he is attracted to her but nothing ever aroused from it.

Vien tried to woo Mr Kennert. The Argossynian girl often stayed close to the beautiful scientist during their shared activities to let him breathe in her scent and used to expose her young body as best as she could by the deliberate choice of clothes and evocative poses. She was flirting and joking with him not shrinking from the piquant allusions. Nothing worked.

One day Vivianne swam in a pool naked. Artri brought the towels and helped Vien to dry her body and the long hair after the fun time in the warm water but even her nudity didn’t move him. It was all so incredibly frustrating.

The only thing Vien refrained from was reiterating her initial straightforward proposition to share the bed together. It would be too humiliating to receive the second refusal so she hoped Artri will make the first step. He didn’t and Vien was at her wits’ end, not sure how long she can go on. Besides, their time together began to shrink at an alarming rate. One day Artri’s people may find the man intended for her and she won’t have a choice but agree to leave the Cycads Valley with him. And it was the last thing she wanted.

Mr Salter visited them one more time to check on his patient’s recovery and declared with pleasure Vivianne’s full return to health. So far Vien held the faint hope this exact statement was what Artri waited for to take their friendly relationship to the higher, more intimate level. Nothing of the sort happened.

When Artri left her again on the threshold of her bedroom Vien entered and blocked the door. She has buried herself under the blankets to hide from the cruel world denying her what she craved the most. Soon she realised it’s too hot to stay that way for long.

Not thinking to much about what she was doing the girl has thrown away all the covers and stripped herself naked. Then she straddled the bed frame putting all her weight on the metal rod. The brutal pressure of a cold thing on the delicate tissues made her shiver. A second after she started to move back and forth, very slowly at first and then faster. Vivianne didn’t need many such movements to let out the guttural moan of pleasure. When she couldn’t get anything more out of this Vien fell back on the sheets feeling the intense throbbing of the freshly stimulated areas.

Wasn’t it pathetic to be forced to play with herself when there was such a ram around?
Argossynian boys were so much easier and less complicated. Barely anyone would say no to the single and attractive girl like her. But Mr Kennert wasn’t just anyone. He was both a miracle and the mystery and she had no key to the latter.

Vien spent the big part of the night thinking about him and pleasuring herself albeit in more gentle ways than in the beginning. It was good to vent the steam lest she will go crazy. Before falling asleep Vien took a long hot bath to wash out all traces of the arousal. She didn’t want Artri to know about her weakness.

Vien considered changing the bedclothes too but decided against it. Artri didn’t enter her quarters lately so there was no sense to do it, especially when she can stain them once more later.

When the girl made herself ready to go, the sun was already high in the sky. For today Vivianne had chosen the deep ruby red dress with shoulder straps and ballet shoes of the matching colour. She liked how her freshly washed hair shined in the rays of the Galdanedian star. Maybe this morning Artri Kennert will fall for his hostage at last.

Walking outside Vien noticed the surprise awaiting her; Artri was not alone. The guy standing beside him couldn’t be one of the guards. He looked far more beautiful than any Mr Kennert’s manservant. This man’s features had the same timeless quality as those belonging to his dark-haired companion. In a contrast to Artri’s coal black mane the other male’s curly hair was a pure gold and when he turned toward the guest Vien noticed his eyes were of an intense violet colour. Maybe his beauty was not that purely angelic and breathtaking as Artri’s but still he was a hot guy.

Mr Kennert together with the stranger came forth to meet her.

“Vien, darling,” Artri said, “this is my deputy and the best friend. Let me introduce you, Mr Thomas Morton Fisher.”
The Unwanted Proposal

The terrible thought appeared in Vivianne’s mind. What if the blond arrived to take her? However charming and pretty he was not Mr Kennert and Vien didn’t want anyone else. She barely heard what the newcomer said. If he complimented her Vien nearly regretted the way she looked. Vivianne was dressed up for Artri and only for him, her saviour, her caretaker, her spotless guardian angel.

It was the latter’s smooth voice that brought her back to reality.

“Ivvi wasn’t that shy in the beginning,” Mr Kennert said. “It must be your charm, Tommy, that made her speechless.” Artri never called Vien Ivvi before but the new variation of her name sounded so sweet coming from his lips Vivianne fell in love with it instantly.

“Forgive me, sir.”

Vien curtsied with as much grace as she could muster. “I didn’t expect such a noble guest and therefore forgot myself a little. I’m sorry.”

“No problem, darling,” Mr Fisher said. “It is my fault to appear without the warning, interrupting your honeymoon.”

Vien knew she was blushing after the last mention but couldn’t help it. Tommy undeterred continued.

“My friend could not stop to praise you, how pretty, intelligent and amusing you are but reality surpassed my expectations by a mile.”

Mr Kennert laughed. “Tommy, come on. Can’t you see you are making my baby uncomfortable? Because she’s all these things but also modest and unpretentious.”

My baby? Vien barely recovered from the shock of hearing the words when another unexpected thing happened. Artri leaned over Vivianne and kissed her neck. The wet touch lingered making it hard not to shiver and keep the calm face.

“I think you need to eat your breakfast,” he said as if not nothing unusual happened. “Forgive us for not joining you but we have some urgent issues to discuss together.”

When both men headed toward Mr Kennert’s apartments Vien sat on the bench unable to gather her thoughts. Then she touched the place where his mouth had been and groaned silently.

Tommy sent him the congratulatory smile. “Now I understand your obsession, brother. She’s Vai incarnate.”

“Yeah, but Vai with the spark of mischief, Vai lusting over me, can you imagine? Not the frail beauty afraid of her own shadow but a real wolf child.”

“I guess you rarely let her out of bed. So how many times you’ve had that spark already?”

“Never.”

“How come? Being you I could not resist the temptation. For how long? More than two weeks
now if I remember correctly.”

“It’s hard but worth every possible effort. I want her to be desperate for my touch and crazy with want, begging me to take her. And, Sweet Infinity, I am so close to my goal. Do you wish to see something hot? If so, I’ll show you.”

“Now that is a pureblood filly ready to ride her but you probably should tell the girl it’s forbidden what she has done,” Tommy said after watching the footage from Vivianne’s bedroom.

“I will tell her if she’ll become fully mine.”

“If?”

“Okay, when,” Artri corrected himself. “There may be a problem with Lea and Fran, she seemed to tolerate well the news of their existence but it’s hard to predict how it will go on after the girls’ arrival. I don’t want her feelings hurt too much.”

“You can just wait and see. I may always take them to my household in case any complications arise but not worry in advance. She seems a reasonable young woman. And now, what do you want me to do?”

“I’m sorry for leaving you for that long,” Artri said after his deputy departed to the Centre. “We had to discuss our job-related matters. I hope you like my pal, his looks make people crazy regardless of orientation and gender.”

“He was nice to me,” Vien answered. “And I love him already for being the good friend to you, Mr Kennert. But he’s definitely not my type.”

“No?” Artri moved closer, not so close he could touch her but enough for the girl to feel the warmth radiating off of his body. Is it even possible or was she dreaming?

“May you share with me your tastes in men?”

Why was he doing this to her? Of course he knew. He knew everything. At last the scientist took mercy on his innocent quarry. The moment of their peaceful coexistence lasted too short though and Artri immediately breached the subject most painful.

“It seems I have found a perfect solution to our not so little problem. You know my servant Jon Carroll, do you?”

“I, yes,” she answered through the constricted throat. One day Artri brought that inconspicuous servant of his to Vien when she asked him about the species of plants growing in the valley. The physicist himself did not know much of the Galdanedian flora but employed someone who might help them with this. He said Jon Carroll is a local guy and even if not the botanist he’s interested in such things.

The man proved to be well informed. They spent quite a pleasant afternoon in an unlikely threesome. She liked him well enough but felt nothing special toward the guard.

“I was talking with him lately and he is ready to take care of you in my stead. Of course you may not agree. I don’t want to force his ownership on you but he’s a good guy, better than I will ever be.”
Vien was sitting speechless with no idea what to do. Artri seemed to not mind.

“I am aware you may be afraid your quality of life you’ve got used to may decline after the transfer. Don’t worry about it. I promise to support financially his household as long as you will stay with him.”

“Mr Kennert, I don’t want, please don’t send me away!” Vien cried, all diplomacy and restraint forgotten.

“Hush, sweetie, I’m not sending you anywhere.” His ringed hand touched her knee in a soothing gesture. “I will do nothing you won’t accept. It’s only the proposition. Jon is a good, honourable man and he’ll do everything to make you happy but you aren’t obliged to agree. I just ask you to consider the possibility. Will you do this for me? I so wish to see you settled.”

And who could say no to such a heartfelt plea? Vien sighed.

“I will talk to him if you so insist.”

“Good. Whatever your decision it would be not polite to spurn poor Jon without listening.”

Artri Kennert smiled to her, satisfied at last.
Vien smiled to a man approaching her. The guard seemed to be intimidated by Vivianne’s presence. How strange! He was a bodyguard after all and should not fear the young and unarmed girl.

“Hi, Jon,” she greeted him first. It would be ridiculous to call the guy Mr Carroll. Yes, he had to be older than Vien more than ten years at least, but the whole person didn’t command the fraction of respect surrounding his famous employer. Jon reminded Vivianne her native men, unassuming and devoid of superiority. She could easily befriend with him but to desire such a man or choosing him for a partner was out of question.

“Good morning, Miss Vivianne.”

The guard bowed low before her.

“You probably know already why I am here.”

“Yes, of course. Please sit down, here next to me.”

Vien tried to be welcoming and kind to the poor guy. It wasn’t his fault Mr Kennert has chosen Carroll for the job, so she promised herself to be delicate with him. Besides, it will be good to exercise the magnanimity and the best manners if Artri may ever agree to keep her as his personal slave. Now she had a perfect occasion for this.

“You are a fantastic companion, Jon. I’m really impressed by your knowledge of the local nature,” she began with a compliment. “I feel we could go along together very well...”

Something like a glint of hope appeared in the man’s hazel-grey eyes. Gosh, it wasn’t Vivianne’s intention to feed any unrealistic expectations, she just wanted to be nice.

“Miss Tray, you must know I am your staunch admirer. There would be no greater privilege for me than to give you the shelter and my care so I could be your slave and a devoted servant for life.”

No, no, it should never come to that! Vien has to end it at once.

“And I would be privileged to accept such a generous and noble offer, dear Jon,” she said trying to stay calm and collected. “I like you very much and feel good in your company but can’t agree to be your slave. It is because I am in love with another.”

His ordinary face visibly animated for a moment now saddened again. Vien pitied him but couldn’t change her decision.

“It was exactly what I expected,” he said. “How could I imagine winning a girl when my boss is involved as a rival? But you must know that I don’t blame you. I will have warm feelings for you always. And remember, in hard times you can always count on me. If you’ll ever need me, I won’t hesitate to risk my life and well-being to help you.”

The servant took her hands and kissed them with zeal.

Vien felt awful. Causing someone pain was not her favourite pastime.

“Please, stop it,” she whispered afraid that Mr Kennert may see this far too intimate gesture. “I am
only the silly Argossynian girl and deserve no worship. I’m only glad you’re not angry with me.”

“I would never force myself on you against your will. As I said, I have been expecting such an outcome but hopefully you don’t blame me for trying.”

The man was so sweet Vivianne wanted to kiss him but couldn’t risk it here in the open where everyone can see them.

“Of course I don’t blame you,” she said. “Let’s be friends, okay? I’m in need of the sympathetic persons here in the XY Zone. For now, I know no-one besides my host and you.”

“I think we can remedy this. There are some kind guys among my colleagues who are truly impressed by you. Young Thad Thaddeus, Grant Sperrin and a few others. When the boss will be absent, I can introduce them to you.”

Vien didn’t like the idea of doing anything Mr Kennert could not approve but thanked him, anyway. Then they went for a walk to soothe the raging emotions and it was done. What a relief!

Artri waited for her with the dinner.

“Carroll told me everything,” the man said offering Vien the chair. It wasn’t typical plastochair but a retro one made of real wood, dark and heavy. Mr Kennert liked classic, handmade furniture. Her bed and other pieces in the guest bedroom were of the similar kind.

“And so it seems we won’t be celebrating,” he noted measuring her with the green stare. Was it a rebuke in his eyes? Did she disappoint him? It was the last thing Vivianne wanted. Luckily his features mellowed almost at once.

“It’s a pity, darling, because Carroll is one of a few really good men around who are single at the moment. But okay, I’ll try to find another one, more to your liking. It may take time though.”

Vien wanted to shout it’s completely unnecessary because she will never choose another but stayed silent accepting the glass of juice. The girl was drinking the green fluid not paying attention to its taste. Then she tried to eat but swallowing anything solid was too great a challenge.

Artri saw her low spirits and reacted. “Ivvi, sweetling, I did not intend to upset you. I’m not throwing you away. You will have a home here as long as you need it.”

If the physicist meant these words as a consolation they did not fulfil their task. Vien felt terrible, like an intruder. Sweet Goddess, how could it happen? The Federation men were oppressors and slave owners, her compatriots’ worst enemies. She was supposed to hate them, not fall desperately and hopelessly for the one.

“You know what?” Artri tried again. “I think the female company may do you good. I’ll let my slaves return from Stanley Spalding so you won’t be the solitary girl in the household full of males. It’s time to meet them, especially if you plan to stay with us longer.”

Vien could not argue with her host. These women had far more right to be close to him than Vivianne. They are serving him while she only takes.

“Mr Kennert, it will be a pleasure,” she said, “when they are going to arrive?”
Neither their owner, nor Mr Spalding said a word about the reason for her and Leandra’s exile. Mr Kennert rarely told them about anything he was doing during their absence but Francesca had her own informants among the men of the household. She knew about that strange custom of his which was rescuing sorry asses of the captured Argossynian women. Okay, sometimes he took care of the girls in trouble from Riadis or his native Makantara but mostly of Argossynians. They never stayed with him for longer than a few days. After treating the worst injuries and healing their bodies and spirits each one was sent somewhere safe. The master monitored how they fared afterwards but rarely visited any of his rescue girls. At least it was what the boys told her and they also didn’t know everything about their boss’s whimsical behaviour.

Mr Kennert, being the top scientist with a multitude of achievements in his field, had every right to act extravagantly so Frances didn’t mind, especially when she never had to deal with those females.

This time though it was different. The last woman the master took home from the Detention Centre more than two weeks ago lived still in the Cycads Valley and they were going to meet her. Frances and Lea were supposed to befriend with a new girl and treat her with the utmost respect. Because their owner said so. He also ordered them to not talk too much about his past and especially about their predecessors.

Meeting the freeborn Argossynian was the last thing Francesca wanted or looked for but nobody asked her if she’s happy with the perspective of another possible rival in her surroundings.

Frances and Lea didn’t love each other very much, but they agreed on a truce. Although it couldn’t satisfy them fully, there was no better solution to guarantee both slaves the comfortable coexistence under Mr Kennert’s roof. Their owner had no favourite, so they were on an equal footing. Frances tried to change it but the master was impermeable to her efforts so she almost gave up.

Now the fragile balance they achieved could be gravely endangered. She had a sick feeling about it and could not stop thinking what can go wrong.

“Calm down,” Lea whispered seeing her distress. “It will be what will be and we have no say in the matter. It’s useless to worry in advance. Nelly tells her compatriots are always friendly to other women so she shouldn’t be dangerous whatever her relation to the master. Let’s wait and see.”

Instead of soothing her fears Lea’s thoughtless complacency made Francesca furious. She didn’t dare to show her bad mood outwardly because the guards escorting them were watching.

“It’s easy for you to tell,” she sniffed hiding the face in her hands. “You don’t love him as I do. You can always agree to Mr Spalding’s proposal but I can’t imagine a life without the master.”

“Your feelings are irrelevant when they aren’t reciprocated,” Leandra reminded her not without a hint of cruel satisfaction.

“Mr Kennert can ditch us anytime regardless with whom he sleeps. You know we are perfectly replaceable.”
Francesca wanted to shout Leandra was wrong. She liked to imagine the master has chosen her because of some exceptional personal qualities but the sad truth was they were to him hardly more than living equipment of his many estates.

Artri invited them sometimes to his bedroom, one or both at the same time but after sex he was always cold and indifferent again. Being honest they were more often with his friends, guests or acquaintances than with the owner himself.

Immersed in her unhappy thoughts, Francesca didn’t even notice when they reached the Cycads Valley.

“The boss is waiting for you,” Greg said. “Remember to be nice to his new charge lest we all suffer the consequences.”

“You don’t need to remind us about our duties, Mr Sawter,” Frances snorted earning the warning look from the man. The slave felt terribly wired but when the craft landed she quickly schooled her features to look meek and docile.

All the blood in Frances’s veins boiled when she saw the girl standing at the master’s side.

It was not her appearance that was the main issue. The girl looked very young with her pleasant, slightly round face, surrounded by long and straight fawn hair. Her nose was shapely and of a moderate size, lips rather narrow but of healthy cherry colour, eyes cobalt blue and shaded by long brown lashes with perfectly shaped eyebrows of the same colour. The Argossynian had a fair complexion marred only by the small herd of freckles gathered mainly around the base of her nose. The long neck of the girl was bare. It meant she wasn’t Artri’s rightful slave yet like Frances and Leandra. The last fact would fill Francesca with a new hope if not the clothes the newcomer was wearing.

The dress clearly belonged to the set of exquisite garments Frances saw only once. The guard who had shown them to her was fired because of the indiscretion he committed and the master forbade her to even think about touching them again let alone wearing one of these. It was the wardrobe worthy of the queen from the epoch of Primitive. Each article of clothing was the result of hours of arduous work with its handmade lace and all the complicated embroideries. Artri never changed his mind even if Frances was working hard to satisfy his demands. And now the Argossynian vagrant enjoyed the luxuries denied to Mr Kennert’s devoted slaves. Oh yes, Lea was probably too tall to wear them without adjustments but Francesca being of the similar built could fit in admirably. It was all so unfair and disrespectful.

Frances could not voice her annoyance loudly. She had to accept the Argossynian’s hand and to pretend everything is as it should be. Leandra seemed to have no trouble with getting close to Mr Kennert’s guest. She hugged the girl chirping something about her joy of getting such a nice and sweet companion.

After the supper with Vivianne Frances was sick of the false niceties and a small-talk they had at the table.

When they were alone in hers and Lea’s rooms she could let it out at last.

“That damned stray bitch! How dare she to usurp the place that should belong solely to us!” Frances cried.
“Calm down,” Lea seethed. She had enough of her companion’s bad temper. The woman could not stop thinking the newcomer would be far better colleague than constantly angry and frustrated brunette. “Someone may hear you and I don’t want to be punished for listening to your slurs and not reporting.”

“How do you dare to speak to me like that, you cow coward, to lick the feet of the Argossynian whore!”

“Francesca!”

In the fervour of their heated discussion they didn’t notice the master of the house who appeared on the threshold of their shared apartments and had to listen for some time.

Both girls curled on the floor in the submissive gesture but it was too late.

“Francesca,” repeated the man, “I am terribly disappointed in you. I was sure the property of mine knows better than to use such a language.”

And then he summoned the guardsmen to teach Lea’s unfortunate colleague how to behave.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Frances, it's not her fault Kennert may be such a bastard.

The description of Vivianne's appearance was borrowed from the Mother of Hope and partly modified but not much.
Vien never asked about the mysterious structure standing on a small hillock near the house and nobody explained her what it was. It looked like some kind of modern sculpture, rather strange artistic installation. Now she discovered it had a strictly utilitarian function. The thing had to be the whipping post. Realising that fact and a meaning of a scene she saw through the window the girl gathered her skirts and ran as fast as she could in the group's direction.

Vien was panting when she reached the place. Her new acquaintance, Mr Kennert’s brunette slave was already half naked, and the guards were tying her to the sinister thing. The view was so, so wrong and terrifying.

Without thinking, the girl kneeled before their boss.

“Mr Kennert, sir, please can you stop it?” she pleaded looking up at the beautiful scientist Artri’s gaze when it touched her was cold and austere. For the moment Vien thought Mr Kennert will ignore the intruder ordering the guards to remove her from the area but then his initial expression mellowed a fracture.

“She had insulted you under my roof,” he said. “Nobody dares to say foul things about my guests and you are the most welcomed person here.”

There was a dangerous glint in his shining green eyes but Vien didn’t flinch.

“I don’t feel offended, Mr Kennert, she probably voiced what she was thinking. You cannot silence people only because you don’t like what’s in their minds.”

Her boldness made him smile.

“That’s an interesting notion from the one on their knees but okay. Stand up, please. I’ll do as you say but you must know she won’t be grateful. Knowing my slave she will hate you even more because of this. It’s humiliating for some to accept mercy from their enemy’s hands.”

“I’m not her enemy,” said Vien. Artri smiled again. It was a small, indulgent smile but strangely infuriating.

“But you are! And she knows it already.”

Then he turned to his cronies.

“Okay, boys. On mistress’s Vien demand free Frances and let her return to the slave’s room.”

“Francesca, wait!” The physicist stopped the girl when she wanted to leave. “You forgot about something important. Please show your gratitude to Vien the same way you would address me. It
was she who saved your back from bleeding.”

Hearing the man’s words Frances approached Vivianne. She bowed before her ready to kiss Vien’s hand. Vivianne expecting the gesture had enough time to hide both palms behind her back so the other girl only looked up at her and said. “I thank you mistress Vien for your kindness and saving me from the pain I deserved.”

“Why have you done this?” Vien asked when they were alone in the room.

“Because it is the only argument she honours. Your magnanimity is outstanding but showing her mercy only makes you look weak in her eyes. Frances is skilled in all kinds of erotic arts, spirited and pretty. I had many offers from the people who would buy her in an instant. This girl knows of her popularity and it makes her excessively proud. I am sure even now Frances thinks she’s better than you. So I had to show her how wrong she was.”

“And what if she is right? Your beautiful slave may be much better than me. In erotic arts at least. But some say I am a fast learner, so…”

Vien paused looking at the physicist seductively. She hasn’t found herself humiliated by the gesture made today, on contrary it gave Vivianne the sudden chill and not of the wrong kind. Besides, she had saved Francesca, so it was worth the effort.

The girl had to admit she has nothing against living as the third and youngest slave in a household. She honestly preferred this to being the first for someone else, even the best one. Vien felt deeply surprised by herself and her feelings.

Today she saw the darkness in her host but it didn’t discourage her from trying. It meant her angel was not necessarily what he seemed before but that touch of darkness made him more human and attainable. And, in a strange way, even more desirable.

That night Vivianne could not sleep imagining herself with him in all possible kinds of compromising positions. With the exception of hurting the others she could do anything to make her dreams come true.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully you don’t blame Vivianne for her feelings. Handsome alpha males are often hard to resist even if, esp. in a real life, they are one of the humanity's greatest nemeses.
Artri could not forget the view of the colourful skirts pooled around the kneeling Argossynian. The way she was looking at him from the ground, the astounding mixture of humble and bold, made him want to snatch her and carry to his rooms immediately, carefully designed strategy forgotten. It was not easy to keep the impassive face in front of his people.

The inhibitors were already not enough therefore the physicist summoned Frances to his place to get rid of the problem.

The brunette entered, the uncertainty pictured on her face. Artri let her go before but she could not be sure he won’t punish her personally behind the closed doors of his apartments. The slave’s moves were cautious, typical for the person forced to share the cage with a dangerous beast.

Artri was ready to give Francesca the detailed orders when the strangest thing happened. Luckily the scientist didn’t say a word because when the girl approached him the arousal quickly vanished. Maybe he needed this but not necessarily from Francesca.

“You wanted to see me, my lord?” the young woman asked when the silence lasted.

“Ah, yes. I wish you to know how saddened I am by your behaviour. Far more than angered. Miss Vien has done you no harm so you have no right to insult her or Lea for being civil to my guest.”

“I’m sorry, master,” Francesca said but Artri knew she didn’t mean it. The only thing the slave was sorry for were his favours she lost because of her lack of composure.

“I’m sorry too,” the scientist said. “Now I know it was unjust to react the way I did. You were serving me admirably well, so I shouldn’t be that hasty with punishing you for a single fault. Luckily there was certain someone ready to help you with the trouble. I hope you will remember her kindness.”

“Of course, my lord,” Francesca said in the same emotionless way.

“Okay, you may go now.” Artri dismissed the slave.

Now the physicist wasn’t sure if bringing back Lea and Frances was a right move. Artri wanted Vien to be jealous and even more determined but what if their presence will have the opposite effect dissuading the girl from wanting to stay?

Despite of what Art told Vien in the beginning, he didn’t need to keep the additional female personnel in the household. To have them on every command was simply convenient.

He wasn’t ready to share Vivianne. Maybe later when he will have enough of her services and even
then not with everyone, but for the usual occasions he can always hire the public slaves. And it’s probably the best solution now, when his priorities have changed.

Francesca is too ambitious to accept another woman as her master’s favourite slave. She may try but who knows how far the wench can go after realising her aspirations have no chance to be fulfilled. In the critical circumstances she may be dangerous to her rival.

At least Lea seemed to be genuinely taken with Artri’s rescue girl. The shrewd woman could always fake the affection but it seemed very unlikely. Not that she wasn’t ambitious in her own way, but in Leandra the realism always prevailed over the ambition. She was such a down-to-earth person and Artri valued her for this. Lea may be the good companion for his fallow-haired Argossynian wonder, especially after their children will appear, because they must someday. Ah, well, she wasn’t yet his. There was one last thing he planned to do before it will happen.

Vien woke up and sat on the bed yawning. She went to sleep late after talking with Lea, who described her almost every guest invited to today’s evening fete Artri organised for her.

He was so set on this event, even if Vien pleaded it unnecessary. Despite Vivianne’s reservations he refused to change his mind. Mr Kennert said he still hoped Vien may find someone more to her liking because Artri himself is not worthy to have her, too old, too strict and far too boring for such a lively spark as she. Blah, blah, blah, his usual nonsense. But what could she do? He was the master of the house and his word was the law everyone had to obey.

At least Mr Kennert promised Vien if she won’t find her knight in the shining armour Artri will reconsider her joining his household as the third slave. At long last! But better late than never. Now the only thing she has to endure is this ridiculous party thing with far too many people and a lot of snacks. That’s how Galdanedians have fun when her people fight with the food shortages.

Vien winced when standing. Her period had to begin yesterday. It was Vivianne’s first after the kidnapping to the XY Zone. So far the Argossynian contraceptive implant she carried protected her from monthly bleedings. The fact they reappeared was a sure sign the factor will soon stop working. Vien didn’t mind a bit of cramps, they usually weren’t very painful but it also meant she will be able to get pregnant.

It was the complication Vien didn’t consider so far. Hopefully taking her for a slave doesn’t mean Artri will want the offspring with her as soon as possible. He neither had children with his current slaves nor spoke about wanting them. So maybe he’ll agree for Dr Salter to prescribe her something to continue the contraception before they’ll consummate their future union. And what if not? What if agreeing to the possible consequences will be one of Artri’s conditions before accepting Vivianne’s offer? Is she ready for such a difficult decision? It was the deepwater she was treading and there was nobody to advise her. Lea was friendly and Jon promised her to be of help if need be but they both were Mr Kennert’s creatures and Vien couldn’t trust them.

“Sweet Goddess, please help me,” Vivianne whispered, stressed and unsure how to act. She really wanted that man but was terrified of the price her choice may demand of her sooner than she expected.
Vien looked careworn today as if something was eating her from the inside. She struggled to not show it but without success.

Artri felt almost guilty for insisting on organising the party after the girl was sceptical about it but he genuinely hoped Vien will warm up to the idea. It would please every other woman to be the centre of attention of so many famous and attractive people, introduced to them as Artri Kennert’s ward, wearing beautiful clothes and assorted jewellery.

Vivianne accepted all his gifts with gratitude but they didn’t mean much to her. The only one she really wanted was Artri himself.

He assured the Argossynian she won’t be under pressure to choose another man and that today’s gathering serves only as one last occasion to meet possible alternatives before they will make the final decision.

Most probably she doesn’t trust Artri’s word with this, suspecting he hadn’t given up yet the plans to send her away. If this is the source of Vien’s discomfort, then maybe he should stop tormenting the poor child and admit his feelings about the girl are even stronger than hers.

The problem is, after what happened to Vai he has to be sure Vivianne’s choice is not the result of a temporary whim or purely physical attraction but fully conscious decision to join her fate with his. If there’s even a slight possibility this relationship may end with a similar disaster it will be better for everyone involved to end it now before it really began.

“Is something wrong, master?” Lea asked seeing him frowning. “May I be of help?”

“I was watching my charge, Lee, a few times today,” Artri said. “Don’t you think she looks subdued? Did Ivvi complain about something to you?”

“No, not at all. But we were talking until late at night so she may be a bit sleepy. Hopefully, it’s nothing worse than that.”

“Oh, thank you, Lee. If you’ll see anything alarming, please come to me immediately.”

Artri dismissed the woman. He wanted to ask Vivianne himself but in that moment the main party planner called him to discuss some final arrangements so he gave up the idea. The physicist trusted Lea to take a good care of the Argossynian in his absence.

Francesca was nowhere to be seen, probably sulking in her room. Even the fact Vien shared her wardrobe with the brunette didn’t lessen the latter’s cold hostility toward the newcomer. Artri ordered the guards to monitor her in case of any problems with the slave.

The scientist dismissed the objections the guy set forth for the umpteenth time. Vien asked him explicitly to employ no serving females for the evening, nor use his own staff the same way, so the matter was out of question. Was it too hard to understand?

Far more important than the entertainment of his guests were additional security measures, and they had to be unbreakable. It was the first time he will show his treasure to the outside world and
nothing should mar such a glorious occasion. Neither his enemies nor false friends and especially no journalists were allowed anywhere close to the estate. Artri took care of this part personally supervising all the steps taken. He was aware of being on the verge of a paranoid, but the stake was too high to leave anything to chance.

“Do you know where Mr Kennert is?” Vien asked Lea. She was more and more nervous while getting closer to that cursed night. Besides, her bleeding intensified unexpectedly since the morning so the last thing she craved for was attending the major fête in her state of the utmost discomfort. It was too late though to say no when everything was almost ready. She didn’t want to be ungrateful and couldn’t risk displeasing Mr Kennert regarding circumstances. Luckily Vivianne’s abode was well stocked with all kinds of sanitary products so at least this was no problem.

“I’m afraid our lord is busy with the last touches before the evening festivities,” the slave said. “He asked me to take care of his guest when he can’t. So, may I help you with anything, like getting ready for the party, perhaps?”

Vien appreciated Lea’s good intentions but preferred to be left alone.

“No, thank you,” she said. “I think I can manage by myself. I’ll go to my room now. If Mr Kennert returns please tell him he can find me there.”

Behind closed doors Vien could stop pretending. Her spirits were at their lowest since the incarceration in the torture house. The only thing she really wanted was to lay down and weep. Now Artri will surely know she’s weak and unstable. Why should he want such a human disaster to be his slave? She was no match for the proud beauty like Francesca and even less aggressively attractive looks of Leandra surpassed Vivianne’s meagre charms by many miles.

Vien should face the fact for Artri she has become only the troublesome burden. He wouldn’t go to such a great effort if he didn’t want to be free of her. She should agree to Jon’s proposal, at least the guard wanted her truly and she would be safer with him, far from the spoiled and famous. Artri’s glamorous world is not hers. It was a folly to insist she’s fit to be his slave.

In that moment Vien missed the most the uncomplicated world she was born and raised on, the place where everyone had so little and yet was contented for what they’ve got.

Because when you struggle to survive in a harsh environment you also learn to enjoy every little good thing in life. And what is the use of all this wealth and luxury when surrounded by them she can’t be at peace?

Laying in the bed and thinking Vivianne was unaware of the time’s flow until she realised it’s getting dark outside. And then her communicator came to life.

“Darling,” it was Mr Kennert’s voice, “I’m waiting for you. The guests will soon start arriving.”

Chapter End Notes

I was struggling with this chapter for three days, writing it and deleting most of the text, writing and deleting and so on. That way only less than a half of the original content remained. I’m still not satisfied with the outcome because it doesn't seem to
flow as it should but I have no idea how to make it work better.
Artri nearly gasped aloud seeing Vivianne emerging from her room. She wore the dress he remembered vividly. It was the one Vai had while telling him the great news in that short time when he still hoped their relationship may have a future. How it ended everybody knew except Vien, unaware of the meaning that particular article of clothing had for him. Was it a bad omen for the person covered in the bright green silks? Maybe he should destroy all Vaicia’s things years ago to not tempt the fate. But no, what was he even thinking? Being the scientist Artri can’t give up to the stupid superstitions. What will happen depends only on him. Artri was now older, wiser and ready to learn on the past mistakes. Surely he can keep the girl under his protection safe, even from himself.

Vivianne probably mistook his hesitation for the discontent.

“I have chosen this dress to match your lovely eyes, Mr Kennert, but If you don’t like it I may yet change,” she said eying him with the apprehension.

“No, you look beautiful like that. This shade of green fits in with your fallow hair. You’re are so perfect I just forgot how to speak.”

At last she smiled albeit with little joy in it. “You didn’t know what to say? Mr Kennert, for the person as famous as you and used to command people around, it’s unbelievable.”

Artri came closer to take her by the hand which she allowed him.

“Please, don’t call me Mr Kennert. It’s so formal and stiff. No matter what the future brings I hope we will remain friends. And as your friend may I ask you to address me by my second name?”


“But you just did it. See, it cannot be that hard. At least promise me you will try.”

There was a long moment of silence and then she nodded. “You are my saviour so I can’t refuse to obey. I only hope you will give me enough time for my trying.” Suddenly her eyes were full of tears. She looked more vulnerable than on the day Artri delivered her from the clutches of Bart and his helpers.

“I wish to give you all the time you need,” he whispered letting himself to kiss the palm of her hand and then Artri sensed it. In the well-known aroma of her body and the perfumes she used he found the whiff of something different, both metallic and sweet. He knew it very well from his many former partners and couldn’t mistake for anything else.

Artri’s enhanced genome among many important advantages like a longevity and perfect health gave him also a few additional, unique skills. One of them was acute and precise sense of smell. Artri’s abilities matched no dog nor a wolf; his nose, even if sensitive and long, was decidedly human, but it gave him precedence over every other man Art knew.

So how was it possible he didn’t notice earlier? Ah, yes. The urgent business kept them apart for the last two days. It had to start in that time.

So this was the reason of the change in her behaviour.

The man recalled what Percy told him after examining the girl for the first time. Something about
the certain implant she carried and its effects. Artri didn’t pay much attention to the doctor’s notice because there were more urgent issues to deal with. Perry said it should work at least for a few more cycles. Apparently the doctor’s estimations were wrong. Or was it the stress that shortened the drug’s action? In such a case it might be partly his own fault.

“Do you feel unwell?” Artri inquired. “If so, you don’t have to force yourself to attend the party.”

Vien looked at him, surprised.

“It have been better but I am not ill,” she said.

“No, you’re not, only… different from before.”

And then it got to her.

“How, how can you possibly tell?” she asked, lips quivering. “Were you watching me when I didn’t know?”

“No, I only have better than an ordinary sense of smell and draw conclusions from what Percy told me. I’m sorry but as your caretaker I can’t miss a single thing concerning your health.”

Now when he knew Artri couldn’t stop himself from gathering her close to breathe in that divine cocktail of scents. Holy Infinity, it was intoxicating.

Vien didn’t push him away.
At the moment that seemed her lowest everything changed so abruptly. When Artri embraced her it wasn’t another tender, fatherly embrace. Those were sweet and soft, but this one was different, possessive and demanding. Vien wouldn’t be herself to miss the opportunity she was awaiting much too long. She didn’t shy away this time from testing her luck and the answer she received surpassed her wildest dreams.

Vien wasn’t a complete novice to this game, but all she knew paled in comparison with this purely animalistic, insatiable hunger. She let herself be devoured forgetting about her former discomfort and a gnawing doubt.

“I guess we don’t need this gathering,” Artri said staring at Vien with the darkened eyes, fingers still tangled up in her hair.

“And what about your visitors, sir?” she chirped with false innocence licking his fresh taste from her lips.

“She’s here, sir?’” she chirped with false innocence licking his fresh taste from her lips.

“I guess we don’t need this gathering,” Artri said staring at Vien with the darkened eyes, fingers still tangled up in her hair.

“And what about your visitors, sir?” she chirped with false innocence licking his fresh taste from her lips.

“It was Vien who noticed they weren’t alone. She already pitied Francesca who was miserable enough to watch their wild exchange of bodily fluids. She believed it was much worse than catching them enjoying the intercourse itself. The latter was a popular social activity according to the standards of the local culture, while kissing on the mouth Galdanedians reserved for the dearest friends and long-term lovers. At least that’s how Lea described it and Vien believed her.

She had to let him know they should stop. To give the man justice, Artri was quick with the response.

“What is it, baby?” he asked.

“There’s Fran here, and she wants something,” Vivianne whispered to his ear.

When the scientist turned around to deal with his slave, Vivianne sent her the conciliatory smile. She struggled to look guilty but the elegant brunette ignored her altogether, as if Vien wasn’t there.

Francesca curtsied before Mr Kennert.

“I’m sorry, master, but your father has arrived and wishes to talk to you.”

Vivianne knew Kennert senior was persona non grata in his son’s home. What could bring him here against Artri’s wishes?

Artri squeezed her hand.

“She’s here, sir?” she chirped with false innocence licking his fresh taste from her lips.

“I’m sorry, master, but your father has arrived and wishes to talk to you.”

Vivianne knew Kennert senior was persona non grata in his son’s home. What could bring him here against Artri’s wishes?

Artri squeezed her hand.

“Please, stay in your rooms and rest, I’ll come back soon.”

Vien dutifully stepped back relieved she won’t have to meet the mob of unknown people just yet.

Already inside she took off the dress staying only in a short chemise of the same colour and prepared herself a drink, she needed a lot to get rid of a sour taste after what took place. The hostile
presence of the other woman marred the longed-for promise of happiness and understanding. Vien didn’t want anyone to suffer if it could be avoided and she could only imagine what Frances might feel. Too bad she saw them together. A pity Vien didn’t invite Artri inside but how could she predict they will end this way? Why oh why everything must be that complicated?

Artri returned after about an hour. Vien glanced at him discreetly afraid to find even the merest trace of hesitation or regret. There was none, but she didn’t like the angelic look on his face either. She preferred him as before, full of passion and vibrant energy, not a flawless marble statue emotionless and distanced.

But as the scientist approached Vivianne, all that ice slowly melted. He sat on the edge of the bed looking at her with affection.

“Darling you should see their faces when I’ve told them they can go home because you don’t feel well enough to attend the event.”

“You did what?” Vien wasn’t sure if she heard correctly. “Is it wise to displease so many important people? And what about all that food that was ordered?”

“I see you already behave as the mistress of the house but don’t worry. My people delivered the food to the slave house and the guests, well, the guests will return in due time for the ceremony.”

Seeing her puzzled expression the man explained.

“If you insist to live with me, and it seems you do, there must be the proper bonding ceremony. The one in which you will surrender yourself to my rule and will welcome the symbols of your new position.”

And then he turned serious.

“This is my earnest wish but you must learn first what such a position involves. Until that time you may always withdraw your approval and we will part our ways with no hard feelings on either side.”

No, not this nonsense again!

“Why, do you judge me to be that fickle and undecided? I assure you I know what I want!”

Artri smiled indulgently. “I don’t doubt your sincerity, kid, but you may not be aware of all the consequences. And I want you to take the informed decision to avoid any misunderstandings.”

Vivianne didn’t like it.

“Ah, well. If this is your condition to accept me I have no option but to agree,” she stated. Again Vien felt humiliated by his reluctance after so promising the prelude.

“You don’t understand. There’s no other thing I crave for more, than to make you wholly mine, but you’ll soon see why I don’t want to get in our relationship hot-headed and unprepared. Just because I care that much. Will you lend me a bit of patience? Please?”
“Has someone told you already you are hard to resist?” Vien asked.

“All the time. But no one was so pure and so much desired as my Argossynian hostage.”

It was the last thing he said for a long while.
Late Lament

After coming back to reality Artri suggested summoning doctor Salter. He said they must be sure the hastened return of her periods had no pathological origins. Vien agreed with this sensible proposal and the date of the medic’s visit was set for tomorrow morning.

“I’m sorry for the delay my treacherous body caused us,” she said when they were sitting at the supper.

Artri knew what kind of delay she refers to.

“Don’t be silly, it’s not your fault. I was waiting for you my whole life so a few additional days doesn’t matter. We will have that time for innocent pleasures and arranging everything to your liking. Many things will change.”

Vien tried to sound carefree.

“How come you were waiting for me all your life if you didn’t want me when I finally arrived? I don’t understand.”

“And this is the moment I was dreading since the beginning of our acquaintance. There’s this thing I should tell you after we first met. I’m aware it may destroy my chances with you but before the ultimate decision you need to hear about something.”

“Oh, you’re so very mysterious,” Vivianne noted. “Soon you will tell me that you kill the girls after the first night with them. But it cannot be true. Frances and Leandra had sex with you and both are very much alive!”

Artri usually liked her antics and laughed at them. This time though his response was different.

“Vien, it’s not funny, the last thing to joke about.”

Vivianne felt like scolded.

“I’m sorry,” she apologised. “I didn’t want to anger you.”

“I’m not angry. It’s okay, just listen. And don’t interrupt until I finish.”

There was something strained about him at the moment. Vien didn’t know this side of Mr Kennert yet. And then she had an idea.

“May I sit on your lap, sir? Maybe it would be easier for me, and you, this way.”

“I’m afraid it would distract me too much. Better stay where you are, I’ll try to keep it short.” Artri sent her an apologising look. Vien wanted to hug him closely and promise everything will be fine.

“I have already told you many things about myself,” Artri began playing with his nigrite ring. “It would be enough if our ways were to part eventually, but you have decided otherwise. And therefore you deserve to know the whole truth. It was my coworker Kertie Dwight who spotted your person in the torture house and reported to me. I was on a holiday but the Kert’s news made me return in a hurry from another continent. He said the girl his friend Bart Rennell was working
on looked almost exactly like my former lover whom I lost many years ago.”

Vien almost jumped from her seat. “And this is all? Did you really think it would matter to me? I know you like me for how I am and don’t care how you have chosen me. It’s only important that you did!”

Artri sighed. “Darling I have asked you to not interfere. I haven’t finished yet. The worst thing is my precious lover died because of me. Her name was Vaicia, but she was better known as Vai. And no, I didn’t kill her with my own hands nor ordered the execution but I’m sure she would be alive now if not the fact she had been my personal slave for some time.”

“So how it came to that?”

“She was the only woman I ever loved but my feelings were not reciprocated. Vai knew what I was doing and hated me for it. She was mortally afraid of me, especially after I started to use violence against her too. The more she despised me the more I was angry and more inclined to be cruel and abusive punishing her for not loving me. One day I realised it leads to nowhere and decided to break the vicious cycle this failed relationship had pushed me in. I have used the inhibitors, resigned from my additional job and tried to amend the wreckage but it was too late. Vai was lost to me. I had to acknowledge defeat. When she fell in love with one ordinary guy, I let her go. My enemies captured and killed them.”

“You have done evil things, Nathoo but of her death you are not guilty.”

“Yes, I am. Vai’s life would be a hundred percent safe under my protection. My deeds had made her run away from it and that’s how she met her death. Maybe I shouldn’t call it love but rather the sick addiction but I was never addicted the same way to anyone since then. Until the day I saw you in that cell covered in blood and grime…”

“Even if it was how you told me, I know you have changed since then, “Vien said moved by the man’s confession. “Am I not the living proof of that change? Be sure I will never run away from you. My name is Vivianne, not Vai.”

It took her long to convince Artri she’s not afraid to take the risk. According to Vien there was no risk at all but she didn’t oppose him for the sake of peace alone. He yielded at last after many hugs and kisses and promised to not question her choice anymore.

“Do you want to negotiate your contract now?” Artri asked when the bots cleaned the table and brought them coffee.

“But baby, you don’t listen.” He noted the subtle change in Vien’s behaviour.

“I’m sorry, Mr Kennert… Nathoo. Can you ask doctor Salter to come earlier?”

The scientist didn’t comment, merely nodded and called the physician.

When Percy appeared he dealt effectively with the current issue and when it was finished, they had a lengthy, detailed debate about the ways of continuing Vivianne’s contraceptive regime. The men
let her make the final decision how she wished to proceed with her bodily functions.

“So it’s good I had postponed the garden party,” Artri said carrying her to bed. “I shudder to think what could happen if you had to roam around the park for a few hours. Next time please warn me about your ailings at once.”

Vien didn’t know how to reply. She hasn’t expected that level of understanding. Now Vivianne’s morning fears seemed to the girl nearly sacrilegious. The only thing she needed was to tell about her problem. It was so easy and simple and as far from Vivianne’s apocalyptic thoughts as possible. She felt ashamed for judging her future owner unjustly after all the hospitality and kindness he showed her. If she had any doubts left, they disappeared for good in that moment.

Lying in bed Vien was thinking about poor Vai. What a pity she had no chance to meet the current version of her owner but the other woman’s loss was Vivianne’s gain. He would never take her if Vaicia lived. It was the new source of shame because Vien was partly glad nobody stands in her way.
Cangian

The first person Vivianne met after getting up was Leandra.

“Hi!” The woman greeted her. “The master had to leave early and asked me to keep you company until his return.”

Vivianne smiled. “Thank you very much but you don’t have to. I do not want to be a bother.”

“Oh, but I’d love to,” Lea smiled back.

“Frances says I have no shame licking your boots to earn the future favours but I don’t care. And please receive my sincere congratulations. The master said you are to become our lawful sister soon.”

Lea embraced and kissed Vivianne. There was no way to check if she’s honest with her a bit too enthusiastic acceptance but even if she wasn’t it changed nothing. Vien was a newcomer here and it would appall Christine if her little sibling wanted to oust the other women from their home. Her duty was at least to tolerate the other slaves, if she could not befriend them for whatever reason. Female solidarity should always prevail over fighting for the man’s affection. That’s what Vien was taught almost since birth and it was like her second nature. Remembering that she kissed Leandra back and sent her even more radiant smile.

“I’m so happy you share my joy,” Vien said. Her good humour quickly evaporated.

“A pity Francesca hates me.”

“Don’t worry about Frances. She would never win our lord’s love regardless of your presence or a lack of it. The master was frank with us before we joined his household about what we may expect from this kind of union. It’s explicitly stated in our contracts. We were to exchange the certain services for the carefree life in luxury and the promise of equally comfortable retirement. There was no single word about possible feelings. Every girl has a right to dream about reaching for more, with the man like our lord nobody could blame Frances for wanting him for herself. But it was only her unfounded delusion, you don’t need to feel guilty for crashing her high hopes. It’s how the life goes.”

There was a melancholy in Leandra’s last words so Vien felt obliged to ask.

“And you? Did you ever…”

Lea burst with laughter. “No. Maybe it’s hard to comprehend but not every woman must be in love with Mr Kennert. Sometimes I think he has chosen me exactly because of this. Of course I admire and deeply respect him but it’s all. And now let’s go to breakfast. I was waiting for you with the meal so you wouldn’t eat alone.”

Mr Kennert returned at noon when Vien was still with Leandra. The guard and a little boy accompanied the scientist. The kid with the sandy hair could not be older than five standard years.

“What does it mean?” Vivianne asked Lea, feeling strange unease deep inside. Does Nat… Mr Kennert have a son?”
“Not that I know of,” Leandra said slowly, looking at the child as if hypnotised. 

Seeing unknown people staring at him the boy has hidden himself behind his chaperone. 

“Darling, come on!” Mr Kennert kneeled to embrace the kid. “Nobody will hurt you here.” 

“You promise, uncle Nat?” The little one was close to tears. 

“I promise. And now come. I’ll introduce you to these beautiful and kind ladies.” 

Artri took the boy in his arms and slowly approached them. 

“This one,” he said pointing to Vivianne, “is your new aunt Vien. And this is your mama I have vowed you will soon meet. Her name is Lea.” 

In a moment of a pure consternation Vivianne had to support her friend because Leandra seemed close to fainting. The older woman quickly overcame the temporary weakness and extended her arms to take the boy from the physicist. 

“Canny, my baby? I am your mother. Don’t be afraid of me.” 

Her gentle voice emboldened the kid enough to look at her with interest. 

“Mama?” he chirped a bit unsure. The word had to be foreign for him to use, poor child. 

“Yes, yes, I am! Now are you hungry, or tired? Come, I’ll take care of you.” 

“You can go, Cangian,” Artri assured the boy. “I’ll come later to check how you fare.” 

Canny had to trust the man. He went to Leandra without a fuss. 

“Excuse me, master,” Lea spoke, her eyes even more wet now. 

“Of course.” Artri nodded and then turned to the young guard who came with him. “Grant, follow Leandra and be at her service if she needed anything.” 

“I’m sorry, sweetie, for this whole drama,” Artri said when they were left alone, “but I have promised myself to find Lea’s child. And when my lawyers could retrieve him I didn’t want to leave Cangian with his bastard of a father a minute longer than necessary.” 

Was the man apologising for the good deed he made? Vien had no idea what to say. 

“He was beating him, the child of four, can you imagine?” Artri continued. “I am a monster by birth but even I would never hurt such a baby. Too bad he had a slave too. We were too late to save her finding only the fresh corpse in the cellar.” 

Vien covered her mouth with the hand. Artri’s words reminded her anew what a terrible place The XY Zone was. What a great luck happened to Vien when he rescued her from the fate worse than death! 

“Do you want me to bring you something to drink?” she asked trying to be helpful. 

“No,” Artri declined. “I’ll go to change and then we can start to compose your contract. The time is running out, and we didn’t even begin.” 

After Leandra explained her what a contract was Vien thought it unnecessary in her case. When
two people are in love, no written agreement is needed, but she didn’t want to be cross so the girl meekly agreed.
Only yesterday Vien has made the mental list of her future fiancé’s amazing qualities. Now she had to add one more, not less important one - good with kids. So why he still called himself a monster was beyond her. Vivianne had no time to think about it more, because Artri reappeared soon in the garden with the tablet in his hand.

“Let’s sit,” he said. After kissing her on the forehead Artri led Vien to the table where she ate breakfast with Leandra.

“I have prepared the draft after realising we will stay together but there was no chance to review its points with you. Of course you can have your own propositions, not listed here, but they must be put to the discussion before adding to the final text.”

Vien voiced her scepticism.
“But do we really need it? Cannot I just promise to be the best slave you ever had? Isn’t it enough?”

Artri smiled and shook his head.

“Baby, everyone in the household has their contracts to know what to expect from their employer or a master and to be aware what I will expect from them in turn. In case of slaves it’s nothing officially binding but a useful document, anyway. The girls have theirs and so shall you. Yours will be different, much longer and detailed. Lea and Frances are only the household’s body servants while you will be my official partner and concubine and, maybe, the mother of my children one day. It’s not a trifle matter but very important thing to set the rules we both can agree on. So, shall we begin?”

“Yes, I think we may,” Vien said but could not hide she’s upset by the man’s painfully formalistic approach to what should be the affair of the heart.

Seeing her distress Artri got up and came to her to embrace the girl from behind.

“Darling, don’t be angry at me. I only want you to know what you can expect from this relationship. To be not surprised by the things you may find uncomfortable or strange. Being a partner of the one like me is not an easy job and I want you to be prepared.”

Artri kisses her ear and then the neck putting his bejewelled fingers under the material on the dress until they reached the right nipple. The touch was feather light, but she felt it like an electric impulse going straight to her core. If only he continued she could orgasm from this caress alone.

“Nathoo,” Vivianne begged, “please take me to your bed. Why not leave these papers for later? I can’t go on any longer without you.”

“I assure you that you can,” he said backing off completely leaving her trembling on her seat.

“Have I to remind you about a problem you had yesterday demanding the doctor’s immediate intervention? Besides, your new implant must kick in. Surely you don’t want us to become parents
so early. I prefer to enjoy your sweet person without the third party’s interference for some time.”

Sadly, Artri was right. She acted on an impulse, not thinking about the consequences. Now he must think her silly and immature.

As if nothing was wrong Artri returned to his chair.

“I think,” he said in that fatherly tone Vivianne knew so well, “it will be better for you to read the text by yourself, than add your comments and we will meet after that. This way my presence won’t distract you. Will it be okay?”

Vien had no other choice but to nod. It was clear she was the applicant here. Artri might or might not continue with her. He had a multitude of willing females to choose from, no matter what he said about Vivianne’s likeness to his once beloved. She took the already hated thing ready to hide with it in her room.

Artri walked Vivianne to the door and entered with her. When she sat on the bed the black-maned kneeled at her feet.

“Darling baby, I swear I didn’t want to hurt you with my refusal,” he said looking at Vien from the carpet. “I could pleasure you in a safe way but I’m too afraid I wouldn’t be able to stop. You’re still bleeding and the blood’s scent makes me uncontrollable beast sometimes. We must wait a few days until it’s over.”

“Okay, if you say so,” Vien whispered overwhelmed by the conflicted feelings.

“Thank you for the understanding.”
Artri bowed his black head to kiss the hem of her skirt. “Please call me when you’ll be ready.”

It took Vien some time before she could concentrate on the draft Artri made.

As Vien read the statement, the girl became more and more confused.

“You will wear my collar all the time even to bed or a bath. The only exception will be when I’ll explicitly ask you to take it down.”

“I allow no underwear, no makeup, no artificial fragrances unless I give a special permission for either. Nails clipped short.”

“You will be ready for me whenever I wish, any time of night and day. I may accept valid excuses but the final decision will always be mine.”

“In public you will address me only as your lord or master. In private you may use my name when you wish.”

“Under no circumstances you will argue with me publicly or voice the judgement opposite to what I say. In private I’m opened to discussion always.”

“You must take the intercourse with every man I order you to pleasure, also in multiple arrangements.”

“You can take lovers aside but only after the written permission from myself. I may deny
permission without specifying its reasons.”

“All the procreational decisions I leave for myself as the one who pays for your medical expenses and will provide for the offspring born from your womb. While pregnant you can’t refuse me sex unless your medics forbid you to engage in the intercourse. During pregnancies I won’t lend you to the other men unless you will ask me to give you permission to be with them. I may deny permission without specifying its reasons.”

“All kinds of self-stimulation are strictly forbidden but I will be always to your disposal in case of a sudden need.”

“The corporal punishment may follow all serious breaches of protocol. No punishment will surpass your psychophysical capability to endure. It must be a hundred percent safe and leaving no permanent injuries.”

“Getting pregnant with another is punishable by death.”

“For your service as in the above I will provide you with everything you need for a comfortable existence.”

“I expect you to continue the education and will offer every help whichever scientific institution you choose. For obvious reasons only the extra-mural studies are available for you.”

“Even if we cease to be the partners, it will take no material privileges from you. I will never separate you from the children. You will have an equal share in their upbringing.”

“I may bed other women because it is what men of my station are expected to do, but apart from that I will be all yours, body and soul forever.”

There were many more paragraphs but what it all meant? She could expect her role as a slave may differ from the treatment she received as Artri’s guest but it was hard to predict this. Was her magnanimous host such a strict authoritarian with his women? One could call him a tyrant even.

No, it cannot be! Surely it is his last attempt to discourage Vivianne from their union. Vien wanted the explanations and wanted them quick.

Chapter End Notes

I wonder, dear readers, which part of the contract you find most controversial, care to share your thoughts?

I’m also not sure if this chapter doesn’t need any additional warnings. If so please let me know.
“I see you have read the thing,” Artri said noticing her changed countenance. The scientist was watching over Canny who played in the sand in a freshly made sand pit where only the lawn had been a few hours ago.

“I volunteered to take care of him,” Artri explained. “while Lea is ordering for the boy. She needs clothes, toys, furniture and things like that for my little ward. Canny, come here, darling!”

The boy obeyed instantly.

“Yes, uncle Nat?”

“Say hi to aunt Vien. She came to see how you’re doing.”

“Hi, aunt Vi!” The child smiled shyly. Vien rarely interacted with small children so she felt a bit of unease but tried her best when Artri was watching.

“Hi, Canny,” she said. “I am a newbie here too so you don’t need to be afraid of me.”

“Yes, uncle Nat told me you came from another planet. He said the girls rule it. Is this possible?”

“And why not? It’s not exactly like that, women, men and the others rule my planet together. I will tell you about it more later if you want to hear. And how do you like it here?”

“I like my mama the best! Father told me she left me when I was little because she didn’t care but it’s not true. She loves me and gave me the ice cream for a dessert! She’s even better than Haiia.”

Vien looked at Artri above Cangian’s blonde head. The physicist nodded, his face grave.

The boy unaware of the exchange didn’t stop talking.

“Haiia was good, and we were cuddling sometimes when there was no father. Because father would beat her and me if he knew. It’s a pity uncle Nat could not take Haiia too.”

When Vien had a conversation with Cangian, his mother joined their trio. She had to finish her shopping and came for the boy.

“Master, may I sleep with him?” Lea said looking at Artri pleadingly.

“You don’t even need to ask. He is your son. I will represent his interests in the outside world and provide financially for him. All the rest I leave to you but you can always count on my advice
“Oh, thank you, thank you, my lord. You are the real angel!” Lea was crying out of happiness. Artri held her close patting the weeping woman on the back. “I assure you I’m not. Now stop it lest Cangian will think something wrong happened. No child should be separated from their mother. Especially when they have a monster for a father. It will do the kid good to stay close to you in the beginning. This way he will overcome his traumas faster.”

“I don’t know how to thank you, master!” Lea tried to kiss the scientist’s hand, but he didn’t let her.

“Why is mama crying?” Canny whispered to Vien watching the scene with his big grey eyes.

“Your mother is just happy to have you at last. Go to her so she will stop.”

It was as Vivianne predicted. Seeing Canny Leandra wiped her tears and kneeled to lift him up. Artri kisses both mother and child wishing them goodnight. When Leandra was carrying her son to the house Cangian smiled and waved to Vien. Soon she and Artri were left alone in the darkening garden.

“I don’t know what to say to the kid about his friend,” Artri spoke first.

“Lie to him my people haven’t found her or that she’s all right somewhere? I’m afraid he will be asking. I haven’t told you but the slave when we found her dead was four months pregnant with that rat.”

There was an unfeigned disgust in his words. It looked like a perfect moment to ask.

“You condemn him and yet I’ve read you would do exactly the same to me.”

“No, not the same,” he said coming closer. Vien stepped back keeping the distance. Luckily the physicist abstained from the second attempt to invade her personal space. He sighed.

“I made a huge mistake letting you digest it all with no comments. My initial plan was better because in such a case I could explain everything as it went. For our women my demands aren’t controversial but yes, most might shock you.”

“Demands? They’re threats, we are talking about a death threat and rape here.” Vien never felt more betrayed than in that moment. Compared to this the affair with Wotan meant less than nothing.

“Well, I have warned you, many times I am not a man for you but you didn’t listen.” Artri said this so sadly he sounded like the one more disillusioned here.

“Please tell me it’s not true. Tell me it is only a prank to test me if I’m determined enough!”

“Vien… I’m sorry. No hard feelings, remember?”

He sounded as if after the initial disappointment it was easy for him to give up on their engagement. Maybe he planned it from the beginning. Artri never really wanted her. It was all
toying with Vivianne and her emotions. The feeling of emptiness and loss enveloped the girl. What will she tell Leandra who already congratulated Vien to be soon her sister? Vivianne could already imagine the ironical expression on Fran’s beautiful face.

It couldn’t end like that, Vien still wanted him with all her might especially after she saw the man today with Cangian and Lea. There was so much positivity surrounding him.

After all Vien had nothing to lose.
“Then try to convince me I can still trust you,” she said fighting to stay calm.

“Okay, first this death threat that frightened you the most. I have to put it there because it is what the Galdanedian law says about such circumstances. It’s not an invention of mine. I sincerely doubt I could ever manage to kill the defenceless woman in my possession. Certainly not because of a pregnancy being the aftermath of rape or having sex with a man designated by me. It had to be the premeditated deed or a result of a scandalous lack of caution. And even then I’m not sure if I could do it. Also, the ultimate punishment doesn’t apply to the case in which you don’t want me anymore. I never planned to keep you against your will. If I won’t satisfy you as a master and lover, then dissolving our union is always possible. After that you can do whatever you want with whoever you choose after me.”

Vien said nothing, so he went on.

“It’s not a finished contract yet but a draft and virtually all points may be subject to the negotiation. We can delete some, change the others and also add yours. Now you surely see how important this document is. I could just take you as offered and then impose all these things on you without the warning. But the result would be you hating me, the last thing I want to happen. I lived through it with my former lover and do not wish the reprise of a disaster.”

“Darling, I don’t want to see you hurting but I cannot change who I am. I can’t resign my position in this world. If you can’t accept this, then there’s no future for us. Because either you want me or some false concept of me you have grown in your head. You must come to me willingly and open-minded or not come at all. The choice is yours.”

Now he stopped talking waiting for her response.
“Tommy, she’s such a tough player! Would you believe how close I was to the unconditional surrender? She backed down first, but I was almost ready to promise anything only to own her.”

Fisher’s face displayed no emotions.

“And where is that Argossynian goddess of yours?” Was that irony in his deputy’s words? Artri was not sure.

“Sleeping. We were negotiating her slave’s contract until late at night. Now it’s completed and signed by both interested parties. I am satisfied with the consensus we have made.”

Tommy’s lavender eyes pierced Artri.

“I don’t understand, Nat,” the golden-haired physicist snorted. “You saved her skin taking the wench from the torture house barefoot and with no clothes on her back. Then you provided her with the luxury unknown on that ice-covered planet of hers. If not you, she would serve in a small cell whimpering under tens of patrons of the slave house every night and day. And yet you let the barely adult girl to take over you and everything?”

Now it was Artri’s turn to glare at his companion.

“Tommy, what has gotten into you? I hoped you liked my little angel. Is my brother jealous because of the girl? You sound like Varian. It’s my father’s rhetorics. I have rescued her because I wanted and because I could. Ivvi owed me nothing.”

“I wish I was mistaken but one day you will regret your indulgence. Don’t cry on my shoulder when it happens.”

Tommy had to consider Vien as a threat to their closeness. There was nothing to worry about but Fisher seemed to not believe Artri may love them both albeit for different reasons.

“Three days and I will put my collar around that pretty neck,” Artri said. They were watching Vien having fun in the pond with Canny and his mother.

When the men were talking and ogling discreetly Artri’s young guest, another young woman of the household approached their place. Francesca wore the long turquoise dress exposing the nape of her neck and sharp collar bones. The sash accentuated the slave’s slim waistline. She had her dark hair pinned up which wasn’t exactly allowed but Kennert didn’t pay attention.

“Master, may I take care of your handsome friend,” she requested.

“Frances, sweetie” Tommy said looking at the brunette intently, “don’t talk about me as if you didn’t know me. Come here.”

Francesca faked indifference. “Mr Fisher, I don’t know if my lord lets me. You must ask him
first.”

“Don’t be silly, Francesca. We don’t need his acceptance every single time. Nat and I are closer to each other than any real brothers so everything he owns belongs to me and vice versa.”

“No, not everything,” Artri pointed out with the half smile, teasing them both. It worked. The way Tommy looked at him was priceless. Frances reddened a fraction and not waiting for the permission lowered herself on Fisher’s lap. And then kissed him. Deeply and desperately. At first Tommy looked surprised by her outbreak but he was the last person to lose such an occasion. His answer was just as spontaneous. But if Francesca aimed at making Art jealous or at least angry she failed.

“My poor child,” Tommy said to the slave, “I’m sure that ice prince, your master neglects you.”

“You can make it up to her if such is your wish. But not here where a four-year-old may see,” Artri commented pointing at Cangian screaming and giggling in the water. When Vien joined the boy’s antics she looked more like his older sister than the adult woman. In a way Canny and she were now the step siblings of sorts, both Artri’s wards until the day after tomorrow when the Argossynian’s status will change.

“Frances, take this horny friend of mine and see after his needs,” he commanded.

“As you wish, master,” Francesca answered quietly not so cocky now, probably unsure if he won’t punish her later for her bravado. She should know better but Artri didn’t plan to quell the slave’s fears just yet. It was cruel, he knew, especially when he didn’t care about her. Vien would not approve but she won’t know.

“Mr Fisher, may I?” she dutifully proposed.

Tommy smiled to her. “Always.”

When the pair disappeared in the house Artri got up from his seat. He took the towels and bathrobes prepared beforehand and went close to the pond’s edge to evacuate his little family from the water.

“The sun is getting low,” he said, “and the chill will come soon. It’s time to go out and dry yourself.”

“But uncle Nat, only five minutes more!” Cangian tried to negotiate.

“No, darling. You can go swimming tomorrow again. Soon it will be too cold, come!” Artri was adamant. Canny yielded, and the girls followed him. Artri helped the boy to towel off and dressed him in a green hooded bathrobe.

“I’ll take him,” Lea said.

“You may say goodnight to aunt Vien and Mr Kennert.”

“Our good Leandra carries her greatest treasure,” Artri said watching mother and son entering the house. “May I take you?”

“It’s probably one of the last cases you ask me to let you do something,” she said provocatively. Artri didn’t rise to the bait.
“You know I will always value your judgement. Most of the time our relationship will not differ much from the unions you know from Argossyne.”

“Sure! As if our partners demand from us to carry the visible proof of their ownership wherever we go!”

She was fuming, but it was all for the show.

“So you won’t let me?”

“I haven’t said that!”

They stopped in front of her door.

“Won’t you go inside?” Vivianne asked when standing on her feet again.

“No, not tonight. I have told you, it would be difficult to stop,” Artri had to decline the proposal.

Vivianne pointed at his chest. “Oh, really. Sometimes I suspect there may be quite an opposite problem. What if my future master avoids me because he cannot start?”

Artri burst with laughter. “Darling, you’re such a tease. I will never be bored with you by my side.”

The kiss was short, sweet and hard to finish. Artri knew, however, that a delayed pleasure tastes even more delicious. This awareness allowed him to break away from the girl before it was too late.

“Soon you’ll move to my quarters permanently so we will always be together,” the physicist reminded her. "After you dry your hair please come to my chambers for a supper. And after the meal we have to choose the collar to be used during the ceremony."

"Oh yes, of course, the collar." There was no great enthusiasm in her voice but at least she didn't mock him anymore.

After Vien entered her room, the only trace of her presence was the smell of the wet hair.

“See you soon, princess,” he whispered to the closed door.

Chapter End Notes

I had to edit the ending of this chapter because it didn't fit with the chapter 25. It was easier than changing the latter.
Frances & Tommy

Frances returned to Tommy with drinks for them both. She didn’t bother to dress, secretly hoping for more.

“I don’t understand my friend, I just don’t get it,” Tommy said taking the glass from her. “Which man in his right mind would look for another having such a treasure in their household?”

Francesca smiled at the physicist with gratitude. “Mr Fisher, you were always kind to me. I only wish the master was as attentive and generous in bed as you are.”

“Easy, darling, better not say such things aloud,” Tommy warned her. “Remember Nat has the access to all the camera records and may check them afterwards.”

Frances shook her head. “I think the master values your privacy enough to not spy on your person while having sex. Besides, he’s invested far too much in the upcoming ceremony with a new favourite toy of his to pay attention to the humble body servant like me.”

“Oh, but he should, he should,” Tommy said sipping his beverage. Francesca sensed her chance.

“Mr Fisher, may ask you about something?”

“Sure. What is it?”

“Can you buy me from the master, sir? Mr Kennert would be glad to get rid of the trouble and I have no safe place here anymore.”

Her tone was pleading and the whole posture the humblest she could take. The blond physicist looked at her with compassion. Fran’s heart leaped in an anticipation of what she may hear but her hopes were crashed a second later.

“Dear kid, I feel for you deeply but this cannot be, I’m sorry.”

Francesca wanted to ask why but quickly changed her mind. Mr Fisher despised difficult women, so she didn’t dare to complain. Her desperate attempt failed, but it was better to stay on friendly terms with such an influential person. He may reconsider his decision one day.

Tommy continued.

“You know I barely quit with my former slave. Luckily Keith took care of Sally so my mind is at peace because her future is settled. After all the outbursts of jealousy we went through I want to stay single for the time being. Don’t get me wrong Francesca, if I was looking for a next partner you would be the best candidate for a job.”

“I thank you, sir,” she whispered. It was difficult to hide the disappointment.

Mr Fisher looked at her fondly.

“Oh, I never wanted to upset my perfect bedmate. Please, let me comfort you.” The man put aside the empty glass waiting for Frances to come back to his arms.

“I’m forever your friend and sympathiser,” he said embracing her and kissing a strand of black hair. “It’s not fair to push away such a loyal and talented girl only because of the Argossynian brat. Her compatriots may seem an exciting alternative to our women but they rarely make suitable life companions for us. Nat should learn from my mistake and from his own too. I don’t think she will
last much longer than her infamous predecessor.”

“I wish you were right, Mr Fisher!” Francesca sighed. She tried to think positive. At least Artri’s best friend was on her side. If Frances will be patient, she may yet witness her rival’s fall from grace.

“As far as I know he didn’t tell her much about Vaicia. It would freak Vien out if she knew the whole truth. And therefore we have the potent weapon against her in our sleeve.”

“Why can’t we use it now?” Francesca asked, impatiently.

“She won’t believe us as enamoured in Nat as she is. And we don’t want to be counted among your master’s enemies which could happen if we were careless enough to spoil his carefully woven plans on the eve of their fulfilment. No, Frances. We must wait. Luckily you are not endangered. Argossynians aren’t people who would let their lover hurt another woman. Meanwhile, you should follow Leandra’s example and befriend her so she could trust you.”

“Lea has betrayed me,” Francesca growled.

“You can’t blame the poor woman. He promised to find her son. Now Canny is a living warranty of Lea’s good behaviour. Displeasing Nat who has unlimited power over them would be a suicidal move. She can’t risk losing everything she’s got.”

Mr Fisher was right. Frances couldn’t argue with his arguments.

“Vivianne doesn’t know what she’s getting into. This relationship is doomed to fail and we may help to its end but not now.”

“You hate her too I see,” Francesca whispered.

“No, she’s too small a pawn to deserve such a powerful emotion. I find her annoying is all. Letting himself be ruled by a woman never led my friend to anything good. I wish to spare him another big disappointment but he won’t listen to the voice of reason. It’s too early to even try.”

“Well, being a man you know better how they function. I will wait for a suitable occasion.”

“Good girl,” Mr Fisher praised her. “I wish to stay longer but my duties call. I have some reports to finish for tomorrow.”

The room seemed cold without her companion. Francesca wrapped the blanket around her body but it wasn’t the same. At least she will see him soon on the day of the ceremony.
Vivianne nearly jumped when Tommy Fisher entered the room where she and Artri tried to pick up the model to be used the day after tomorrow.

The blond physicist looked at the table with the collection of fancy collars Mr Kennert offered her to choose from. She blushed involuntarily as if caught in the middle of a lewd act with her future master. The presence of a witness added to the turmoil Vien was in since she saw them. Artri explained to her they were made only for ceremonial purposes. There is no obligation to wear heavy and cumbersome items for longer than a few hours while in the public. For everyday use there were more comfortable models made of soft leather or similar fabrics.

If not counting initials or the full names of the prospective owner engraved in precious metals, those things looked more like regular pieces of jewellery, not the symbols of oppression. Despite this, Vien felt the sudden discomfort as if seeing and touching them for the first time made her realise fully what kind of future she had chosen. Even the damned contract didn’t work that way. The latter was negotiable while these sinister things carried in their weight and shape the intimidating aura of finality.

The contract guaranteed Vien possibility to leave if Artri won’t satisfy her expectations, but in that moment she seriously doubted this point will be valid always. The document was their private agreement and no external powers could enforce him to keep all the promises. She will be entirely dependent on the goodwill of the man she knew for a few weeks and only to the extent Artri himself showed her.

Vien barely noted Mr Fisher talking something about Francesca, praising the slave for her service.

“I’ll be going, Nat,” Tommy announced eventually. “Someone has to work when the certain persons enjoy domestic comforts with their chosen ones.”

“Thank you, brother, for everything,” Artri said.

“See you later, lovebirds, at the ceremony.”

“Goodnight, Mr Fisher,” Vien answered mechanically.

Tommy left but her newly awakened doubts remained. Vien touched one of the items made of platinum and some exotic stones she couldn’t name and then another, more colourful in the ancient Egyptian style.

“You seem tired,” Artri said. “Just pick one and you can go to bed. We can settle the rest tomorrow. In the meantime I’ll take care of adjusting the thing to your neck if necessary. So?”

The scientist looked at Vien expectantly.

“Were they… were they prepared for her, your former love interest I mean?” Vivianne voiced the question she wanted to ask since the beginning.

Artri nodded. “Some, yes, but it doesn’t mean she wore them all during her career as my partner. Vai never liked to show herself before the wider audience. She was a shy person unlike you.
Sometimes I think you have all her advantages but none of the flaws. You will be perfect for me, I know.”

Artri covered her fingers with his.

“Oh, but your hand is shaking,” he noted. “What’s wrong, sweetie? Please tell me.”

She took her hand back.

“Nothing, I’m just tired, as you were gracious enough to notice. I think the silver one with aquamarines will be good for the occasion.”

It was too late to back off. Artri cannot postpone another meeting, it would make him the laughingstock of the society. Besides Vien had Leandra and her son now, so she won’t be alone. And there was Jon too and his close colleagues. If Artri was the poor catch, Frances wouldn’t be jealous of her. The fact something went wrong with Artri’s former lover doesn’t mean the story will repeat itself. Everything will be fine.

“An excellent choice, my lady. Will you let me check how it looks?”

Vien didn’t protest.

She winced when the cold metal edge touched her skin for a moment and then it was there. The collar with its satin padding sat quite comfortably on Vivianne’s neck.

“Perfect! It fits with no adjustments!” Artri exclaimed.

“It went so quick we have a time to choose the rest of the outfit too.”

He sounded so well pleased but Vien had to extinguish his enthusiasm.

“I’m sorry but I really feel exhausted. May I already go to sleep?”

Artri kissed her temple. “Sure, darling. We have the whole future to spend together. I sometimes forget about that.”

“Thank you Nathoo, and good night!” Vien rushed to the door not waiting for the answer. She didn’t know why she’s in such a hurry. Artri followed her with his gaze and Vivianne felt relieved when she was out of his reach.

Chapter End Notes

It's probably the last chapter in this year so let the next one bring you what you wish for the most.
Conversations at night

Vivianne almost sprinted to the door as if she expected Artri won’t let her leave. The scientist could not tell what went wrong but this rapid change of mood puzzled him greatly. The girl was so keen to be with him since her early days in the Cycads Valley. Is it possible the Argossynian wants to withdraw her consent in the last moment? What Artri will do, if it is a case?

A nonsense. Women don’t say no to Artri Nathoo Kennert when he is interested. Vien must feel overwhelmed by the challenges her position ensues. All she needs is a lot of patience and steady but gentle guidance.

But what if Artri unknowingly made a grave mistake? And if so, what could it be? Or did someone seek to dissuade Vien from her decision? Whoever dared to interfere will soon regret the lack of caution and there was one person most interested in the failure of this relationship. It won’t hurt to investigate.

Artri rarely visited the slaves’ dwellings usually summoning the girls to his apartments. Now the physicist was too impatient to wait.

“Francesca? May I come in?”

“I cannot deny you the entrance, master.”

The young woman stepped aside to let him enter. Since Cangian’s arrival the brunette lived alone in the set of rooms, she once occupied with Lea. Leandra moved to the different part of the residence which could better serve her and Canny. Vien won’t join Frances here. After the ceremony and leaving the guest suite, she will take the residence with Art. Paradoxically, the lack of separate rooms will be the strongest confirmation of her superior position.

Negligee Frances wore was almost translucent. Apparently she decided to not dress after Tommy left.

“Fisher praised you most ardently. I love when my employees take a proper care of their duties,” Artri said taking the seat. The woman remained standing. In different times she would try flirting, asking to be taken on his lap. Nothing was left of her former playfulness.

“Thank you, sir. It was a pleasure.”

“I’m glad Tommy took care of your satisfaction but I’m certain you’ve earned much more than that. You may choose the reward you want?”

“Every possible reward?” the slave asked.

“If only it is in my might to give you.”

“Even this?” She leaned over Art to place the hand on the man’s neck aiming for the fastening of his tunic. Before Artri’s body had a chance to respond he stopped her deft fingers.

“No.”

Francesca dutifully took one step backward. “I get it. You only meant things. Do you think me that materialistic, my lord?”
There was real hurt in Fran’s tone when she slouched he arms as if she was beaten or was afraid to be punched.

“No, I don’t,” Art replied.

“Then you are saving yourself for her!” She cried. The girl had to be desperate if she forgot herself so much she shouted at her master.

Francesca covered her mouth with a hand to stifle the sobs that threatened to escape.

Faked or genuine the demonstration of grief Artri wasn’t in the mood to be cruel and lying to her would be just that.

“Frances, my girl,” he said cradling her in a friendly embrace, “No one can criticise you for wanting more but you know I promised nothing like that, neither to you nor Leandra. It’s all in your contracts. We’ve made a certain deal, and you both agreed.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” Frances snorted. “But she’s not fit to be your main. You’ll see she will disappoint you. Argossynians serve only themselves and their damned ideals.”

“What do you know about their ideals?” Artri inquired. “Were you discussing them lately? What has she told you?”

“No, no, we didn’t. She hardly speaks to me, the Argossynian clearly prefers Leandra. It’s just what Mr Fisher told me about Sara and his constant problems with her.”

“This is not the thing you have to trouble yourself with, Francesca,” Artri interrupted the slave’s musings. “I don’t want to hear anything like that.”

“Yes, master.” She didn’t dare to contradict the direct order.

No, it couldn’t be Frances. She was too intelligent to risk severe punishment.

“The matter of a gratification for your service still stands,” Artri said. “I’ll ask about your choice later.”

There was no point in staying here any longer.

When the physicist returned to his place his communicator rang. Artri’s father was the last person he wanted to talk to, but the bastard used to be insistent so Art accepted the call.

“What is it, Varian?”

“I’ve heard about the fete you organise in a few days and I am not invited yet.”

“You know I have no intention to invite you,” Artri said calmly.

“Artie, you don’t need to hide your new sweetheart from me. I’m not against her.”

“Thank you, father, but I don’t need your blessing or validating my choice of a partner.”

“You don’t, but people will talk when I’ll be absent in such an important day. You should agree even if only this once, to show our family united.”
Unfortunately, the old man was right.

“Okay, I’ll think about it, expect my answer tomorrow morning,” Artri spat and ended the conversation.
All drowsiness left Vivianne when her head touched the pillow. The girl could not stop thinking what the hell she had done? How dare she run like a frightened rabbit after days of trying to lure the man? And how Artri may judge such a behaviour?

An hour passed, then another. With no chance to catch some sleep Vien reached for the communicator and sent the short text to her host. The reply arrived quickly.

“Not sleeping too. Do you wish me to come?”

Vien didn’t hesitate with the answer.

Artri Kennert wore the same clothes as before and looked impeccable despite the midnight hour.

“Not feeling well?” he inquired.

“In a way. I’m sorry for the escape, it was childish.”

“No, not at all! I never realised how foreign and scary my requests and expectations may seem to you. Maybe we should not rush things.”

She should appreciate his caution but it didn’t sound right. Why was he so eager to postpone the sealing of their union? Did he find out Vien is not prepared for the position she aspires to take?

“No, please. It was only a temporary lapse of reason. I don’t want to disappoint you even before we started. Will you forgive me?”

“Forgive you, but what?”

“Not trusting you enough after all the care I received?”

Artri shook his head. “Darling, there’s no need to be sorry. I’ve done it all to satisfy myself. You have blessed me with your presence and it’s me who should apologise for causing you discomfort.”

Vien shrugged. “It’s better to be uncomfortable sometimes than tortured or dead.”

“Hopefully you will never have to choose between either,” Kennert said.

“Why don’t you sit?” Vien asked. “It’s my last chance to play the hostess to anyone so let me use the occasion. If we are both not sleepy maybe let’s discuss the rest of the details of my introduction?”

“It’s a good idea. With the business done we can use the next day only for relaxing and some final touches. The party planners will take care of everything else. But let me clear one thing. Since the day after tomorrow you won’t cease to be the hostess. On the contrary, my pretty Argossynian girl will become the sole mistress of all my properties, second in importance only to myself.”

“How come? I’m the youngest and newest here.”

“It’s a matter of my will to choose whoever I want to grant them privileges I see fit.”

“But Francesca will be livid,” Vien voiced her objection.
“Don’t mind her, Ivvi. Francesca is the ambitious woman, but she’s also intelligent enough to
embrace the fact I will never elevate her to the highest position. The contract she signed described
the terms of her service to small details. I’m breaking no promises. She may accept inevitable or
ask me to sell her to someone else. There are many people who will be elated to have Frances as
their personal slave. If such is her wish, I won’t stand in her way to happiness.”

Vien sighed. “Oh, okay, but still it sounds cruel.”

Artri took her hands in his.

“If Francesca was in your position, she would use its advantages against her rivals without the
hesitation. We are not in the Argossynian system. Female solidarity is a thing unknown to most of
our women. You better remember that. Besides, I sometimes wish you would be more jealous of
me,” he added half jokingly.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t intend to sound ungrateful,” was all Vien could say.

“I love to see you contrite. Don’t worry, it’s my job to make the whole arrangement work
smoothly. Just be yourself, I adore you like that.”

The delicate kiss followed Artri’s words.

“Now let’s go and choose our prospective outfits, shall we?” he offered taking Vien by the hand.

It was near dawn when they finished with everything and Vien started to yawn. She was hungry
already but needed rest even more. To her great surprise Artri wanted to sleep with Vien in the
guest bedroom. He said it will be just sleeping, brother and sister mode, regarding the questionable
state of her fertility. Vien agreed enthusiastically. It was so sweet of him and she nearly cried with
the anticipation of many more nights together.

“Can’t believe he stayed the night with that stray,” Frances whispered. Greg was her ally but the
others might eavesdrop and the guard couldn’t silence them all. Greg Sawter’s loyalty had its limits
and he would never defend her before the master if Francesca was in a serious trouble.
Unfortunately Vivianne gained some support among the crew too, thanks to Jon Carroll’s instant
efforts; pathetic fool was secretly in love with the Argossynian imposter. Many times Frances
thought about the possibility to use the man’s infatuation against its object but nothing came out of
this. Carroll was far too honourable a man to endanger his beloved by doing anything inappropriate
or disrespectful.

Greg looked at her ironically.
“And what did you expect, girl? It was obvious from the day one he will have her at his feet like
many others. Strange thing it lasted that long, not that it happened.”

Francesca scrunched her nose in disgust. “Isn’t it rather opposite?”

“Don’t be silly, honey. The boss is not that kind of person. He has to keep everything under his
strict control and she’s not the exception. Better be grateful to have as your superior such a naïve,
idealistic child. Pretty young thing is not a threat to anyone. Maybe only for herself. I can’t wait to
see their first clash and its outcome.”

Francesca smiled weakly. “If you say so, Mr Sawter.”

Greg patted her on the shoulder.
“I know what I mean, darling. Just wait and you will see.”

Frances hoped Greg was right. To witness the fall of her annoying rival was one of her dearest dreams, but on a day like this it seemed impossible to fulfil, regardless of what the guard was saying.
Beside Wotan Retlidge Vien had no other bed partners, and he never stayed for the night. Therefore, it was unfamiliar to wake up with the man in her bed, but with such a ravishing individual as Artri Kennert Vien could get used to his presence in no time.

“Good morning to my beautiful Argossynian hostage,” Artri said. “My father requested to invite him for tomorrow. I was waiting for your awakening to ask if you have nothing against his presence during the celebration.”

“It is for you to decide, my lord,” Vien replayed with a hint of reserve.

Artri gifted her with the radiant smile. “I’m not your lord yet but okay. It sounds so sweet coming from your mouth.”

He moved closer to leave the chaste kiss on her lips.

“Now excuse me, darling, but I promised to contact Varian in the morning and it’s almost noon.”

Before leaving the room Artri turned out to her once more.

“I’m going to let Vari come earlier, maybe even tonight if he’s ready, okay? That way you will have a little more time to acquaint yourself with him before the party.”

“I’ll be content with however you arrange it, I trust you to choose the best,” Vien assured him.

The scientist nodded appreciatively. When he left Vien stretched out her body in the sheets filled with delicious anticipation. Only two days and Artri Kennert, the most desirable man on Galdanede will be hers to enjoy in far more ways than before.

Varian Kennert appeared in the Cycads Valley shortly after dinner. Lea took Canny for the afternoon nap when the guard, the muscular one named Greg Sawter, brought him over to the place where they were sitting.

Varian looked nothing like his famous child. He wasn’t unattractive with his expressive dark brown eyes, shoulder length hair of a similar colour and regular manly features but whatever charms he had they paled in comparison with his son’s breathtaking Elven beauty.

“Nice to meet you, Mr Kennert.” Vien only inclined her head just like Artri instructed her before.

Varian Kennert behaved differently to what Vien imagined judging from Artri’s descriptions of his father. His voice when he answered was soft and pleasant.

“The pleasure is all mine. I can’t do otherwise but to appreciate my son’s impeccable tastes. You must be an exceptional woman to earn his acceptance. My poor boy is so difficult to please. I hope you will make him happy.”

“Don’t try to scare my baby. I think I have intimidated her enough with my expectations. She’s unlike local girls and has yet to acclimatise herself fully in our world.”

“But I am an easy learner and a keen one,” Vien declared, “and Nathoo, Mr Kennert I mean, is the
finest host one could get.”

“Oh, you are a lucky girl for certain and I don’t say this because Artri is my son.”

Varian smiled at her from under his brown fringe. Vien couldn’t tell why Artri sported such a strong animosity towards his parent. Vari made the dreadful mistake once, but it was possible he regretted his former decisions. At least it won’t hurt to tolerate him during the short time the man will remain with them.

Then Artri summoned Frances to show Varian to his lodge. Soon after the physicist excused himself too so Vien was left alone. She had nothing important to do. To reduce the stress Vien may feel, Artri decided to reduce the ceremony proper to the barest minimum. She won’t take much of an active participation in it beside accepting his collar and looking pretty.

After the late rise the day seemed to reach its end very quickly. Vien was reading, running a little in the park and then she ate the supper with Lea and Cangian. Francesca didn’t show up but Vari came to accompany them. Canny was a bit reserved with the newcomer in the beginning but after Leandra told him Vari is his favourite uncle’s dad the boy warmed up to him. Soon they were good colleagues.

“Vien, you should go to sleep early tonight,” Lea said. “To look well rested tomorrow on your great day.”

“She’s right,” Varian backed up the slave’s suggestion. “In case he will ask I’ll tell my son you retired to bed already.”

Vien gladly accepted their advice. Long, warm bath and then sweet dreams was such a wonderful idea. She wished her companions good night.

Entering the guest apartments for one last night Vien realised she’s not alone in her rooms. There was a muted light coming through the doors to the bathroom. Moments after Artri emerged from behind them.

“I thought you deserve to find out what you agreed to take before we will make the final decision,” he announced coming closer. “May I show you?”

Because Vien didn’t know how to respond she remained speechless for some time trying to find the words.

“If you don’t want me just now, I’ll understand. In such a case let me assist you with the bath or you can throw me away. So what is your ultimate wish, my lady?”

Artri stopped talking, waiting for her verdict.

To get rid of him? After she waited for so long? No way. Screw everything. The implant should work till now and if not Mr Salter had safe remedies for that.

“Please, stay,” she whispered at last, hypnotised by the view.
“Are you afraid?” Artri asked. “Because I can see you are shaking. If you feel uncomfortable, we can wait until you will be ready. There is no need to push things beyond your limits. We have all the time we need.”

What did he say? How could she fear the man who gifted her with so many good things? Vien always felt safe in his presence. The sole thought about knowing him intimately turned Vien into an incoherent mess.

“No, I want… I want you now.”

Her confession earned Vien the wide smile from the black-maned. He wrapped his arm around her waist.

“Okay, so let me take you to the water to start acquaint ourselves one with another. I have prepared the scented bath for us to relax.”

“No, please,” Vien groaned. She could not stop trembling. “I need the bed now. We can take a bath but later.”

Seeing such a zeal Artri beamed. “So needy, are we? But that much? I had no idea,” he teased.

It all happened as in a haze. First hungry kisses, then carrying her to the bedroom, then more hungry kisses and Vien undressing Artri first. If he expected her to be a shy girl, she had to surprise him.

If Vien ever wondered if the man hides anything unwelcome from her eyes she could stop to worry. The rest of his body proved to be as perfect as those parts she already saw. He was moderately built with muscles obviously well trained but far from overdeveloped. Artri was looking at her with pure amusement letting Vien explore the new places however she wanted. Vien would gladly take her time if not the urgent need signalling itself by the pricking sensation between the legs and a fluttering feeling in her underbelly. Accumulated through the weeks of anxious waiting and uncertainty the tension had to be dealt with and quickly.

Vien divested herself of her clothes with the little help from Artri. Luckily at this moment his body was ready too because she couldn’t wait any longer.

Artri didn’t protest neither when Vivianne mounted him, nor when she frantically chased her pleasure. Through the blurred vision she saw him watching her with an indulgent smile but soon she closed her eyes as the blessed climax came over her.

Exhausted and covered with sweat she collapsed on her lover’s gorgeous body only to register he was still hard.
“I’m sorry,” she moaned ready to finish him off; luckily during the short time they were together Retlidge taught her how.

“It’s okay,” Artri said. He laid Vien down on the pillows. In this position the man delved among her folds anew. He needed only a few additional movements to find his own completion.

“My, my,” he snorted still inside her, “can’t remember to be ravaged by a hungry wild woman before! I am mightily impressed, my darling.”

Regaining slowly the lost presence of mind Vien realised what she had done. It was their first time together and such an occasion ought to be special and celebrated and she turned an act into the mad rut, not making love but a wild coupling worthy of an animal. Why Artri even let her? She should wait for him to take the lead. What if Artri didn’t like his women capable of such a brash behaviour?

The scientist noticed her distress.

“What’s wrong, baby?” he asked. “Are you hurting?”

Vien had tears in her eyes. “No. I’m only sorry for disappointing you with my performance. I don’t know what has gotten into me to disrespect your person and your needs.”

“Hey, hey, with that ravaging I was only joking. I am satisfied, you can’t imagine how much, you were fantastic, kid,” Artri assured her.

“I am sure she wasn’t like me!”

Artri’s face became serious.

“If you mean Vai then yes, she was not. In fact Vaicia liked that aspect of our relationship least of all. I’m glad you both differ in this regard, so better stop sulking and lets go to wash ourselves. Thanks to your efficiency in lovemaking I suspect the water must be still warm.”

Vien did not want to argue and let herself be led to the bathroom. Despite Artri’s efforts to lighten the mood she could not get rid of a bad taste in her mouth. She accepted all the signs of affection but even if it was pleasant to be adored, Vien could not reawaken her desire for him or at least not so fast.

“You will not stay for the night?” Vien asked when Artri reached for his abandoned clothes.

“I’m sorry but I have scheduled the last briefing with the security staff for today. The guests will start arriving since early afternoon and I want to have time to welcome and introduce them to you. We will be together every night after this one, I promise.”

Vien sat on the bed alarmed.

“I wish to believe it is not because of my terrible blunder,” she sighed.

“Please, not this silliness again,” Artri chided her. “I admire my horny Argossynian girl. You cannot imagine how refreshing it was. Our women are trained to satisfy their lovers but it makes them lose all the spontaneity sometimes. It wasn’t a blunder in any sense, I loved every second with you.”

“But…” she started but Artri shushed her.

“The end of grumble, now be a good girl and sleep. I want to return to you but can’t predict how long it would take.”
Vien did not want to annoy him more, so she only smiled but it lasted only as long as the man was present.

When the darkness and quiet surrounded Vien her doubts returned.

She recalled what Artri told her once about Francesca, how skilled in bed she was. Can she compete with such a person being so raw and inexperienced? Vien hoped Artri does not regret his decision to make her his slave.
Before the Ceremony

The furious knocking on the bedroom’s window awakened Vivianne. It was Cangian’s doing. He stood on his tiptoes and shouted. “Come to play, aunt Vien! Come to play, pleeese!”

Leandra ran to catch him. “I’m sorry,” she said breathless. “Canny, I asked you to not disturb!”

“No, it’s okay, time for me to get up. Where’s Mr Kennert?” Leandra made the funny face. “Haven’t seen him today, I assumed the master was with you.”

“Well, you’re mistaken,” Vien mumbled. Was it possible he spent the night with Frances? Artri had every right to visit his slave and Vien should not complain but it was hard not to worry.

When Vien joined Leandra and her son in the garden, the boy begged her to give him the swimming lesson. “Canny, not now,” Lea told him. “Aunt Vien has different duties to take care of for her future master. She will teach you but not today.”

“The master?” Canny asked.

“Yes. Have you forgotten what I told you? Tonight we have the ceremony of aunt Vien becoming uncle Nat’s personal slave. Later Mr Kennert will introduce you as his new ward.”

The kid looked puzzled. “The slave? Like Haiia? Does it mean he will beat her?”

“Darling, of course not. Your biological father was an evil man. Uncle Nat is not such person. I am his property and have you ever seen him hurting me?”

“No,” Cangian admitted.

“See! She will put on his collar similar to the ones I’m using sometimes but the rest won’t change.”

“I wish it was that simple,” Vivianne thought reminding herself of the contract.

She had mixed feelings about last night. Because Vien lost her appetite instead of having breakfast she sat down in her favourite spot under the tree enjoying the view of the greenery. She didn’t notice when someone else joined her.

“Why so miserable?” Artri asked putting an arm around her. “Are you nervous because of tonight’s festivities?”

“That too,” Vivianne admitted.

“Worry not, I’ll be with you all the time. And what else troubles my rescue girl?”

There was no sense to keep the secrets from her soon to be master. “You had not come back to me.”

“Oh, but I did. I watched you sleeping and didn’t want to wake you. The bed is too narrow, and you snored in its middle. Mine is much larger and we won’t have such troubles after you will move to my quarters.”
“I was afraid you went to seek the less controversial bed companion,” she blurted out.

“I suppose you mean Francesca?”

Vien nodded.

“Sweet Infinity, my baby girl is jealous!” he gasped delighted, “but she has no reason to be. I have seen Francesca in the morning for a short while. She asked for the permission to not show herself today among the guests. It must be tough for her to be looked at as a loser, so I have granted that wish.”

Vien should pity the other girl, but could not find enough compassion for her less successful rival. Her sister wouldn’t like it, but Christine doesn’t know about all the circumstances. As Artri’s partner Vien will be able to help many people in need, while Francesca cares only about herself. Besides, Artri said that even if Vivianne didn't appear on Galdanede Frances would never advance to the position of his permanent lover. Vien should not feel remorse. She will never actively harm another woman but won't act against her own interests either. Artri has chosen her and it’s up to Vien to use her privileged position to the greater good.

“Something is still wrong,” Artri said kissing her neck and then the palm of her hand. “You can't get over our first time. Am I right? If so, don't trouble yourself with it. We will have countless occasions to explore the other aspects of our physical union. It's wonderful you're such a passionate lover. My baby should only learn how to better control her wild desires. Partly it was my fault because I refused her the satisfaction for too long. I promise it won't happen again.”

It was too late to change her mind.

“I hope the learning you mentioned will be pleasant, my lord,” Vien said trying to sound optimistic. Her dreams will find their fulfilment tonight and Vien can't mar the occasion with any trace of negativity. She didn't mention Francesca anymore.
The First Guests

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry for the long wait, it was party real life interference and twitting about Kylux :)

Tommy arrived first. He wasn’t alone. The young woman accompanying him looked familiar but Vien could not tell why because she never met her.

“This is Farla,” Fisher introduced the girl. “You probably didn’t know Rennell had a sister. Well, he has one, and she had grown pretty.” Artri’s deputy sounded so smug.

“How did you find her?” Artri asked, his tone ice cold. He wasn’t looking at the girl.

“I met the little honey at Curtis’s. Her brother wants a good keeper for her. I’m not interested in a new relationship yet but promised them to introduce her to the wider audience.”

“Excuse us for a moment.”

Artri took Vien aside. “The boys had to set the whole thing together, Tommy, Bart and Curtis. I would never let Dwight bring her so they hoped I will be more lenient with my best friend. Do you want me to throw them out? I will if you feel uncomfortable in her presence.” His concern about Vien’s well-being was endearing.

Vien reached for Artri’s hand.

“It’s unnecessary. Whoever her sibling is, it’s not the girl’s fault. Besides, she can’t hurt me, so why bother?”

Artri squeezed her fingers. “I keep forgetting you are nothing like Vai,” he whispered, “my baby is much stronger and determined.”

It was nice to be praised by the man Vien loved, but he was exaggerating.

“Come on, I need no special courage to survive the woman probably younger than me and equally impotent in a man’s world. And what can she do? Kill me with words? It’s her brother and his colleagues I abhor, not she.”

“You’re probably right and I’m being overprotective,” Artri admitted. “Let’s return to meeting guests. I see Keith and his girls are here.”

Artri and Lea took time to familiarise her with most important persons invited to the party so Vivianne knew what the physicist had in mind.

Keith Merriver was the third of importance in Artri’s team after the coordinator himself and his deputy. Brown-haired and tall, the man looked slightly less striking than Artri and Tommy but still extraordinarily handsome. Merriver arrived together with his slaves, Anabelle and the other one not so long ago belonging to Tommy Fisher. Artri’s friend ditched her a few weeks before Vien appeared in the Cycads Valley. It had to be painful for Sara to be in the same place with a man who
done this and yet she came. The former Fisher’s slave was a beautiful woman and the feminine copy of him, with pure gold of her curly hair and enchanting violet irises, elegant facial features, straight shapely nose and tempting lips. She was also much taller than Vivianne.

Artri welcomed her first. “Sally, I’m so glad you are with us. Keith said you were not sure about accepting my invitation.”

“Oh, I couldn’t miss such an important occasion. It’s not every day that our beloved coordinator takes himself a new partner,” the woman replied with a smile and then turned to Vien.

“Bell and I couldn’t wait to meet you. It’s great to have another Argossynian in our close circle.”

“I’m sure we will soon become friends,” the other woman added. She had long platinum hair and sapphire eyes. Was tall and strong. Most beautiful woman Vivianne ever saw. Surpassing even Sara.

They both hugged Vien, and it seemed the most natural gesture. Their man was watching them with the knowing smirk. His behaviour should irritate her, but Vien felt nothing of the sort. She liked the whole trio even before Keith Merriver said anything.

“I’m glad to meet such a mysterious girl,” he spoke at last, “I hope you feel good here.”

“Oh, yes!” Vien agreed. “Mr Kennert meets all my needs with the utmost care.”

Vien felt Artri’s arms surrounding her from behind. “Darling, I forgot to tell you there’s no need to be formal in front of my friends. They will never betray us if you don’t use the proper forms when we are alone together.”

Blushing, both because of the endearment Artri used and his possessive hold, Vien reopened her mouth. “Nathoo is good for me and so is Lea,” she said, omitting the second slave’s name. “And I am a lucky girl to be rescued in time.”

Anabelle smirked. “Great many girls would love to be rescued by this man!”

“I am aware!” Vien said while Keith looked at his slave funnily. “Does it mean that you too, honey? Should I be jealous?” he asked.

“I’m not a girl anymore, master,” Bell replied with dignity. Vien realised only she alone of two female newcomers wears the collar with her owner’s name. Sally’s neck was bare. She decided to ask about it later.

“Speaking about discretion, I would be cautious around that one,” Sara whispered, pointing at the new companion of her former master. “And who the hell is she?”

“Nobody. Just one of many,” Artri said. “As for Tommy, I’m sure he’s loyal to me and knows how to silence any naughty wench who would dare to interfere.”

Vien didn’t like the disdain in Artri’s voice clashing with the benevolent attitude he showed so far.

“The same with May,” he added. “Curtis would flail her alive if she attempted to ruin his chances by saying anything damageable to my reputation.”

That last mention sounded even worse. Artri had to sense her discomfort because he rushed to explain.
“I didn’t mean it literally. I only wanted to tell you are safe around my coworkers and whoever accompanies them, but they are the only exception to the general rule.”

“You will soon get used to this life and its intricacies,” Anabelle said.

“I’m going to!” Vien tried to sound bold.

“Oh, but look who’s coming!” Keith’s voice interrupted their banter.

It was the woman with hair of light blond, some tresses almost white. She had big eyes of pale blue and delicately carved features, small nose and mouth. The guy holding her hand, much taller than she, was fair-haired and grey eyed. The couple looked so in love like people straight from their honeymoon. It was Nelly Rollison and her master Stanley Lee Spalding.

The newcomers’ appearing had a soothing effect on Vien. She dismissed her sudden worries. No woman she saw today looked like the abused creature. Rather opposite, they were proud and sleek, nothing like oppressed victims of the male rulers, wearing their collars or not.

Artri was like his colleagues, he won’t turn into a tyrant after confirming his ownership. She wasn’t on Riadis where women were considered broodmares or courtesans and nothing more. Galdanede was most civilised of men ruled globes. Vien can be happy here and useful for her people’s interests.

“A pity you have not brought Murray with you,” Artri noticed after the first introductions.

“He stayed with his nanny,” Nelly said. Murray was her three years old son. “He’s too little for such a great gathering. We will come with him some other time.”

“Canny may be sad. I have promised him younger colleague to play with.”

“We can send for him if you so wish,” Stanley offered.

Artri smiled at Nelly. “No, I won’t interfere with your decisions. And how Rissa fares?”
Vien held her tongue to not ask who that Rissa was. “So Artri haven’t told you about other girls he rescued before you?” Nelly inquired, seeing how taken aback she is.

Artri’s calm demeanour didn’t change a fraction. “I did,” he said, “but without naming them. You see, Ivvi, Rissa is one of the few Riadisan women we could help. It’s only because her owner, one of their diplomats, took her on a visit to Galdanede. It was Nelly who spotted her and asked me to intervene. So how is my protege?”

“She is satisfied with her position. We love Riss and she reciprocates our feelings. Murray treats her like a second mother.” There was a palpable edge to Nelly’s words. Something close to reproach even. It seemed the said Riadisan woman wasn’t just one of many.

“I’m glad she found the happy home with you,” Artri said in a casual tone. “She deserves all the best after being freed from the monster. What a pity I couldn’t retrieve her children the same way I did with Lea’s boy.”

“Now our friends will welcome the other guests in our stead while we can depart to make ourselves ready for the show,” Artri stated after the moment of silence.

“Take all the time you need, we will take care of everything else,” Keith said on behalf of the rest.

When Vien and Artri entered the house and out of the range of hearing, she spoke about the things that gnawed at her after noticing well hidden but not entirely invisible distress Sara has shown when looking at Tommy Fisher from afar. The mention about Rissa made her realise anew how fragile her victory was. Apparently there had to be something more between that girl and Artri, even if probably one-sided.

“I forgot to add one thing to the contract. It’s probably not a good time to discuss it,” she blurted before they parted for their separate wardrobes.

The physicist didn’t look surprised. “No, if you have any doubts we must take care of them before it’s not too late. What troubles my sweet love?”

“Well, I… you’ve said we can dissolve our union when we won’t like it to last, but what if it will be you who will lose the interest in my person first? What will become of me? We never talked about that!”

Artri dismissed her objections. “I know why you’re asking, but I am not like my friend. Do you think you might bore me? I can hardly imagine such a thing. But even if after a long time it may come to what now seems impossible, you will always have the safe place in my home. Don’t worry, I won’t throw you away to beg on the streets nor sell to some wealthy scum. I am loyal and generous to those who serve me well. Are you satisfied with the answer?”

“Yes. Yes, I think so,” Vien said not looking at him.

“Good. In that case I’ll send Lea here to help you with preparing yourself. We will meet after that as planned.”
Soon after Leandra left, Artri came to take his soon to be a personal slave to a dais where she finally will be presented as one. The only thing she lacked at the moment was the collar waiting for her outside.

For Vien it was a shock to see her future master in his full regalia. He looked impeccable in the lace adorned outfit. Vivianne saw him once like that but it was during the time she couldn’t care too much about visual delights. Now it was a different matter.

“What? You don’t like my make-up?” he joked.

Such a friendly smile. Such a beautiful man and yet the view unsettled Vien. The whip coiled at his belt, chosen to match the collar she will wear, seemed bigger than before. It was both intimidating and foreboding.

“Sweetie, I know what you’re thinking about, Artri said while keeping on smiling, “but I have told you already it’s nothing more than a traditional jewellery men carry when showing themselves in public, the symbol of our position. All other male guests will have them. Yes, even Keith and Stanny.”

For a moment Vien stood speechless, not sure what to do.

Artri didn’t mind her strange behaviour.

“You can resign even now. I have to know if you really want me to make you mine before the world. Carroll would be pleased if it ended that way. I know he’s ready to repeat his proposal. So, what is your ultimate decision, my pretty Argossynian hostage? Are you coming or not?” he asked extending his hand clad in a black leather.

He didn’t imply this, but Vien inwardly knew it was her last chance to accept him. If she’ll refuse now, Artri won’t ask her ever again. The man was too proud to beg for anyone’s affection, and she cannot lose him because of mystical forebodings and insubstantial fears.

“Yes, yes, of course. I’m sorry for the delay,” Vien whispered, taking the scientist’s hand.
Through the window Francesca watched her master’s important guests arriving one by one. Top scientists, artists and politicians, most of them with their collared female escorts or sometimes with bare-necked male ones. Artri Kennert allowed journalists too. No doubt he planned to announce his newest relationship in front of the wide audience.

But how that mediocre, shy thing won such an amazing man during only a few weeks, while Francesca failed with the goal after years of faithful service? What was the source of the other woman’s appeal? And what is it with Argossyne born women in general? So many influential men prefer them as personal slaves. Even in Artri’s team all other girls are of the Argossynian origin. Sara, May, Nelly and Bell, the last two taken into slavery at an early age but still not from Federation planets.

Mr Fisher told her the former free women are much overrated, often seeing themselves as better than men and too proud to submit to their owners. And yet he lived in a longtime relationship with Sara, so at least in the beginning such an arrangement had to satisfy him.

He also said many men value Argossynian females because they can relate to them on a more intellectual level not only as slaves and servants. As if they had not enough of such a companionship from their male friends and colleagues. Frances herself could barely read, but she wasn’t stupid. Everybody praised her for how intelligent and witty she is despite the lack of formal education. If Artri Kennert values the latter so much why didn’t he ordered to teach her and Lea, but kept them as his household’s body servants never caring about their intellectual development?

Thinking about this monstrous injustice made Frances both sad and angry. Vivianne isn't worthy the honours Mr Kennert wanted to pour over her person. It was Francesca who deserved them. The pair robbed her of the hard-earned rights and for this she will hate them forever.

One thing was clear. Frances can’t stay here anymore to be humiliated and marginalised. This gathering offered her perfect occasion to capture worthy replacement of her cruel, ungrateful owner. Many men shown their interest in her so hopefully at least a few would be ready to offer the wronged slave the safe shelter.

Francesca stepped back from the window to check her wardrobe in search of the best outfit. Vivianne let her choose some dresses from the fabulous collection she received from the master. Not that Frances had to be grateful for the gesture. She was entitled to possess them all!

After the quick shower Francesca combed her long, black hair and donned the shiny sapphire dress with the long lace sleeves. There was no time for more elaborate preparations. She spotted young Mr Cray together with Mr Dwight and his slave May Taner. Warren had no companion of his own. It may be the chance she needed.

“Fran, my dear!” May faked the joy of seeing her. “Sara said you won’t be attending today. So good you have changed your mind. Being honest we all would prefer you on that stage! Isn’t it so, my lords?”

It sounded as if the impertinent former Argossynian (another one!) was mocking her, but Frances didn’t mind. These people can’t see how upset and disgruntled she is.

“I wasn’t feeling well and the master let me stay in my rooms, but I’m better now,” Francesca said reciprocating the older woman’s embrace. She curtsied before the physicists.
May’s owner, the red-haired Curtis “Kertie” Dwight nodded a fraction. He was blindingly handsome with long copper tresses and noble features, reminding with the latter Mr Kennert to some extent. Beautiful he was but cold and cruel. No wonder the formidable violentologist Bart Rennell belonged to the man’s closest circle of friends.

In contrast to his colleague Warren “Ren” Cray looked far less intimidating. With his perfect, slightly dark, complexion, shining brown eyes and wavy locks of the same colour the boy was the sight to behold. The crooked smile Reni sent her seemed quite welcoming. Francesca risked smiling back.

“I see, you haven’t brought the escort of your own, Mr Cray,” she chirped. “May I serve you as one? Because my master issued no specific orders for me so I can take care of his favourite co-worker.” Her words might sound flattering, but it was true; Mr Kennert liked Reni and treated him almost like the adopted son.

“Oh, really?” Warren said, “the last time we met you didn’t want to have anything in common with me. What has changed?”

“I’m sorry if you felt like that, but I was too tired with the service we and Lea provided. Tonight it’s different.”

“Come on, Reni, you can’t ignore such a pretty thing. It won’t hurt to grant her wishes if she wants to please you,” surprisingly Mr Dwight spoke in her favour.

Hearing this, May winced; everybody knew she was jealous of her master. Before Reni had a chance to respond they had to stop their conversation because in that moment Tommy Fisher acting in Mr Kennert’s stead announced the most important part of the evening.

“My dear guests,” he began in a solemn tone, “it’s a time for the main point of this here gathering. My friend asked me to invite you in the stage’s vicinity where he’ll affirm his will to take into his possession the girl whom he found worthy to be his intimate partner and a life companion. Let’s welcome our host and his chosen one!”

Maybe it wasn’t the best idea to appear among the people who will see her humiliation, Francesca thought. Many knew who she was, and it cost her to keep the impassive face in front of them even if they aimed the attention at an improvised stage. Francesca concentrated on controlling her facial expression forgot about the rest, clenching her fists. Her long sleeves covered them but one person noticed what was happening. He touched her hand with a soothing gesture. “Easy,” Reni whispered to Francesca’s ear, “you will live through this.”

Contradicting him would be pointless. Cray was far too intelligent to be deceived. Even if he was only the means to an end, Francesca revelled in a gentle touch. He had to be silent because the pair everybody waited for climbed on the dais.

Mr Kennert looked ravishing as always in his black and white attire that suited him the most, with the massive silver neurowhip coiled at his side he exuded power and authority.

Since Francesca saw her, Vivianne usually wore the hair gathered into a loose braid. Now it was hanging down, long and arranged in small waves. It’s warm, strawberry blond colour in stark contrast with the pitch black mane of her prospective owner. Vivianne’s blue dress was a simple model with long sleeves and V-neckline, but its fabric, the spidery handmade lace woven in the shapes of stars and nebulas made it outstanding. Maybe the girl was no trans-galactic beauty, but even Frances had to admit she looked nice and fresh like this.
The official from the detention centre waited for them and now Artri took the tablet from him to pay for the girl. In that moment she already belonged to him, but it wasn’t over yet.

The scientist took the collar from the table.

“This fantastic, courageous young woman agreed to entwine her fate with mine,” he said looking at Vivianne with fondness, “and now she will receive the token of my affection. I’m happy you can all bear the witness to that special moment.”

After that Artri put the collar on his new quarry and clipped it behind the nape of her long neck. Now she should kneel before her new master to kiss his gloved hands. Nothing of the sort happened. Instead of receiving the homage she owed him, Artri took his slave’s head in both palms and kissed the blushing woman on the mouth. People applauded him. Public displays of affection toward one’s property didn’t belong to the acceptable behaviour, but Artri Kennert could afford to ignore what the others thought problematic, and won. Of course he was always winning.

“Now we are ready to receive your congratulations,” the physicist announced, smiling and gathering close the lucky imposter.
The Garden Party

Chapter Notes

After so much pain the next chapter was birthed.

Vivianne wasn’t sure it’s not a dream. She was standing at Artri Kennert’s side, dressed in luxurious clothes and meeting his guests. Their guests.

There were so many people. Vien soon lost the count of individuals paying their respects to her newly minted master. All men carried neurowips, and their female escorts rarely spoke a thing. There were exceptions to this rule, but only a few. The thought came to her unwanted, in what exactly she got herself into? It was easy to forget about a grim reality of the XY Zone, but it existed out there. She wondered how many men attending the fete may have under their belts sinister, terrible things. Federation law enabled them to do anything with their property, killing them included without justifying their actions before anyone.

And what if her magnanimous host transforms himself into the tyrant of the owner? It was too late to think about it but Vaicia hated him for a reason. The hot desire blinded Vien, clouding her judgement and making her oblivious to the consequences. She dared to look at the charming creature at her side, holding Vien’s hand. Seeing her gaze, Artri smiled his warm, comforting smile, and she suddenly felt ashamed because of her suspicions.

The next pair approached them now. The petite woman with rich, honey-coloured, wavy hair and piercing dark eyes was beautiful but also self-confident. Her person demanded respect despite not so insignificantly sized collar surrounding her shapely neck. The man wasn’t half that striking. Muscular and bear-like in appearance, he didn’t look like the leading scientist. And yet the guest standing before Vien was just that, Artri’s former researching coordinator and mentor. Vien knew their names. Brinsley and Kareema Schwartz. She didn’t check their dates of birth, but the couple could be about a hundred years old or more. On most Federation’s planets, higher classes used the advanced medicine to stop ageing process at the chosen phase. The look alone could be misleading.

The woman spoke first.
“Artri, we are so happy you have found someone to your liking at last. We’ve almost lost hope it will ever happen!”

“It was worthy to wait,” Artri said.

“I admire your skills, girl,” Brinsley joined the conversation. “Artri told us you needed only a few days to wrap him around your finger.”

“Days?!” Vivianne exclaimed, forgetting herself. Was it possible Artri was talking about her with the others while officially claiming he does not intend to keep her?

“I meant weeks, obviously,” Schwartz corrected himself quickly. “You can’t blame me, my dear, for mixing up the words in the presence of such an exceptional young woman. Now I know why the others had no chance.”
“Brin, may I ask you to not flirt with my new slave?” The way the physicist spelled the words *new slave* sent shivers down Vien’s spine. She wanted to leave the crowd and hide with him in their apartments to engage in the intimate activities to explore that gorgeous body. Unfortunately, this relationship meant not only pleasant things but many boring social duties.

“You are too kind to me, Mr Swartz. It was the pure luck Nathoo found me.”

Vien noticed her mistake, but it was too late. She belonged to Artri for not more than an hour and already breached the protocol.

Neither the former coordinator nor his companion looked shocked by Vien’s too familiar way of addressing her master.

“Oh, Artie must be really deeply infatuated with you, child, letting you use his precious second name,” Kareema said.

“I… actually…” Vien didn’t want how to respond.

“It’s okay, darling,” Artri interfered. He kissed her temple and continued. “It’s me who was lucky to gain the acceptance of my Argossynian hostage. And I hope you will love her as much as I do.”

“I bet that won’t be hard!” Brinsley admitted. “Artri invited us to stay the night so will have more time tomorrow to acquaint ourselves in more comfortable circumstances.”

“It will be my pleasure,” Vien said, relieved.

Kareema and Brinsley hugged them both and stepped aside to make the room for the next guests.

“Perhaps you want to eat or drink something?” Artri asked. “I hope you have nothing against staying with Keith and his girls for a little while? It’s getting late and I have to introduce Cangian now so the boy could go to sleep.”

“No, problem, master!” Vien felt her ears getting hot after using the last word.

“Okay then!” Artri didn’t comment on her reaction. He led her to the place his friends were sitting.

“Can you take care of my baby when I’m needed elsewhere?”

“With the utmost pleasure!” Keith was the first to respond.

“Yea, please sit with us,” Anabelle said, extending the hand in Vivianne’s direction. “You may go, coordinator. We won’t let anyone hurt your darling.”

It didn’t escape Vien’s attention Artri’s team was divided in two parts. The one she joined comprised Keith and Stanley with their women. To the second one belonged Tommy Fisher with his current companion, Curtis Dwight with May and Reni Cray, the latter flirting with very animated Francesca. Vien didn’t notice her presence before. She wasn’t with Reni when he was paying his respects to them both. Interesting. Frances had to change her mind in the last moment. She looked cute in one of the dresses Vien gave her. Vien was partly relieved to see the other woman enjoying herself. She felt less guilty that way.

The last guests who were not staying the night, left way after midnight. At that hour, Vien wanted only to sleep. She wondered if Artri let her.
The Night Time

It was a strange feeling coming not to her bedroom she got used to through the last weeks, but to Artri’s own apartments. Already inside she stood like a dazed, uncertain what to do.

Artri noticed her hesitation. “What is it, darling? You were not so shy before.”

Was he waiting for her initiative like during their first time? The problem was not that she didn’t want to start. Worse, Vien temporarily lost all interest in any intimate activities. Desire she felt not so long ago left her without trace. She wasn’t ready and doubted it could change soon. “I’m sorry,” Vien whispered, touching her ceremonial collar.

“No need to be sorry,” Artri said. “You’ve made a very good impression tonight. Many men will praise your lovely manners and sweet disposition, and envy me for having such a treasure, combining the best attributes of our home-grown and Argossynian women.”

Vien stayed silent, desperately searching for words, not wanting to admit she feels embarrassed and uncomfortable.

Artri sighed. “For a girl like you the whole event had to be an overwhelming experience. I bet you are exhausted and dream only of sleep. Am I right?”

There was no reproach in his words, just stating the obvious. Apparently he was the same man as before. Carrying the neurowhip and signing the certain deal haven’t change his approach to her person.

“I’ll take it off, okay?” Artri gestured toward her neck. Vien nodded quickly.

“For now, you don’t need to wear another,” he said, putting the silver collar into the drawer. “The only people who stayed are my close friends and Brin and his lady were like the second parents to me. They won’t mind the etiquette. I’m aware you need more time to adjust to all requirements of your position and I am ready to give it to you.”

Hearing his gentle words, Vien felt a new wave of shame. How could she suspect him of being evil when all the man cared for was her comfort and peace of mind? “I thank you, my lord,” she said blushing.

Her attempt at behaving like the local girl would, earned Vien the smile from her beloved.

Artri took her chin in his still gloved hand and made her look at him. “They raised you to be an independent, self-aware creature, but seeing you like that I know you have a strong urge to please your man. You will be the perfect partner for me, don’t worry. The full acceptance of your new status will come to you naturally. Don’t try to rush things too much. One step at a time will be enough.”

His lips touched hers briefly.

It was wonderful, but also terrifying. Artri seemed to read her mind with unnatural ease. Yes, Vien wanted to please him, to prove that she deserved the position for which so many girls envied her now. Maybe at least she should try to overcome the current obstacle?

Before Vien could decide, the physicist stepped back.
“Take the shower and go to bed,” he ordered. “Brin rarely has the time to visit me so I promised to meet him for a longer conversation after you will fall asleep. Our bed is big enough for me to not disturb your hard earned rest with my late return. Sweet dreams in a new place, kid.”

When Artri was gone Vien followed his advice. She was relieved but not satisfied with herself. It would be better to ask him to stay. For his trouble with her, Artri deserved more than Vien’s indifference. If she didn’t want sex, there were other ways to show how much one cares.

It was hard to comprehend what really happened. Artri was her best friend and companion, and somehow the ceremony spoiled that easy understanding they had. His conciliatory manner didn’t dispel her doubts. Artri may be patient, but the patience of such a man has its limits and the last thing Vien wanted was to disappoint him.

Artri didn’t want to leave Vien alone, but giving his newly acquired slave some space seemed like the best idea. The way she responded to the change in her status worried him more than Artri was ready to admit. The unease radiated from her as if she already regretted her choice, even if it was the girl who first pushed for their union. Maybe negotiating the contract wasn’t the wisest move, and the better option was to keep her unaware and dose the culture shock slowly one step at a time. Too late to think about it. Artri could only hope it’s temporary, and the strong infatuation with him prevails in the end.

Brin waited for Art in the guest house. Kareema was sleeping or diplomatically pretended to sleep. Whatever she had chosen, they have a time to talk in private.

The man stood up from his seat to welcome the former co-worker.

“Hi, I’ve made the tea when you told me you’re coming. Didn’t expect you so soon.”

“Thank you. I’m surprised too, but the baby felt exhausted after the evening, so I let her rest. She’s not used to such grand receptions yet.”

“Really? That Vivianne of yours seems to me a natural crowd pleaser. Even Kari was in awe, and she is not easy to be impressed. By the way, I’m sorry for being close to compromise you before the girl. It never was my intention.”

Artri smiled. “I know. Luckily, she swallowed your explanation without questioning more. Lucky me, despite all the vibrant intelligence, she’s still quite naïve.”

“While you are good at setting traps using that naivety?”

“Oh, no! And you too call me manipulative?” Artri exclaimed theatrically.

“You don’t need to pretend before me that you aren’t. But it’s not my business what you’re doing with your property.”

That night they weren’t talking about women anymore.
“Nathoo, I’m sorry. You should wake me!” Vien groaned after realising she does not remember him getting up or joining her in the sheets.

“There was no need to disturb your sleep after the trying day. Stay in bed as long as you wish and come to us later. I’ll be having breakfast with the guests on a verandah.”

“No, wait, I will be ready in a minute!” Vien kicked the duvet and jumped from the bed. She passed her amused new master diving into the wardrobe to choose some clothes for the day, but stopped dead in her tracks, reminding herself about the underwear thing. Is she supposed to resign from it already? In her contract she agreed to that, but Vien will meet people soon. Should she ask for Artri’s permission to wear it then? It was crazy. Why the man should decide about the clothes she will keep on her back?

“Darling, the minute passed. Should I go without you?” Vien heard Artri’s voice. “Or maybe you need my help?”

It was easier to tell him. “Actually, yes. I was wondering about the rules.”

“Which rules? I’ve told you… Do you mean the other rule of dressing?”

Artri’s black head appeared in her view.

“Yes, that one.”

“I’m so glad you remembered. It’s up to you to decide. You may try to see how it feels but don’t have to force yourself just now.”

“You know,” he said coming closer, “I could take you to my guests naked and stuffed with dildos in both holes and nobody would say a word. How would you like that?” The small smile appeared on his handsome face.

Artri’s words didn’t shock Vivianne. Judging by the contract’s many points it was predictable such matters may resurface.

“I’m not sure,” she said, meeting his gaze.

“That’s great you are honest with me. I love it in you. The problem is, I am not ready for this. Maybe one day, but not very soon. I have the strong urge to keep your sweet person for myself, even if it’s considered rude by Galdanedian standards. But I am a Makantaran by birth and we act far more possessive than our Galdanedian colleagues.”

“Possessive?”

“Yes, I’ll show you how much, but not now. Get dressed, please. You can use the underwear, there will be more fun in undressing you later.” That said, Artri left Vivianne to her own devices.

On the verandah she found the bunch of people enjoying their shared meal, Kareema, Brinsley,
Sara, Annabelle, Keith, Lea, Cangian and their charming host.

The place was furnished with the classic stuff, so when Vien approached the table, Artri stood up to pull the chair out for her. She took the seat, aware of many eyes watching her. Some were friendly or indifferent, but she caught two clearly judgemental gazes from Kari and Bell. Both women wore their collars, even to this informal meeting. No matter what Artri said yesterday, they probably expected her to do the same.

“Good morning everyone,” said Vien to cover up the slight unease. “I’m sorry to be late.”

“No problem, I guess,” Keith responded first. “You had the right to be tired after the night with my horny friend. I bet he allowed you no sleep at all.”

Luckily Artri warned her Galdanedians know no boundaries when discussing their sex lives, so it prepared her for that kind of inquiry. This time she even managed to not blush.

Before Vien could formulate the answer, Mr Kennert spoke in her stead.

“Don’t judge the others too fast, Merriver, because not everyone is such an insatiable beast as you.”

Then he looked at her.

“Don’t mind him, honey. As his coordinator I should probably teach him better manners than trying to embarrass the girl of eighteen and not used to our coarse jokes, but it’s not an easy task.”

“It’s okay, Mr Merriver. My people are far from being prudes so I don’t feel offended,” she declared.

Artri nodded, seemingly satisfied with her words. “Good. And now what do you want to eat, darling?”

“I may take the same Canny has,” Vien decided. “Thank you, my lord.”

The rest of breakfast passed in a less strained atmosphere. They were talking about neutral matters, and Vien soon felt more at ease until Kareema expressed the wish to have a word with her face to face.

“May I steal your precious quarry for some time?” she asked Vivianne’s owner after the meal.

Artri shrugged. “If only Vien has nothing against it I have no objections too.”

Vien was not happy with Kareema’s request, but it would be impolite to refuse the person important to her master. She knew about Kari’s special role in the beginning of Artri’s scientific career.

“What is it you wanted to tell me the others couldn’t hear?” Vien asked when they reached the bench by the pool.

The older woman laid her hand on Vien’s shoulder. “Don’t be angry at me. My intention is not to
spite you but to share my vast experience to make your staying among us happy and useful.”

“I thank you, mistress Kari, but Nathoo and Lea told me everything I need to know.”

“Oh, I seriously doubt that. Lea will never tell you about the things that might be difficult to swallow for the former free woman. She knows Artie had chosen you as her superior and she won’t take the risk of displeasing you.”

Vien couldn’t believe what she heard.

“Lea and I are good friends. I’m sure she’s honest with me,” she stressed, “as much as Francesca, albeit in a different way.”

Her quick retort evoked the indulgent smile on Kareema’s face.

“My dear child, you are so naïve. Everything is a matter of a chosen strategy. What you just told me is the best proof how much you need a proper guidance. I can offer you mine for free.”

“And how do you know I want anything from you?”

Kareema sighed. “Maybe I began in a wrong way. I’m not here to criticise you or your behaviour, but to help you. Artie may give you the basic rules and directions, but will forever hide what’s most important for him. He’s too proud to confess what he really craves for in this relationship.”

“Mistress Kari!” Vivianne exclaimed, trying to silence the older woman.

“Just let me finish, okay? May I?”

It tempted Vien to get up and leave. They haven’t exchanged many words, but the whole situation became uncomfortable. She could endure the patronising attitude from Artri Kennert, but not the audacity of his former lover.

In the end the natural respect for the older person prevailed and Vien nodded reluctantly.

“When I met Artie for the first time he wasn’t much older than you now. Soon he became like the second son to me, therefore I know him better than many. Don’t be fooled by his authoritarian bearing. Inside, he’s far more vulnerable than you think. Despite all the wealth and popularity, he hasn’t been lucky in love so far. My boy is very picky with his women, but after finding the partner exactly to his liking he will be loyal and devoted to a fault. From the way he dances around you, I know he’s fallen deeply. You are probably the only person who could really hurt him by refusing to reciprocate his feelings. All I can do is to beg you to not be like that cursed woman who broke his heart so carelessly and left him devastated.”

Vien couldn’t sit still in her place. “As far as I know it was she who died in the end!”

“Did Artie tell you he’s guilty of her passing? It would be so typical of him to take all the blame. It was Vaicia’s own foolishness that killed her, the silly girl unable to recognise how greatly Artie honoured her unworthy person.”

It all sounded ridiculous, and this time Vien had enough.

“Excuse me, mistress Kari, but on Argossyne we never speak ill about the deceased people.
Besides, I’m perfectly aware how much I owe my master for rescuing me. My sister has raised me well enough to know how to be grateful and how to show my gratitude. I intend to make Nathoo happy, but not because you say so. You may save yourself the trouble. Can we return to the rest now?”

“My, my, how fierce creature you are!” Vien’s hasty words didn’t move Kareema. “I guess it’s what Artie likes in you. If you don’t want to listen, I won’t force you. I hope one day you’ll recognise me as your true friend, not the enemy.”

For Vien, the other woman’s calm demeanour was just as infuriating as her unwanted advice. Kareema had no right to interfere and much less to treat Vien like a spoiled brat.

She breathed a sigh of relief when they could go their separate ways.
The Invitation

The way Vien looked, with her face scrunched in anger and disgust, made Artri alarmed. Is it possible the old woman told her too much? He trusted Kareema, but she could be unpredictable sometimes. Maybe letting her be with the girl alone wasn’t the best idea. Artri had to know.

“What’s wrong, darling,” he asked. “Is it because of Kari? Was she unpleasant to you?”

“What? No. She just... I didn’t like the way she talked about Vai.” And then Vien reported him everything she heard. It was a great relief. Artri only shrugged. “Ah, this. Kari sometimes treats me as if I was fifteen. She can be such a mother hen. Do not mind her, I’m afraid she’ll never change.”

After they returned to the rest, Kareema behaved as if nothing happened. Sally and Keith entertained them with their jokes, and Canny recited the rhymes his mother taught him, earning sincere applause from the adults. When Artri suggested the short excursion to Kemaris volcano, everyone agreed.

The guests departed after the late dinner, and Lea took the yawning Cangian for a bath. It was the moment Artri waited for the whole day.

“Now go prepare yourself,” he said to Vien. “Wash off all the makeup and fragrances. I want you as natural as you were born.”

“You won’t accompany me?” she asked.

“No, I have a few contacts to make before going to bed. After that, I’ll be waiting for you in the living room. You don’t have to hurry. Take all the time you need.”

Vien joined Art after her ablutions. The girl looked gorgeous in the evening gown she had chosen, but he couldn’t let her stay in it for much longer.

“Undress. I want to see exactly what I’ve bought and if it was worthy my money,” Artri said with the smirk, making himself comfortable in the armchair.

He noted with delight how her pupils widened after the order. “Here, now?” she gasped, reddening.

“Am I not obvious enough? Here, where else?” Art said as if explaining his intentions was beneath him. “Next time I will do this myself but now I want you to show me.”

Vien did what she was told without the fuss and without the finesse either. It was simple and efficient action devoid of coquetry. She was more flirtatious when fighting for his favours, but Art was okay with it. He can teach her everything she needs to know to please her owner. They have time aplenty.

Vien folded neatly her clothes and stood up waiting for his next move. Artri congratulated himself for taking the additional dose of inhibitors. They’ll help him stay in control as long as he wants.

“Now spread your legs and put your hands behind the head,” came out another command Vien fulfilled in silence.

Artri smiled. “Very good,” he said, licking his lips. For the long while he simply admired the view. Artri saw countless naked females before. They were offered to him or offering themselves for his pleasure, ready to do anything to gain and keep his approval. This case was different, like a dream
in which the long-lost person was standing in front of him very much alive, warm and breathing, and trembling in an anticipation of what will happen.

Maybe he shouldn’t think about the other one, but it was inescapable. Vai, when given the same request, would do his bidding but in her reluctant, martyr like manner with clenched jaws and eyes shut as if it was an extreme sacrifice. Vien was willing. The girl loved this as much as he did. Realising anew she reciprocates his affection was an uplifting experience.

Her skin had golden shine after spending much time outside. Thanks to all the rich food she enjoyed as Artri’s guest, Vien regained her lost physiological body fat and soft curves replaced the sharp bones he saw in the beginning. Not that it mattered. He could admire her being regardless of the girl’s physical condition. Skinny or plump, she will be always perfect for Art.

“Do you want me to touch you?” Artri asked the wonderful apparition before him.

“Yes, my lord,” Vien whispered, casting her eyes down as if she had been taught how to behave in the slave house.

“Then come here.”
Artri’s voice alone made her weak in the knees. Vien never felt that way with any other person. Yes, she had her teenage crushes and found the brief affair with Wotan promising, but this was something entirely different.

The way the scientist’s intense gaze moved over her naked body, up and down and up again, added to Vivianne’s arousal. After the initial hesitation she stood proudly, presenting herself before the one man’s audience.

The unveiled admiration she saw in Artri’s green eyes was dazzling. From all the girls begging for his favours, Artri Kennert has chosen Vien. She partly owed this luck to his former lover but was determined to make him forget the poor creature and to be the only center of his attention.

Approaching her new master, Vien felt giddy with delightful anticipation. Her whole body was shaking, even if the air in the room was warm.

Artri patted his knee.

“Here,” he said smiling, so she obediently lowered herself into his waiting lap. The man surrounded her with the right arm when his left hand reached for something from the nearby table. Vien concentrated unreservedly on her lover only now realised what it was - the broad, soft collar with Artri’s initials pressed into the lacquered leather.

“Will you let me?” asked the physicist with even more radiant smile. With her tongue suddenly dry, she could only nod. Repeating his action from yesterday, Artri clasped the thing behind her neck.

“May I undress you, Nathoo?” she found her voice at last, acutely aware of his hands touching her goosebumps covered skin.

“Not, yet, darling. You must be a bit more patient. The pleasure delayed tastes much better.”

Was he relating to the first rushed consummation of their union? The thought alone made her ears burn from the embarrassment.

“That’s okay,” he said soothingly. “Now kiss me and don’t think about the rest. Just let me worship you like you deserve it. I’ll be your most devoted servant and slave tonight.”

Despite the words he uttered there was nothing servile in his demeanour, rather opposite. He was in full control of the situation and enjoyed it. Not waiting for her move, Artri touched her lips with his, and Vien opened her mouth, letting him in. The man tasted heavenly, like some exotic wild berries, both tart and sweet. She moaned with disappointment when the contact was severed, so Artri indulged her more.

Much too soon their mouths were separated for the second time, but before she protested Artri’s lips were on her neck below the collar, sending the wave upon wave of shivers down Vien’s spine when he kissed and licked the sensitive spot.

“You’re so tense, darling.” Artri said, stopping his ministrations for a moment. “Don’t think, let yourself relax. It’s not the exam, and I’m not a professor here. I wish to give you the pleasure better than you ever had, but you have to trust me. If you find anything uncomfortable in my doings, please let me know, but apart from that, forget about everything else. Just feel.”
His soft voice was too persuasive to rebel against the advice she was given. “I’ll try,” Vien promised solemnly, and she did.

When after the round of more innocent petting Artri’s lips closed themselves around her aroused nipple, Vien cried aloud. By some miracle the man knew exactly when she was close to lose it and relented, easing the tension for her to calm down. He changed the breast for the second one doing exactly the same, sucking delicately at first and then harder, stopping the action in the last moment before Vien could reach her climax. The Makantaran prolonged that sweet, yet merciless torture until she begged him for release. And all of it before he even touched her anywhere below the waist.

Artri smiled. “Not yet,” he said, adjusting the slave on his lap, already wet from her juices. “There’s a long evening ahead of us, princess, and a very long night.”

Vien woke up alone in her master’s huge bed, in which they ended yesterday for the next rounds of their lovemaking. The memory of everything he could do with the skilled mouth and hands made her cheeks hot anew. But it was only the prologue to more wicked things. Her imagination from the time Vien fantasized about their possible intimate encounters proved to be far too poor and completely inadequate to what took place the last night. She could only hope Artri was equally satisfied with her performance. Now all Vien’s efforts at reciprocating his favours seemed to her clumsy at best. No way she could beat Francesca at this kind of stuff.

Artri’s entrance interrupted her thoughts. “My sweet little sleeper awakened at last!” he exclaimed. “That’s good because the bath is ready. I’m sorry you’ll be taking it without me, but I had to get up early because of the urgent business.” Artri didn’t tell her what business it was. Instead of further explanations the physicist sat on the edge of the bed.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Never felt better in my life,” Vien confessed with the wide smile, and despite her little doubts she meant it.

Artri smirked. “Okay then. I’m glad you find me acceptable as a lover. Being honest, I didn’t expect you to last that long. You were so needy and responsive all the time.”

“It’s your fault, master,” she teased. “Who else kept me on the edge for so long? That one time we had before wasn’t much.”

“I’m sorry, but my goal was to be sure you really want me. If you demand a recompense for the emotional distress, I am ready to deliver. Any time.” He took her hand and kissed it with zeal.

“Maybe I’ll take that bath first!” Vien replied with little conviction.

She felt almost disappointment when Artri agreed.

“I think it’s a good idea. Besides, Canny asked about you a few times already. The kid said you’ve promised him the swimming lessons.”
“Have you chosen your field of prospective study, Squirrel?” Artri asked. She had agreed to be called by that nickname and slowly got used to it. Hearing his inquiry Vien realised she completely forgot about this point of their agreement. The physicist mistook her hesitation for something entirely different.

“Well, the contract says I expect you to continue the education, but if you really don’t want to learn, I’m okay with that too. In such a case, you will have more time for your master.”

“Oh, no, no,” cried Vien, “I don’t have to choose the subject because I knew what I wanted since long. Even before the slavers captured me, I had applied for the biology department of Vedellian University. Didn’t I mention it to you at least once?”

“So, the biology it is,” Artri concluded with something like a shadow of disappointment. Had he hoped Vien would choose him as her teacher and mentor? The thought seemed tempting, but it would be a mistake. Artri Kennert already took over most of Vien’s thoughts and feelings. Not that it made her unhappy, but to have a significant part of life independent from his person seemed like a good thing. Besides, Vien supposed she would be a mediocre physics student at best, so abandoned the idea with no regrets.

“I had quite decent grades in secondary school, but I’m not sure if it’s enough here. Are the exams very difficult?” Vien wondered.

Artri sent her an indulgent smile. “I don’t think the slave of mine needs to pass any. Everybody will be honoured to do me a favour by supervising the scientific career of my partner.”

Vien wasn’t easily convinced.

“But someone must check somehow if I am fit for being the student, especially if I am to receive the official grade in the end.”

“Everything will be legitimate, don’t worry. I’ll contact one of my good friends, Terrence McGail, who’s the chief of the faculty you’re interested in. He will organise it all for us. I suppose Terry may want to talk to you before, but you should not concern yourself too much about the whole matter. I know he will be satisfied with his prospective pupil.”

“Nathoo, you forget about nothing!” Vien exclaimed, throwing her arms around Artri’s neck. “How can I ever repay you for all the care and generosity you show me?”

The physicist gathered her closer.

“You know about quite many ways it can be done, and if it’s not enough, I can always add more, if you so wish.”

To be the personal slave of so influential the scientist had great many unexpected advantages. The interview with Mr McGail was a mere formality. She immediately liked him, not only as a professional but as a human being and they quickly made an agreement regarding her future mode of learning. She expected to begin in a few weeks’ time.

For now, though, Artri insisted to continue what he called their honeymoon. Because he said it’s
vital for him to enjoy his quarry throughout before his neglected duties call him back. He took her to see his other estates, one of them on the Galdanedian moon, Perennis.

The pair stayed a few days in each, and after returning to the capital they were visiting Artri’s friends and colleagues and receiving them in turn. Sometimes Lea and Canny accompanied them while Francesca stayed in the Cycads Valley. Vien soon stopped to castigate herself because of her rival’s sad fate. It wasn’t her fault Artri didn’t love Frances, and there was nothing Vien could do about it.

The threats listed in Vien’s dreaded contract never materialised. After taking possession of her person, Artri Kennert remained as before, the doting and adoring partner and caretaker. The only thing new was a lot of sex they had virtually everywhere, but it never tired her with the lover like him. To show how thankful she is Vien out of her own volition began to follow some of his wishes included in the document. The praise she received from time to time was the only reward she needed.

“You can’t imagine, little brother, how is it to have the willing partner for your unrestricted disposal every night and day. She’s so natural, as if she was born into it, and so eager to learn how to please me better,” Artri said to Tommy Fisher. The scientist watched his girl giggling because of the joke Sara had to tell her. They couldn’t hear it from the place they were sitting, but it was obvious the girl enjoyed herself immensely.

Tommy snorted. “Yeah, because no woman wanted to spread her legs before you until that Argossynian brat appeared. You could die in a dire celibacy if not she. Sweet Infinity, Nat, be serious!”

“And you stop being vulgar, Fisher,” Artri said. “You know exactly what I mean.”

“Well, you’re not the first middle-aged man who acts crazy because he fell in love with a much younger woman.”

“Now, that’s a problem indeed,” Artri admitted smiling, “but not where you see it. The Squirrel is so young indeed, I sometimes think she should have a female companion close to her own age. Vien loves Sara, Bell and Nelly, but they are all older than she. And I will not always have enough free time to accompany her.”

“Well, if you fear Vien can get bored, why not fill her belly with your baby? It’s probably a much better idea than insisting on her studies. What’s the point with the useless knowledge she’ll never use? You don’t need the intellectual partner in what is basically the walking womb.”

“If you weren’t my best pal, I would slap you for this and hard,” Artri warned Fisher. “And who had suggested such a solution, hm? One could think you’re the father of five, at least!” And then he laughed in too happy the mood to quarrel. Tommy could be insufferable sometimes, but because there was no way he could ever hurt Vien, Artri ignored him. “We have to go,” he announced. “Vien asked me to invite Varian for a supper tonight. I never imagined the old man would take an instant liking to my filly. Surely you don’t want to be worse than him?”

Tommy Fisher didn’t honour him with the answer.
When Artri and Vien returned to the Cycads Valley mansion, Varian waited for them already.

“Are we late?” Artri asked.

“No, it’s me who came earlier than planned because I had nothing important to do. Francesca kept me the company in a meantime.”

“I’ll go now,” the brunette said, “if you let me, sir.”

Vien didn’t know to whom she exactly refers, their master or his father.

“I suppose you may stay,” Varian suggested, and Artri didn’t oppose him. Vien would prefer to spend the evening in a threesome, but Francesca was still Artri’s rightful slave so had every right to be there. Besides, Varian was their guest and it would be impolite to not honour his wishes. Vien only smiled with a faked complacency and accepted the status quo.

Vien quite liked Kennert senior. As she expected, Varian admitted before her once he deeply regretted his treatment of Artri’s mother. He knew it was rushed and catastrophic decision to get rid of the poor woman. Not only because it was the main source of the rift between him and his only child.

“I wish you could understand me, though,” he said. “Her being unfaithful not only endangered my family’s position but also hurt me deeply. I know it’s hard to comprehend for a person like you, so loving and entirely devoted to my son. I know you would never make your master suffer as she had made me. It doesn’t mean I’m trying to justify myself. It was cruel, stupid and unnecessary and I’m ashamed of myself now.”

The bots delivered the dishes and beverages. Even if the Cycads Valley gardens looked lovely in their early summer glory and the lanterns’ yellow lights added to their charm, the atmosphere at the table was stiff and the small talk tired Vien after a few minutes. She had to keep the appearances playing the cheerful hostess and was relieved when the meeting reached its end.

When Francesca curtsied and left, Vien wanted to walk Varian to his carries.

“No, wait,” he said, “I want to talk to Artie before I leave. Alone.”

“Go to bed, I know you’re fatigued,” Artri said, and Vien had no choice but to submit to his bidding. She wished Mr Kennert good night.

After the conversation with his father Artri spotted the lights in his apartment were still on. Apparently the baby waited for him and it made him smile, but he couldn’t join her in bed just yet. His steps led him elsewhere.

Francesca wasn’t sleeping. When Artri entered, he found the slave in an armchair fully dressed and presentable.

“Well, well,” he said, “I was nearly sure you have aimed at Reni Cray. You were dancing around
the boy at every opportunity, but this? How easy you made a fool out of me, Francesca!"

Despite the scolding words, there was no real emotion in his voice.

“It never was my intention, sir,” Francesca retorted. “But I must think about my future because no one will do this for me.”

Artri wondered since when the girl became that careless and disrespectful. She probably trusted Vien rescues her from his wrath if such a need arises. It was true he seemed changed under her influence, getting superficially soft and far more agreeable than he used to be. People could be so easily mistaken! Maybe he should show the wench her proper place as long as he holds that power. But no, it made little sense to trouble himself with her manners. Soon it won’t be his problem.

The physicist smirked. “But you don’t expect me to call you stepmother, or do you?” The thought alone seemed so hilarious, Artri laughed aloud after asking her about this.

“Nobody can demand from you anything you don’t want to do, my lord,” she said without the hint of gaiety. “Your father is kind enough to offer me the shelter when you don’t need me anymore. It’s so very noble of him, to spare his son a huge problem. I’m sorry to be a burden.”

She wasn’t sorry in the slightest, and Artri knew about it.

“Well, if you really want this, I won’t stand in your way to happiness, but remember he’s even more strict and demanding than me. Don’t try anything behind his back, especially with Reni. I know you are attracted to Cray, and therefore it’s hard to understand such a decision, but it’s your decision and I intend to honour your choice.”

“Thank you, my lord.” Francesca bowed her head. It ended the conversation.

The girl evidently plotted something sinister, but he could afford to pay no attention to her possible intrigues. There were many things Art didn’t like in his father but as a parent he was always loyal to him. If Francesca plans to use Varian against her former master, she will be gravely disappointed.

“When I’ll tell Ivvi she won’t believe me,” Artri thought to himself, walking toward his rooms.

It came out the passing of the latest news to Vien had to wait until the next morning. She slept with the lights turned on, naked under the duvet. Artri smiled with affection, noting the Argossynian kept the collar on. She knew he likes her to wear it while having sex so it was clear Vien expected them they will make love tonight. Artri quickly joined the girl in bed, spooning her deliciously warm and fragrant body.

Being careful with the treatment of his new property had paid off the thousandfold. She wasn’t half that rebellious, as it might be expected in case of someone with her upbringing. He didn’t dare to hope she would adjust so swiftly to her new role. And yet Vien surprised him and was doing it every day. No doubt that properly led his Squirrel will become the paragon of a perfect slave sooner than he thought it might be possible.
The master's gift

“What’s the occasion? You probably forgot to tell me, master, we have guests tonight!” Vivianne exclaimed. The table was adorned with bouquets of purple and blue flowers. Their subtle fragrance permeated the air.

“Can you take a closer look at these plants?” Artri said with a mysterious smile.

From a far the flowers seemed vaguely familiar, but she could not pinpoint the impression they evoked. Vien approached the vases to inspect them, and then she realised what they were, her native flowers! Blue ajirans and purple leverias of the Argossynian southern tundra. How could she not recognise them? Maybe because Vien didn’t expect to find these species in a subtropical climate of the Galdanedian capital’s surroundings.

“Do you like my surprise?” Artri inquired.

“It’s the surprise indeed, didn’t know they could be found on Galdanede too,” Vivianne whispered, not knowing what more she could say.

“They don’t grow here,” he said. “Only sometimes people keep them in botanical gardens. They cultivated these on my demand to add lustre to this special day.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” said Vien, showing the signs of the mild confusion. “I didn’t know there’s some Galdanedian, or perhaps Federation’s, holiday today. So what exactly do you want to celebrate, and who will come?”

“Nobody besides you and me.” His warm embrace surrounded her like many times before. “The hundred days have passed today since we’ve met for the first time.”

Vien looked up at her lover. “Only one hundred? It seems like I knew you for at least one thousand!”

“Same with me. Finding you was the best thing that happened in my life. And I wanted to honour the loveliest flower of Argossyne by surrounding her with blossoms coming from their shared planet. They are as sweet and delicate as you but just as resilient in the face of the hardship.”

Vien giggled. “Mr Kennert, I didn’t know you’re not only the physicist but also an aspiring poet!”

“Even if so, which I seriously doubt, I’m the very poor one. But it doesn’t change the fact no words can describe what you do to me simply by existing.” The passionate kiss followed his words.

“I have a present for you,” Artri said, holding her still. He reached to the pocket to take out the tiny, flat object. At first Vien thought it may be a piece of jewellery, but it didn’t look like one.

“It’s my badge,” Artri explained. “Carrying such a sign slaves may move freely outside the home without a company of their masters. With the badge you don’t have to ask for a special permission to go out every time you need it, to visit friends or whatever reason. Nobody has the right to interfere or stop you, even when entering the slave houses or similar institutions. My authority will protect you everywhere. It is the highest level of freedom the woman may get on Galdanede and Makantara. We don’t keep our females in obligatory seclusion as Riadisans do. They may be locked in when they don’t behave, but I trust you unconditionally to not fail my trust.”

Vien felt moved by his speech. “I didn’t expect such a thing,” she confessed accepting the gift and
looking at it fondly. “When have I gained your confidence? You’re not afraid I may use it to escape?”

His green eyes were full of sudden mirth. “It won’t let you leave the planet’s atmosphere. Here’s where your freedom of movement ends. If you’ll peruse the privilege for sinister purposes, it will be taken back and you will be punished according to the law, the public whipping being the least severe retribution,” Artri said matter-of-factly.

“It was only the speculation,” she explained quickly. “I promised never to run away from you.”

When they were talking the bots set the table for them. Artri kissed her on the forehead.

“I’m glad you remember. Now, let’s eat the supper and I will tell you everything else you need to know before using new possibilities.”

Vien reluctantly moved away from him to take a seat. Artri placed himself on the opposite side. She had not seen him since early morning when he left for the Centre, and longing for the closeness with the man, would gladly skip the meal part. Vien wondered when she will have enough of him. Probably never.

“For safety reasons I recommend you to take a guard or better two when going out without me,” he continued pouring the water to her glass. Usually bots did that, but Artri dismissed them as he used to do often. The master of the house serving his slave girl himself was another subtle sign of her privileged position in the household. “My boys are well trained and won’t interfere with whatever you may plan to do. You know I have enemies not very fond of my liberalism, and Argossynians aren’t universally loved on Federation planets so we have to be careful.”

“Yes, my lord,” Vien said, trying not to fidget too much. Artri behaved as if he didn’t notice. He was talking about great many things but she could not concentrate on either. At last, the scientist took mercy on his tormented lover.

“Come here, baby,” he said, “I can see you don’t listen anymore. It’s so endearing that you don’t even know how to pretend.”

Before letting her sit on his lap Artri divested Vien of her gown and because there was nothing else under the dress she stayed in the collar only.

“I never met the girl getting ready so easily,” he said putting the hand on her belly and teasing it around the navel.

“Is it possible?” Vivianne gasped, aware she’s blushing and trembling all over. She couldn’t blame a long period of forced abstinence this time. They got laid frequently and the last night was no exception.

He gathered her nipples in one hand and squeezed them almost painfully, making Vien’s body stiffen and a needy moan escaping her lips.

“Your enormous temper needs to be controlled,” he whispered to her ear, “no way we can’t avoid the proper training. What do you think about starting it tonight?”
Vien was ready for the next level of their relationship. There was no doubt about that. Her pupils dilated when Artri told her about what he plans to do.

“I have to tie you before we begin. You might not stop the urge to use your hands on an instinct and could harm yourself unintentionally. I will supervise everything just right,” he said, watching her closely. All things they needed were already prepared. Artri described how they work, ready to back off if she was showing any signs of discomfort.

“I guess you know what you’re doing, my lord.” Vien licked her lips seductively. Even if she was afraid she knew how to hide it.

It was bold to choose the gag with an ingrained choking device in the very beginning, but Vien didn’t protest. The eagerness to please her man was strong in the youngster. The slave swallowed the long strand of a rubber-like material after a few failed attempts. She lost her breath soon after gagging on the obstacle in her throat, not used to toys like this.

“Easy, easy, you won’t suffocate on this, it’s narrower than the cock you take so easily, even if longer,” he said securing the thing at the back of her fallow head. “It’s a hundred percent safe. Just breathe through your nose,” Artri instructed. “Good girl, now it’s way better. Keep it like that and I’ll be satisfied.”

He let her adjust to the new situation. The episodes of gagging occurred, but with his guidance the girl overcame them successfully. After that she knew what to do. Artri praised her and kissed the wet hair.

“Now it will be a tad more difficult. I will squeeze your nose shut for a few seconds. You may hold your breath or try to use your oppressed mouth instead to take the air in. Ready?”

Artri smiled when Vien nodded again, no less determined than in the beginning. Apparently she trusted him enough to go on. He started from the very short periods of time to lengthen them gradually. When she was choking too much Artri relented to repeat the next attempt after the slave calmed down.

“Perfect. I knew you will be the one,” he said, wiping the snot and the excess of saliva from her
sweet face. Then he cleaned the inside of her nostrils too.

“Now, let’s see if it cured you from your arousal.” Artri smirked inspecting the area between her outstretched thighs.

“Your inner flower still stands,” he observed cheerfully. “Do you want to see? Oh, I forgot you cannot answer. Then you have no choice but to believe my word for now. Everything is recorded so you can check it later.”

Artri was sure she deserved the reward for her zeal in obeying his orders. With the utmost pleasure, he delved into her depths.

In the moment of the final release he put his fingers around her throat, feeling her body jerking mightily when her pleasure followed his.

With Artri’s seed smeared on her thighs and the mouth filled with the gag, she looked so deliciously ruined he was almost ready for the next round. Instead of indulging himself, the physicist freed the slave first from the muzzle and then from all the ropes. After massaging her limbs, Artri have Vien the fluid to rinse her abused throat.

“It’s good I haven’t been eating much during the supper, isn’t it?” Vien asked when she could speak again.

“Almost as if you were reading my thoughts, darling. But I suppose you will be mightily hungry when I’ll end with you.”

Vien raised her perfectly shaped brows. “So it’s not the end?”

“Surely not. It isn’t too late to try something more, unless you have enough for one day.” Even saying these words he suspected she won’t follow the last suggestion.

Vien was sleeping like a log, totally exhausted as she herself admitted before floating into her dreams. She had no energy left to eat anything. The girl lied curled up on the sheets, showing her reddened, swollen buttocks. If Artri knew she would accept the pain that readily he would try it much earlier but he was too afraid she will associate the action with the horrors she suffered kept in the detention center. Apparently she could distinguish two different intentions behind the violence.

At first Ar thought the specimen he had chosen may be too heavy for her but she never tried to escape its weight. The Argossynian didn’t utter the sound through the whole process. She orgasmed almost immediately after he put the belt aside and entered her from behind. Sometimes she seemed too perfect to be true. The girl who looked like Vai but didn’t fear him in the slightest. Was it even possible? And yet she was snoring now in his bed, warm and real. Artri kissed his slave’s hair still dump from the sweat and laid down on his back thinking about the future that awaits them.

Someone had to cover her when she slept because Vien woke up under the duvet, which wasn’t there the last time she was conscious. It had to be Artri, who else. She outstretched her hand hoping to touch him but the place was empty. Vien had to open her eyes to check the rest of the bed. She groaned with disappointment, finding no one.

The feminine voice cut in from somewhere.
“I see you’re awakened at last. It’s past noon already.”

“Lea? what are you doing here?”

“The master had to leave for work and ordered me to take care of you in his absence.”

“I don’t need a nurse,” said Vien. She sat straight but winced after putting her weight on her whipped ass.

“Are you sure you want to dismiss me?” Lea asked.

“How much he told you?” Vien answered with the question.

“Only that you had a lot of fun and may want my help. Oh, come on, Vien! Sorry if you see me as an intruder, but one man’s slaves should not keep the secrets between them. Next time the master will send the guardsmen with an errand and you won’t have a choice but to yield.”

Vien was not convinced. “I can take care of myself, thank you very much.”

She gave out the sigh of relief when Lea left her alone.

“I’m not a child,” Vien said to herself. “I know how to synthesise the cooling gel.” It was a different matter to uncover herself before the master or a doctor, but she didn’t intend to increase the number of people entitled to see her vulnerable. Vien hoped Lea doesn’t feel offended by her refusal.

After dinner Lea took Canny for a visit to their neighbour’s guard. She seemed to like Gordon Andravis very much, and their master encouraged her to deepen the acquaintance with the man.

When Artri returned home Vien waited for him alone in the garden. She finished her lessons for today and was ready to spend the rest of the day with her owner.
The party at astrologers

When Artri saw her he almost ran in Vien’s direction and after they met the man snatched her into the fierce embrace so tight, she barely could breathe. Vien had been lifted from the ground and showered with kisses.

“You’re okay?” he panted, carrying her toward the house.

“And why I shouldn’t be?” she asked sending him an innocent look. Such a simple gesture as casting her eyes down could work miracles with the man.

Artri laughed. “You little fiend, you! I couldn’t concentrate on anything today.” The physicist put Vien on his lap after lifting her skirts to have easy access to her body under the dress. “I could not stop thinking about what I left at home. If not for one important interview, I’d rather stay to wake you with my presence inside that needy hole of yours.”

“Maybe you should take me with you to the Centre, master,” she suggested, “so you could indulge yourself in the backroom if need be.”

“You’re such a temptress. Incorrigible temptress! And what can we do with you?”

“Is it bad?” she asked with a wide-eyed innocence.

“Well, we should teach you a bit of restraint but all my attempts to control your temper failed so far, leaving you even more aroused. To harness that incredible drive may be a major problem for an elderly man like me.”

Vien ignored the last sentence. She got used to the mentions about the physicist’s chronological age and knew them for what they were, the pure coquetry of a narcissistic male.

“You talk gibberish again,” she snorted. “Better kiss me already.” To this demand Artri complied, placing his hands under Vien’s frock, but when she wanted to free him from his clothes, he stopped her attempt.

“Not now,” he muttered.

Vien knew the order when she heard one. “No?” she whispered, confused. “I was sure you couldn’t wait to be with me.”

“I can’t deny that but we have to leave soon for the annual party at astrologers. Their coordinator invited me some time ago, and I forgot to tell you.”

“You forgot? Just like that?” Vien voiced her surprise.

“Don’t be cross, sweetling, but whose fault it is if not yours? Who else makes me constantly distracted?”

Vien sighed. “Do we have to go? Can’t we just stay home and enjoy ourselves?”

“I’m sorry but it would be in a poor taste to ignore them for no good reason. We don’t have to stay very long. Come, I’ll choose the dress for you.”

It came out Artri not only chosen Vien’s outfit for the evening but also helped her to dress and do the hair. The gown was modelled on a corset and wearing it wasn’t exactly comfortable but the
result looked so very pleasing Vien decided to let it go.

“Only a few hours and we’ll be home again,” he said putting the parade collar on her neck.
“Besides, we can spend the night in our city apartments. Everything is prepared for our stay there if
you so prefer.”

The reception was grand, far more than the one in which Vien had been established as Artri’s
personal slave. Since then she took part only in a few low-key encounters with his friends and
acquaintances. No wonder the place seemed vast and overcrowded. Luckily this time Vien was far
from being the center of attention, so it made the entire experience nearly tolerable. As the newly
appointed partner of the most famous Federation scientist she met a lot of interested and probably
judging glances, but they were discreet enough to pretend she doesn’t notice.

Of Artri’s team Tommy, Keith and Sally were invited too, but when Vien and Artri arrived the
boys already vanished somewhere. They met only Sara conversing with the handsome dark-haired
woman. Nereena belonged to Galben Dorosh, one of the leading Galdanedian mathematicians. She
was shy and soft-spoken girl and Vien took an instant liking for her unassuming person.

“Excuse me for a moment, darling,” Artri said, “I have one thing to handle. I’ll soon be back.”

He left her with Sara and Neri and went after one guest. Vien didn’t expect Artri to leave her side,
but it could look weird if she protested. To not contradict him in public was one of most important
conditions in her contract she agreed to respect. With the corner of an eye she saw him discussing
something with the unknown man. As for the Galdanedian, the latter was exceptionally short but
beside that fairly average guy. Then an unexpected thing happened. The main host, Dessen
Namarca, joined the duo. The astrophysicist said something, after which all three males laughed
aloud. After that, Artri let himself be led toward the rooms where the certain female staff waited to
fulfil every wish of the willing clients. He disappeared behind the doors.

In the presence of other girls, Vien could not show how shocked and mad she felt. She remembered
what the contract said about such matters but didn’t expect the scientist would jump the similar
occasion that soon. As if he wasn’t satisfied with what Vien could offer him so far. She tried to
continue the conversation but it was of no use.

“I have to go to the restroom,” she excused herself and rushed in the direction of one to calm down
in the absence of the prying eyes.

When Vien returned to the main hall Artri rejoined her. “It took longer than expected,” he said, his
face serene and with no hint of excitement. “Hopefully you had no chance to get bored in my
absence. Come, I’ll introduce you to my old colleague from the Gavin Alverren’s school. We
haven’t seen each other for ages.”

For the rest of the evening the master entertained her as if nothing of importance happened. Vien
let him take the lead because what other choice she had? She pretended to listen and fought with
herself to keep up the appearances. If Artri noticed her discomfiture he didn’t show it.
When Vien complained about what happened at the party, Artri dismissed her grievances as if they meant nothing. Worse, he looked like the one who didn’t understand why she may have any reservations.

“Ivvi, come on, it’s purely social convention, the custom that has nothing to do with you, or us. Your position is established, and I am a guarantee it will stay this way far in the future. But only if you still want to have me as your lord and master.”

Was it the warning in disguise? Vien looked at the physicist, alarmed. Artri smiled, but there was a dash of something unsettling in his gaze. His next words sounded even more disconcerting.

“If you wanted the guy who could keep you as his sole sexual partner, you should choose poor Jon. I bet it would elate Carroll to put his whole life at your feet. Nobody judges such ordinary people’s doings so they can afford to be free and careless. I cannot, and you had been warned about it beforehand.”

Artri’s attitude reminded her the treatment Francesca usually received, indifferent and verging on the hostile. It was no pleasant experience, especially after the wonderful time they had together lately.

Vien cursed the tears that appeared suddenly. It was humiliating to show her weakness, but she couldn’t stop them. So far Artri seemed to be the perfect partner, but at the moment she wasn’t sure about his true intentions.

“Now, now, stop this nonsense and look at me.”

Artri approached her when Vien cried and took her hand in his warm ones.

“I haven’t done this to spite you. And being honest, I didn’t even touch that girl. We just talked for a while. As a result, I had my social duties for the evening covered and the poor thing temporary respite from hers.”


“If you don’t believe me, you can always ask her.”

“And how can I find that woman now?” Vien wanted to sound doubtful but couldn’t hide the shadow of hope in her trembling voice.

“It’s one of Namarca’s body servants, the guy has a whole harem at his disposal and delegated a few,” Artri said and waited for Vien’s response.

When the silence lasted, he spoke again. “As the Makantaran I don’t approve all Galdanedian customs. Believe me, we aren’t half as promiscuous as them. Even if I live here since five years old, I still prefer my native more restrained and sober culture. Of course, it doesn’t mean we are prudish either.”

Despite all the distress she felt, that last statement made Vien smile through the tears. “Ah, it is indeed hard to suspect you of such a thing, master!” she exclaimed.

“Darling, you have nothing to worry about, nobody meant to hurt you,” Artri said. “I’m so used to
this ridiculous practice I didn’t realise how hard you can take it. Now I know I should prepare you better. Apparently the certain clause in the contract was not enough. Will you forgive me my lack of sensitivity? Please?”

With these words beautiful Makantaran kneeled at her feet like he used to do when she wasn’t yet his property.

“Maybe it will be easier for you if I promise to yield to my worldly obligations as rarely as possible,” the man suggested looking at her with devotion. How quickly it replaced his former cold distance.

And who could stay indifferent in the face of such a heartfelt demonstration? Her objections began to vanish.

Vien decided to live in the city for a few days at least, to spare Artri travelling back to Cycads Valley every evening. They planned to return there in the weekend together.

“I can’t stay firm with that girl no matter how hard I try,” Artri said to his friend when his slave was still sleeping after their late night activities. Tommy came for him early so they had a coffee together before leaving for the Centre.

Fisher only sighed. “And what do you expect me to say? You know what I think about your folly.”

“The folly? Honestly, it never was my favourite pastime. To do it on command? Sounds ridiculous if you ask me.”

“Well, you were doing it since we left school and never had a problem. Believe me, people will notice your erroneous behaviour and it won’t add to your prestige.”

Artri only shrugged. “My reputation is set enough to not suffer much whatever I fancy. Don’t worry about me. Did I tell you you sound like Varian sometimes? Well, now even my father found himself under her spell, so much he freed me from Frances. You are in a minority, little brother.”

Tommy looked at Art with pity. “You probably think it is incredibly romantic gesture to treat your woman like that, when in truth it’s plain silly and have to backfire sooner or later. Maybe it will be later, but you can’t pretend forever.”

“Can you keep your voice down, Fisher?” Artri interrupted him, “lest you will wake her. Next time I won’t tell you anything.”

After he said that the yawning girl they were talking about stood at the threshold of the room. Artri wondered how much she heard.

The barefooted Argossynian wore only the loosely tied, short dressing gown and a collar. The look Fisher sent her contradicted his words. It was decidedly interested, close to fascinated even.

“Sorry to disturb. I didn’t know you had a guest, master,” Vien muttered unaware of the reaction her appearing among them catalysed.

“It’s not a guest, darling, only Tommy. Come here, I supposed to leave you sleeping, but if you’re already awakened, you owe me the parting kiss.”

Vien tried to excuse herself by saying something about coming straight from the bed, but Artri
insisted. He made the whole show out of it partly to spite Fisher, who had no choice but to bear their caresses with a straight face.
When Cangian spotted Vien, he ran to her at once. The boy embraced her tightly in the middle and didn’t want to let go.

“Where have you been for so long, aunt Vien? Why can’t you live with us?” he cried, his scrunched little face close to tears. “I want you to live with us!”

“Nonnie, come on, I have told you many times Vien has the master to serve and must stay at his disposal,” Lea cut in. “You have me, and Mr Andravis, and Grant with the other guards.”

“It is not exactly like your mama puts it, but close,” Vien spoke but before she had a chance to elaborate Artri joined them.

“What is it, Canny, darling? Should I be jealous?” he said, smiling.

Artri’s words had to baffle the child because Cangian didn’t know how to answer, but after the while he overcame the confusion.

“Can I buy her from you, uncle Nat when I grow up?” he blurted.

Instead of scolding the kid, Artri patted him on the shoulder.

“I’m afraid, darling, Vien is not for sale. Besides, I hope when you will grow up the practice of selling and buying people would belong to the past. And even if not, you can’t buy the other person’s feelings and you cannot keep them if they really don’t want to be with you. Or rather you can, if you have means and the power, but it never ends well.”

“But you do like me, aunt Vien?” Canny turned to her, hopeful.

“How could I not?” Vien embraced the boy. “I’m sure we are good friends, but I’m afraid you are too young for me. One day you will find the one closer to your age and ready to be more than a friend.”

“If you miss my lady, Canny, you and your mama may move to the capital with us for some time,” Artri offered. “But the garden around our city apartments is much, much smaller than the park in the valley. And I have brought the new toy for you that may be more useful here.”

“What a toy, uncle Nat?” Cangian was intrigued. He stepped back and looked at Artri as if searching for something the master of the house could hide behind him.

“I ordered to send it to the Cycads Valley this morning,” Artri said and gave the sign to the guard to bring the thing. For Vien it was a surprise too. The physicist didn’t mention the present he had for his ward. It was the carries in the pony's liking.

“One day when you’ll be older I plan to give you the real horse. Would you like to try this one for now?”

Artri didn’t need to repeat the question. Canny forgot about all the rest and moved toward the animal-shaped vehicle with the cautious, disbelieving smile.
kid to skip the meal just this once. After such a statement, she let him play and sat with Artri and Vivianne. From time to time Leandra watched her son who went wild on his new friend Rocket, how he christened the carries.

“I’m so very sorry for his gall today,” she said. “It’s hard to tell from where he found the idea.”

“Do not worry, Lea,” Artri assured the slave. “Canny is still so very young. Judging by the persons with whom he spent his early childhood, the kid is not that bad. I will talk to him later about his behaviour. What do you think, Squirrel?”

“Well, it was quite endearing,” Vien said, “Canny didn’t know it may be harmful to say such a thing. That’s what he was taught almost all of his short life. Please be gentle with him, Natti.”

“I will. I’ll explain for him everything according to what the four years old can understand.”

“Thank you.” Leandra looked relieved. “You are both so very good to me and my poor child. Not only with this, but with everything else. I don’t know how to repay for all the kindness we have received. I shudder to think what would become of us if Francesca accomplished the goal she set before her. I’m so happy it is you, Vien.”

“You tend to overestimate me,” Vivianne noted, and Artri added. “Caring about your needs is the duty of mine, and one of most pleasant.”

The child they talked about interrupted the rest of the conversation.

“I’m starving, mommy,” flushed Cangian hooted from the threshold. “May I get something to eat?”

“As far as I remember you refused to come to the supper and ignored her summons,” Artri said with a serious face. “You must apologise to her and only if she’ll forgive you maybe you would get a snack.”

If they expected the boy to rebel, he surprised them greatly. Canny ran to Lea at once and muttered his apologies while kissing her hands.

“And now, where the hell had he learned that?” Artri inquired, faking disbelief and winking at Vien.
Laying in bed, sweaty and naked under the weight of her beloved, Vien asked. “What did you mean, master, by telling Canny owning people can be abandoned before he matures? Is it even possible?”

Artri kissed her nose and smiled cryptically. “Well, there are people and organisations working on it, but I cannot say more, also not to disappoint you if nothing will come of it. At least not in such a short time I’m afraid, but instilling the very idea in young persons’ minds surely won’t hurt.”

The answer didn’t satisfy Vien. “But you never mentioned it to me before,” she pointed, frowning.

“I’m sorry. It’s not that I snub you, darling. Knowing about these things is dangerous and the less you hear about them the better.”

“Oh, okay,” she agreed, leaving the topic for now. It was hard to argue with the man, especially not long after Vien screamed his name in the throes of passion. She promised herself to return to the subject later.

“But you must know,” she said, “that I want to be yours regardless of our relationship’s formal status. Even if I could return safely to the place of my birth, I would stay with you instead.”

“It’s the most precious thing I could hear from anyone, ever,” Artri whispered, his hold on her tightening. “And I hope I’ll never give you the reason to change your mind.” For the moment they stayed like that until she spoke.

“I never expected the girl like me could live a decent life anywhere in the XY Zone, and yet here I am. But I also don’t quite understand why you were tortured me with the whole contract’s thing. It seems completely useless now.”

After Vien’s mention of the contract she saw the subtle change in her lover’s demeanour. Artri released her and laid down on the pillows next to the slave.

“You have every right to remain sceptical,” he said, “but I would defend the whole idea. Our mutual agreement gives us the solid foundation to build on. It was important for me to be sure you knew what the worse case scenario may be. I may never pursue some points of the deal but to have you informed about all possibilities makes me less anxious about our future together. As the one who is in charge I feel the burden of responsibility for the well-being of my partner, especially after I failed with… after I failed once.”

“Nathoo, you worry too much!” Vien tried to lighten the mood. “And you don't need any elaborate lists of conditions to make me cooperate. With the sole exception of hurting others I am ready to do everything to make you not regret the decision to keep me.”

“Everything?” She saw the sudden spark of interest in her master's green eyes.

Vien laughed. “You sound as if you don't believe me. Why? I could swear countless women had to promise you that since you parted with her and probably before too. Am I right?”

“Not exactly.” Artri said and seeing her disbelief added. “They didn't have to, it went without saying, and I didn't expect less.”

“You, shameless…” Vien cried searching for the right word to describe him.
“You shameless what?” Artri was on her again. “It's you who asked first.”

“Shameless bastard,” she seethed looking him in the eyes.

“I'll show you the bastard,” Artri whispered to her ear. “Such a mean, insolent creature deserves immediate punishment for offending her master.”

Vien let him place her on all fours and slap her rear a few times, hard. After that he was riding her to oblivion. That last time left her both satisfied and ultimately exhausted. She declined the proposal to take a bath. Falling asleep Vien realised Artri wipes the sweat and other fluids from her body with a warm, wet towel. It was so sweet she smiled at him but was unable to open her eyes.
“When will you show us what that unique gem of yours is capable to do?” The young man only expressed what the others were speculating about, but Warren Cray alone had the audacity to ask their coordinator publicly.

Fisher stifled the laughter. Dwight pretended he didn’t hear Reni’s question. Only Merriver felt entitled to reprimand his younger colleague for his arrogance before Artri himself could speak.

“Your dad had not taught you the essential rules of proper behaviour in a respectable society? Sharing one’s slave is the exclusive decision of their owner. You can’t expect to be rewarded with the man’s valuable property’s service simply because of existing.”

“Thank you, Keith,” Artri said, nodding to the eminence grise of their team, “but I don’t need excuses for anything I do. If you aren’t contented with the state of things in our group, Reni, you can always leave and find another, better suited to your liking. I know about many people who would be happy to join us in your stead.”

“What’s wrong with you two?” Warren almost jumped from his plastochair. “You look at me as if I demanded to take her now on this here table, but it was only the question!”

“I don’t rule out the possibility to share my beloved girl’s body with my acquaintances but it won’t be soon. She’s so young and sensitive the creature. I have resolved to wait until the poor baby will be ready to carry the full weight of her duties as my personal slave. But for those of you not patient enough to wait that long, I have the certain offer. If you’re really interested in tasting her sweet person’s charms you can try to win her for your bidding. I’ll give my permission for the affair if Ivvi herself asks for it.”

“Courting? That’s too boring,” Reni moaned. “You know how to discourage the man without outright forbidding the thing.”

“Do you have such a low opinion on yourself, Warren?” Keith teased. “Even if she prefers dark-haired and less licentious partners, it’s always worthy to try. Who is to compete with me to become our first lady’s first secondary lover?”

Artri smiled after Merriver called Vien first lady. The whole situation amused him, because he knew very well his colleagues’ attempts are doomed to fail. The contract gave Vivianne the chance to take herself temporary lovers if she really wanted them, but the girl was too enamoured in him to take into account such an opportunity. When the boys left and Artri stayed alone with Tommy, he shared these thoughts with his friend, but Fisher was sceptical.

“Being you, I wouldn’t be that sure of her fidelity. You should not judge her by yourself, brother, or that woman may surprise you one day. I’ve heard Argossynians aren’t less promiscuous than us, Galdanedians.”

“They may be, when free,” Artri said, recalling what Vivianne once told him. “In relationships Argossynians tend to be as strict as Riadisans or maybe even more but for much better reasons. The exceptions can happen, but they are just that.”

Tommy sighed heavily. “I see it’s pointless to deter you from trusting her. But you must know treating the girl like a holy cow, untouchable, is tantamount to hurting her. You show her completely unrealistic picture of our social relations. When you’ll get bored with her as with all the
others and sell her to someone else, she may suffer terribly... Why do you laugh?”

“I’m sorry but it reminded me what Cangian had asked me about some time ago. You are as naïve as my four years old ward, thinking I may sell Ivvi, ever. What I have told you after finding her is still valid. And no, she’s not untouchable, but I’m the only one who can do the touching. Ivvi is so eager to learn everything and I never had a more brilliant pupil. You cannot imagine how far one can go taking in consideration your subject’s feelings and their freedom of choice.”

“You live in a dream, Nat. I can only hope the waking up won’t be too painful. It’s not so great an achievement when you love someone for how well they treat you. The trick is to accept them for who they really are. She hasn’t been given a chance to know the real Artri Nathoo. Are you afraid she won’t be able to deal with it?”

“Fisher, just stop. My private life is not the business of yours. When you sold Sally to Merrriver, I said nothing even if it made the situation in our team almost unbearable. It still is, but we both, Sara and me, accepted new status quo without the grudge. Now I demand the same respect for my decisions.”

“These are two different things,” Tommy argued. “You can always leave no longer wanted slave. People do this all the time and it never was a big deal, while your notorious ignoring certain social rules weakens your position, and ours as a result. People started to talk and won’t stop if you will continue to act that way.”

Artri sent Tommy the amused look. “Well, some of us work thrice as hard to make up for my negligence And if you too aren’t satisfied with your researching coordinator, there’s a way to go.”

The cold shoulder given him infuriated Fisher. “You really could do this? Fire me because of the woman, no matter how pretty and pleasant in bed? After decades of friendship! What had she done to you to make my best friend treat me like that?”

Artri stayed calm. “Tommy, it’s not me who started the argument. I have no intention to fire you, as you call it. What I said only means that I won’t expect you to work with me if it’s against your wishes. Nothing more than that.”

“But it would clear that inconvenient situation with you and Sara,” he added as an afterthought.

“What?!?” Fisher exclaimed. If looks could kill Artri could be dead in the matter of seconds.

Not paying attention to the blonde’s outburst was the best means of punishing him.

“You’ve heard me. I value her input no less than yours, brother. She’s such a great mind. It’s a pity we could not fall in love after you ditched the poor woman. It would solve the most of our logistical problems.”

“You could do this?” Tommy growled.

“What, to fall in love with Sally or to prefer her as a co-worker? For a certain reason she’s far less troublesome choice than you.”

Fisher had to realise he has no chance to win and abandoned his confrontational behaviour as quickly as he started to fight. He even smiled.

“Oh, okay. You won’t have to choose between us because I’m not going anywhere. And if I’m anxious about your actions, it is only because I care for you.”
“You don’t need to. I know what I’m doing,” Artri answered coldly. They parted without the usual pleasantries.
“What happened?” Vien asked, seeing Artri returning from the Centre. “Problems with coworkers or maybe competitors?

The man embraced her. “No, why do you think so? But there’s something not connected with my work that I have to tell you about. I’m afraid you won’t be happy because of this.”

It didn’t sound good, so Vien waited with bated breath.

“Gordon Andravis asked me to let Lea and Canny live with him. Being honest, he resolved to buy her, and I am ready to grant his wish, but only if you agree. I don’t want to rob you from the companions you so like.”

That was unexpected. Did Artri imagine Vien will rob her friend from the relationship the woman so craves for because she doesn’t want to lose Lea’s company?

“Gordon is a kind man,” she said, “and he raised two well-behaved sons. It seems he will be the best foster father for the boy.”

“So you have nothing against the new arrangements?”

“I will miss them both, but hopefully they can visit us from time to time?”

“That’s another problem, darling. Gordon decided to change his employer and his new boss lives on Perennis. My business keeps me mostly on Galdanede so it won’t be very often.”

“Ah, well, that’s tough but we can always communicate. If it means she’ll be happy I will survive the parting somehow. May I ask one question though?”

“Yes, what my lady wants to know?”

“Have you ever considered the possibility to employ him by yourself, master?”

“A few times but Andravis is not interested. Maybe because we are more like friends and he doesn’t want to spoil it by entering the boss - underling relation. A pity because it would solve all our problems in one go.”

“Well then, we must accept the things as they are. I hope Canny won’t miss us too much!”

“The kid will be happy in whatever place as long as his Rocket is with him. And I won’t give up my patronage over the boy, or at least not quickly.”

“That’s a very considerate decision, master. May I go now and tell her?”

In such an unexpected way, Lea disappeared from Vivianne’s everyday life. A few days after the woman and her son’s departure, Artri excused himself too, to embark on a mysterious mission. The physicist didn’t want to tell her where exactly he will travel, only that he won’t be directly available for some time.”

“Why can’t I go with you?” Vien asked appalled, “I promise I won’t be the burden!”

“I don’t doubt you wouldn’t be but it’s not that. The place I’m going to is not female friendly. It’s better I enter their space alone. The man has nothing to worry about there, but the girl so young and
attractive… No, I prefer to save you from unpleasant things you could meet among these people.”

“Sweet Goddess, Natti. I hope you don’t go to Riadis!” Vien exclaimed, terrified.

“No, not to Riadis. Don’t you know I joined the boycott of this wretched planet and its society?”

He didn’t want to tell her anything more about his destination. She had to accept her owner’s decision, knowing close to nothing.

“Don’t worry,” Artri said when they were parting. I leave you under good care. The boys will send me daily reports about the state of things. If you will need my answer for your message, remember it may take time to receive it. It would not mean I’m in danger. Please be patient and I’ll try to return as soon as possible.”

Initially Artri tried to convince her to stay during his absence in one of his friends’ houses, but Vien declined. In the Cycads Valley she felt safe and comfortable being the mistress of herself. She begged him not to send her anywhere from the place she loved and he yielded to her pleas.

Vien looked surprised at Jon Carroll, accompanied by one of her master’s coworkers. She didn’t expect any visitors after Canny and Lea left with her new partner.

“Mr Merriver asks your permission to enter to check how you fare,” said Jon.

Vien inclined her head in the welcoming gesture.

“It’s a pleasure to see you, Mr Merriver. You can stay, but as you can see, I’m not prepared to meet guests tonight. If you’ll wait, I’ll change into something more presentable as befits the hostess receiving such an important person.”

She sent Keith the reserved smile.

The one with which the physicist answered her was wide and cheerful. “There’s no need, sweet child, to trouble yourself. I won’t stay long, and you would look pretty in anything. My friend has an excellent taste in women.”

“Still, I think I should.” Vien preferred to wear her collar and the long dress and resolved to have them. She turned to Jon.

“Please, Mr Carroll, take care of our guest while I’ll be changing my clothes. Maybe lead Mr Merriver to the verandah and offer him something to drink. I’ll join you soon.”

When Vivianne returned she was wearing the long layered gown and the moderately wide collar. She let her hair loose from the braid so now it cascaded with shiny waves past her shoulders.

“You look ravishing. No wonder our coordinator has his pretty eyes only for you,” Merriver tutted. Vivianne didn’t like it.

“Why are you here, Mr Merriver?” she ventured. “I mean, what is a genuine reason of your visit?”

“I don’t need the reason to check on my coordinator’s chosen one other than knowing that she’s temporarily abandoned and without friends to cheer her up.”

“I am grateful for your care, but I have no shortage of wonderful friends around me.”

“Perhaps, dear child, but you cannot take any great pleasure out of the company of such ordinary
people.”

“Why? Ordinary doesn’t mean vulgar. I am an ordinary girl myself. After barely finishing the secondary school, I’m not that far above them. Besides, my master has left me in their care. It’s only natural I trust them the most as Natti’s loyal servants.”

“And we are his loyal friends. You can trust us just as much. Artri hadn’t forbidden you to socialise within our circle and maybe you can join us for a few hours to amuse yourself.”

Keith took the risk and touched Vivianne’s fingers. Jon sent him the warning look but said nothing. It was so innocent the gesture Vien didn’t protest too.

“I feel privileged to receive your generous proposition,” she said, “but I have so many things to take care of, my studies included, there’s no chance I could find the time to accept your kind offer. Maybe after Nathoo returns…”

The small talk with Keith Merriver and the streak of praises he was sending in her direction tired Vien enormously. She felt relieved when the guy left at last.

“What do you think, Jon?” she asked her faithful caretaker. “Should I insist for him to stay a bit longer? I have no idea how to treat these men. I suspect they show me their interest only because I’m their friend’s slave but I can’t tell for sure. And I don’t want to make them my enemies if they expect more friendly approach than I can offer.”

Jon looked at Vien with sympathy.

“You shouldn’t trouble yourself with these people, mistress, especially with Mr Merriver. He has enough women to adore him and warm his bed to leave you at peace when the boss is away. If he really wanted to cheer you up, he would bring mistresses Bell and Sara with him but he didn’t. You’ve done the best thing not sitting with the man alone. I don’t expect him to breach the rules by forcing himself on you but it’s better to not give him a chance to try.”

The last words made Vien cringe internally, hearing all vague suppositions she was afraid to name confirmed by the independent source.

“Don’t worry,” Carroll pleaded, “we won’t let anyone offend you, let alone attempt anything questionable.”

“I’m glad I have you and your colleagues,” Vien said, “but I’d love to see Nathoo at last.”

“I’m sure the boss will return as soon as possible. Being him I wouldn’t want to stay away from you the minute longer than necessary.”

Jon’s heartfelt confession made her laugh. “Oh, no, and you too?! I thought Mr Merriver exhausted today’s pool of cheesy compliments falling on my poor head!”

She giggled and could not stop. Not because the joke was that funny. It worked more like relieving the stress of the unwanted visit but also the whole precarious situation in which she found herself lately.
The roll call

Keith left the Cycads Valley utterly disappointed. Kennert’s young slave treated him as an obstacle and was hiding the boredom throughout their short meeting. Did the girlish thing find him that dull? She seemed to like Keith before, so the cold distance she put between them yesterday didn’t stop to amaze him.

“So how your reconnaissance went?” Reni was the first one to inquire.

“Better don’t ask,” Keith snorted. “What an ice queen, more haughty than her own master! Not that she was impolite. If I wanted to tell on her to Artri, I could not name the single thing to complain about. But if you could hear her. All the time proper and stiff. Only ‘yes, Mr Merriver’, ‘that’s interesting, Mr Merriver’. And she never got rid of her annoying chaperone. You know that guy Artri says he’s in love with her.”

“Do you think that halfwit fucks her behind the coordinator’s back?” Warren asked. The boy loved gossiping.

“If he does at all, I’m sure it can’t be behind his back. The chap is too honourable,” Keith spat the last word as if it was the worst insult.

“Anyway, it had to be painful for the man like you to be ignored by such a child,” Reni teased.

“The greybeard spoke!” Kert joined the conversation. “I wonder if you could do better.”

“Kert, we can’t bombard her with everyday visits, she may become suspicious. What about asking the wench for a little party? She seemed to enjoy them when Artri was with her. In such circumstances we can all try our luck one after one. What do you think?” offered Reni.

“And who moaned not so long ago, how much he dislikes courting?” Kert reminded him.

“Oh, come on, the man can change his opinion sometimes. So?” Reni looked at his colleagues, awaiting their answer.

“Better forget it,” Keith put him down. “Vien insists she’s busy with her lessons and has no time for frivolous entertainments. Surely it was only the pretext to refuse but she will hold on to it for dear life, I tell you. The hopeless cause, that one.”

Warren wasn’t that easy to discourage. “Where’s your manly ambition, Merriver? You can’t give up after one try, or can you? Everything depends on the right approach. She can ignore an invitation by a man, but what about the other girl or girls asking nicely?”

“I’m afraid my ladies won’t be eager to cooperate,” Keith said. “They’ll quickly figure out our intentions are not quite innocent.”

“If so, I don’t understand why you keep them,” Reni muttered under his breath.

“And you, Kert. I guess May won’t have such reservations?”

“My slave and Vien aren’t that close but she will try,” Curtis said. “Besides, Vien had never been in our house so it may be the additional reason for her to make the exception.”

Reni clapped his hands. “You’re the only one who knows how to proceed with females! Now we
must choose the day. I recommend hurrying up in case Artri returns earlier. If his slave is as
temperamental behind closed doors as coordinator says, the poor thing must be in a dire need. It’s a
perfect occasion we cannot miss.”

“Do we have to invite Tommy and Stanley too?”

“No Tan for sure,” Kert voiced his disapproval. “Spalding may be the terrible bore sometimes and
remember we will have to deal with her own escort, there’s no need to bring to the equation that
self-imposed defender of justice.”

“And what about Fisher?”

“He may come. Even if Tommy declines to join the competition at least there will be no danger of
him trying to spoil the fun.”

“So it’s settled!” Reni summed up cheerfully. “Keith, are you with us?”

Merriver sent them the crooked smile. “Yes, sure. I’d like to see you try. And fail.”

Reni didn’t pay much attention to his older colleague’s pessimistic statement.

“I think, Kert,” he continued his musings, “you have the best chance to win the prize. With the sole
exception of your colouration, you resemble our coordinator the most. Yes, I think the first lady
may like you.”

The days dragged without the master of the house. He accepted all reports sent to him but
messages from the man were scarce and he didn’t mention the date of his return yet.

Slowly Vien became restless, unused to live alone in such spacious apartments. She could not
concentrate on anything thinking about what will become of her if he never comes back. When
Vien shared these fears with her friends among the guards, they dismissed her anxieties as
unreasonable assuring the slave there’s no such chance.

Sometimes Vien talked to Leandra, happily settled on Perennis with her doting new owner, and the
woman told her the same. There is no option Artri can leave her. It wasn’t the first time he
travelled incognito wherever he had to. The last thing was most infuriating. Nobody could reveal
before her where the physicist may roam.

“Please don’t worry. Nobody will dare to hurt him,” Lea said after Vien complained once more
about the strange situation. “I’m sure he will return to you safely. You must be a bit more patient.”

Vien hanged up to notice Thaddeus standing in the room’s corner waiting for her to end the call.

“What is it, Thad?” she asked.

“Mistress May Taner is here. She’d like to talk to you.”

“May?” Vien muttered, surprised. She met Curtis’s slave a few times, but they rarely spoke. “What
can she want from me?”

“I don’t know, but she says it’s important.”
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