

THE KRINAR'S INFORMANT

A Krinar World Novel

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Chapter One

The jungle resonated with sounds of night creatures, sounds Liv never heard on the footpath in the shady light of day. She ducked as a giant ghost bat swooped low, the large span of its wing brushing her hair. Shivering, she hugged herself and trudged forward, keeping her gaze on the path for snakes. A moving shadow on a tree trunk caught her eye. A tarantula scurried over the bark. She barely missed head butting the cocoon suspended on silky strings that stretched between two branches. Glowing silver in the moonlight, the semi-transparent cocoon vibrated, sending a ripple through the web. Something struggled inside, something bulky and black. She refused to think of its content.

This was for Erik and Karl.

If her brothers discovered her gone, they'd be furious. She didn't even want to think what Hans would do to her, but there was no other way. She had to meet the Krinar, and the village on the outskirts of the jungle was the only public place within walking distance. Even if Anita said she could trust him, she wasn't going to risk being alone with

an alien who'd single-handedly wiped out armies of Resistance fighters.

Steeling herself, she continued on her journey, the hair on her arms rising with every crack of a branch and hoot of an owl. She was used to the flat, open expanses of the Kalahari Desert. Sand she could handle. Reptiles and hairy jungle insects not so much. Soon, the soles of her hiking boots were caked with mud, losing traction and making her slip on the moss-covered rocks. Humidity dampened her clothes. The long-sleeved shirt didn't do much to protect her against the mosquitos, either. They were nothing short of vampires, stinging through the light-weight fabric.

When distant lights became visible through the dense vegetation, she exhaled in relief and picked up her pace. She'd chosen the bar. Except for a few houses and a grocery store, there was no place else. Standing on the step of the open door, she surveyed the space. Men in dirty vests threw daggers at a target drawn on the wooden wall. A rowdy group downed shooters at the counter. A man with oily hair and a shiny face looked up. Maybe the bar wasn't such a good idea. How could she have known? She'd never been on this side of the jungle. It was too late. They'd already spotted her. If she fled, it would be like turning one's back on a lion—an open invitation to attack. False bravery was her best defense.

Lifting her chin, she walked inside and took her time to decide on the best spot. Two chairs in a corner were vacant. She was about to take one when the man with the oily hair sauntered over.

“Hello, sweetness,” he said with a Spanish accent.

“I'm not your sweetness.”

He grinned. “You will be.”

Without warning, his hand shot out, gripping her braid. He gave a pluck, jerking her closer.

She winced at the sting on her scalp. "Let go."

He chuckled. "Or?"

"Or you become a eunuch," a deep voice said from the door.

The whole bar's attention turned toward the sound.

A giant, as muscled as he was tall, stood in the doorway. His face was sculptured in angular lines, his jaw square, and his nose straight. A neatly trimmed beard drew attention to those lines, making his face seem harder. His dark hair was cropped close to his skull in the military style her brothers favored. Red welts on his upper arms marred the even tone of his bronze skin. The wounds looked fresh. As his slate-gray eyes landed on the foul-smelling man's hand where it was fisted in her hair, they flashed with a spark too otherworldly to be human. There was no mistaking the physical perfection and unusual size. He was a Krinar. The bar had gone silent. The man next to her was frozen to the spot.

The K stepped over the threshold. With a wide stance, he took in the room much as she'd done upon her arrival. He appeared docile, but experience had taught her that men with a calm demeanor were often the most dangerous. His attire was in the lighter colors the Ks in Lenkarda favored. Khaki pants molded over powerful thighs, and a beige, sleeveless T-shirt stretched over his broad chest. Every hard contour of his muscles was visible under the fabric.

Her mouth went dry. Did she do the right thing? The K was a killing machine, a Resistance hunter, and she was with the Resistance. He was lion. She was prey. The only thing that guaranteed her safety was the information she

could provide. He wasn't going to rip her limbs off before he'd gotten intel. Was he?

The man who held her uttered a surprised curse and looked at his crotch. She followed his gaze. The flip knife in her hand indented his jean-covered testicles. With the K throwing her off-balance, she hadn't realized how much pressure she was applying.

The K chuckled. "As I said, you're about to lose your balls." He tilted his head. "Or maybe your dick. Women can be unpredictable."

The man released her and took a step back. She resisted the urge to massage the sore spot on her skull, instead focusing all her attention on the K who moved deeper into the bar with lithe strides. Too fast and agile, neither she nor the man could predict his path until he was in the face of her molester.

"You touched my *date*."

The man threw his hands up. "Hey, man, I didn't know. No hard feelings."

The K looked down at the man as if he was examining a bug. "Oh, but you're wrong. There are hard feelings. Plenty."

The man didn't wait. He stumbled two steps back, knocked over a chair, and ran for the door.

The K gave her a once-over. "Do you want me to go after him?"

She swallowed. "I had it under control."

He smirked. "I noticed." Picking up the chair, he placed it in front of her. "Sit." His grin stretched wider. "Put the knife away first."

Only when she'd pocketed the knife and flopped down on the seat did he take the chair on the opposite side of the table. Grateful for the distance, however small, she exhaled

the breath she was holding, trying to calm her erratic breathing.

The K leaned back, scrutinizing her. "You must be Liv." He said the name slowly, as if he was testing the sound on his tongue.

A waitress slid up to them, her eyes darting toward the bar where the bartender was shooing her on with his hands. She pulled down the hem of her tank top, trying to cover her stomach.

"What can I get you?" she asked in a high-pitched voice.

Poor girl. Liv knew how she felt. Under the table, her knees were shaking. "Nothing for me, thank you."

"You're in a bar," the K said. "You're occupying one of their chairs. You have to order something. Isn't that the rule?"

She was too nervous to drink. "I'm fine, really."

"Mineral water with a slice of lemon for my *date*," he said, "and a fruit juice for me. Anything in season. Freshly squeezed. No ice."

Wait a minute. How did he know what she drank? An uneasy shudder ran down her spine.

"Sure," the waitress squeaked. She scurried away as fast as she could without making it obvious that she was running.

Liv didn't blame her. The alien's voice was commanding. He made it sound as if failure came with a death warrant, even for something as trivial as accidentally putting ice cubes in his juice. If the way he ordered drinks was so assertive, what was he like in combat? She pushed the disturbing thought aside.

"Would you like something to eat, *date*?"

Despite the air of danger surrounding him, the K's choice of words was starting to grind on her.

“Just so we’re clear,” she said, “I’m not your date. I know there’s a language barrier, so I’ll excuse you for the innocent mistake. Maybe your translator chip is malfunctioning.”

A wicked glint played in his eyes. “My *chip* works fine. There’s no mistake or innocence on my part.” He arched a perfect brow. “We’re ordering drinks in a bar. Isn’t that the definition of a date?”

Was he making fun of her? “I’m not here to play games.”

He leaned closer, his gaze penetrating. “You think I am?” A slow smile curved his lips. “I do play, Miss Madsen, but not games.”

She reeled at the intensity in his strange eyes, her breath catching on a silent gasp. The waitress appeared with their drinks, not giving her time to analyze the statement.

Stay on track. Follow the plan. Breathe.

Anita had said the K who’d help her was a good, solid soldier, a guardian both Korum and Mia respected. Anita liked him. She’d gone as far as to say he was like the brother she never had. It couldn’t be the arrogant alien facing her. Anita would never approve of such an attitude.

She waited until the waitress was gone before she asked, “You are Zavir, right?”

“Would I be here if I wasn’t?”

It could be a set-up. He could be a Keith, a K working with the Resistance. With Resistance movements popping up faster than mushrooms around the globe, there was so much backstabbing going on one could never be sure.

He pushed the water toward her and picked up his own glass. No ice. *Thank God.*

“Drink,” he said. “You appear dehydrated.”

She chose to ignore the diagnosis, even if her lips were parched. "I'll need to see some ID."

His disturbing eyes widened a fraction, and then his smile turned mocking. "Of course, you do."

Taking his time, he pulled up a hologram from a wrist-watch device. His credentials hovered in the space between them.

"Any Krinar can fake an ID. I want proof."

He crossed his arms and leaned back, looking like he was getting comfortable to watch a sitcom. Do Ks even watch comedies? Do they share the same sense of humor?

"What proof do you have in mind?" he asked with a lazy drawl.

"Anita said you have a birthmark."

All pretense of friendliness vanished from his tone. "A defect, you mean."

"Show it to me."

His eyes tightened. "Anita, as in Wian's charl?"

"Yes."

"How are you acquainted?"

"We're friends. We met in South Africa while we were both on holiday in Cape Town. It was Anita who suggested I get in touch with Korum. Korum told me he'd set up a meeting with you. When I asked how I could be sure it was you, he told me about your mark."

"You trust Korum."

"Of course. I know Mia. If she trusts him enough to live with him, so do I."

He gave her a calculated look. "Did he tell you where this mark is?"

She swallowed but squared her shoulders. "Yes."

Amusement returned. "I guess we should step outside, then."

“I’m not going anywhere with you until I know you’re Zavir for sure.”

“All right, little human. Suit yourself.”

Holding her eyes, his mocking smile turned wider as his hands went to the waistband of his pants. She swallowed a couple of times more while he unbuttoned, but she didn’t blink an eye, not even when he lifted his hips to work the fabric an inch down his ass. She leaned over the table to examine the red mark that started at the top of his pelvic bone and disappeared along the line of his groin. Upon her insistence, Korum had sent her a simulation of the mark. There should be small half-moon a fraction lower to the right.

“More,” she said.

For a second, he seemed surprised, but then his look turned into something she couldn’t place, something challenging.

“Who am I to deny a pretty lady?”

The pants slipped farther down his thighs, revealing the hard V that cut from his hips, but also the top of his male parts, his very large, hardening male parts.

“Stop,” she said in a jerky voice, but not before his cock had thickened more.

“Are you sure about that, little human? I can give you all the proof you want.”

What a jerk. He *was* messing with her, and it wasn’t the kind of messing designed to put her at ease.

Deciding no reaction was the best reaction, she said, “We can’t talk in here.”

“Then why did you want to meet here?”

“You didn’t think I was going to meet you alone without first establishing you’re the real Zavir?”

“Do you think the men in this bar would stop me if I wanted to kill you?”

“Probably not but ripping my throat out in public will be all over the news. Interspecies relations are fragile as it is. You don't want to risk a scandal that could compromise your Council's mission.”

“What do you know of our Council's mission?”

“What Mia told me.”

“That is?”

“That they prefer a peaceful transition.”

“What prevents me from *ripping out your throat* once I've got you alone?”

Her back turned stiff. “Are you threatening me?” Her words were full of bravado, but her hands shook in her lap.

His deep voice adopted a seductive tone. “It depends on what you perceive as a threat.”

Enough. He was a first-class ass. She didn't care how good Korum said he was, she wasn't dealing with him.

“This was a mistake.” She stood. “I want someone else.”

About to turn, a big hand clamped around her wrist. Her heart slammed in her chest. The chair scraped over the floor as he pushed to his feet. Craning her neck to meet his eyes across the table, it took every ounce of willpower she had not to cower under his dominating height and angry scowl.

“You're stuck with me,” he said. “There will be no one else.”

“I don't appreciate being threatened,” her gaze dropped to where his fingers gripped her, “or harassed.”

His hold increased marginally. “That wasn't a threat, and if I was harassing you, my hand wouldn't be on your wrist. It would be somewhere way more tantalizing.”

She yanked to free herself, but to no avail. “If this isn't a threat, what do you call it?”

“Education. Teaching you how lame your plan is so you won’t make the same stupid mistakes in future.”

“Stupid?” Indignation mixed with her fear. She jerked her arm again, harder this time. “Let go.”

Instead of obliging, he picked up the water and held the glass to her lips. “Drink.”

She had no choice but to part her lips when he tipped the glass or risk looking like Miss Wet T-shirt in Scumbag Bar. The cool liquid slipped down her throat. Fine, it tasted like heaven, even if she had to admit it rather grudgingly. It was a welcome relief from the dryness in her mouth and the humid heat.

“That’s better,” he said when she’d downed everything, catching a drop on her bottom lip with his thumb.

Not expecting it, she jumped at his touch.

Coming around the table, he dragged her closer. With their faces inches apart, she could make out the strange slate color of his eyes. What looked like a flat, dark hue from far was a striking mixture of fine-grained gray, deep green, and bluish-purple. Those eyes, so intently fixed on her, were alert and observant. Light shimmered at their depths, making it seem as if they were being illuminated from within. Beautifully frightening.

“What are you doing?” she exclaimed.

“Making this look like a date.”

Before she could digest his meaning, he lowered his head and brushed his lips over her ear. She pushed on his shoulders, trying to put distance between them, but his free hand pressed her back to his chest, keeping her in a steel grip.

“Don’t fight me,” he whispered. “It turns me on.”

That made her freeze.

“Look around,” he said soft enough for only her to hear. “Every dick in this place will assume you’re a tattle-

tale, unless we make it look like a..." his teeth grazed her earlobe, "...date."

The shiver that ran over her was uncontainable. Zavir had felt it, because he chuckled from deep in his chest. Glancing over his broad shoulder, she hated to admit he was right. Every man was staring.

"Put your arms around my neck," he instructed.

She hesitated.

His fingers splayed over her back, taking up an alarmingly big portion of skin. "You do know how to make it look real?"

She shot him an irritated look. "Of course, I do."

He laughed softly. "So brave." His voice dropped an octave, sounding darker and more dangerous. "Now kiss me like you mean it."

"What?" she cried out in shock.

"Kiss me, little human," his wicked voice teased, "so that we have an excuse to take our discussion outside."

She was about to retort with a clever remark, but he didn't give her an opportunity. The moment her lips parted, his mouth slanted over hers. There was nothing tentative about the kiss. His tongue speared past her lips as she gasped. He sucked and molded, not giving her the choice to return or resist the kiss.

His mouth was cool, but his touch seared. Heat built in her chest and spread to her belly. His fingers tightened on her skin while his free hand found purchase in her hair. Her knees turned weak when the heat transformed into something deeper, something that made her breasts tighten and her sex swell. Blood gushed in her ears. Somewhere in the back of her mind, warning bells competed with the deafening thump of her pulse and heart.

What the heck was she doing? This wasn't part of the plan. When she finally came to her senses and tried

to push away again, his hand smoothed down her back to cup her ass. She barely bit back a whimper. Her response to his uninvited touch was pathetic. How embarrassing. If he didn't stop, she'd have no pride left. Her only salvation was that he brought the kiss to a slow halt.

His lips brushed her jaw, his breath scorching the shell of her ear. "*Now* we can take it outside."

If he hadn't held onto her when he pulled away, she would've stumbled. In an effort to maintain some resemblance of dignity, or at least the pretense that she was still in charge of her body and sanity, she straightened her clothes. When she fished a bill from her pocket, his large hand closed around hers.

"Drinks are on me," he said. "Isn't that how the *game* works?"

Pulling free, she muttered under her breath, "Instead of mentioning your birthmark, Korum could've simply told me you're obnoxious."

"Careful." He pointed at his ear. "Enhanced hearing, darling."

Perplexed, she allowed him to pull her outside with his vice-like fingers locked around her wrist after he'd taken care of the bill.

The minute they hit the darkness of night, however, she pushed away from him. "How dare you?"

The infuriating bastard didn't bother to answer. He only turned his back on her and disappeared around the building.

"Hey!" She had a childish urge to stamp her foot. "Where are you going?"

With no choice but to follow, she went in the same direction to find him leaning against a tree, his boot propped up against the trunk.

"Let's hear it," he said in an almost bored tone when she stopped in front of him.

Obnoxious, scary, damn alien. How she wished she could kick his ass. "I want my family's safety guaranteed."

He clicked his tongue. "So demanding."

His gaze roamed over her chest and hips.

"If this is a trade-off, aren't you going to tell me first what you have to offer?"

Suggestive bastard. Swallowing an insult, she said, "Information on the biggest Resistance cell the world is yet to see."

He cocked a brow. "The biggest, eh?"

"That's what I said." She couldn't resist a jibe. "You really should have that chip checked out."

He only grinned. "How big?"

"Thousands."

"Here, in Costa Rica?" He sounded doubtful.

"They're spread around the world, but their leader is here. The local group is only a few hundred strong. I'm not only talking numbers, but also power. Think senators, religious opinion leaders." She dropped her voice to a whisper. "Presidents."

His arm muscles flexed as they tightened across his chest. "You have the names?"

"I have better. I have proof."

Gray eyes narrowed. "Weapons?"

"They have scientists on their side. I don't know what they're working on, but I know it will be big. It's supposed to catch you unaware, when you least expect it."

"Can you get this information?"

"Yes. I can also tell you all the cities they plan to attack."

"Why work from here and not one of your big cities, like New York or London?"

“Because they plan to bring down Lenkarda first.”

The K stilled. “Impossible. Our defense system is too advanced.”

“You’re mistaken. Your protective shield can be destroyed.”

He moved so quickly she jumped. The one minute he was slumped against the tree, and the next he was in her face. “What’s your role in this movement?”

“My brothers are second-in-command to the leader.”

He towered over her, his gaze boring into hers. “You’d betray them?”

“Not betray them. Save them. My brothers,” she licked her dry lips, “are on a suicide mission.”