

Peculiar. Most peculiar.

Smoothing her dress with a dismissive off-hand brush, the slender Kaminoan crossed one leg over the other and waited. Though normally such a waste of her time would have been irritating, she found the moment of calm most welcome as she prepared herself for the negotiations to come.

Still a newcomer and readily aware of this to the Arconan trading circles, she'd been fortunate to find someone as friendly as Diy to show her the ropes, as it were. Of course, this would not change anything in the long run and when she finally ran Diy out of business and bought up her assets, there might be a hint of cruel irony present. But at the moment, she did not concern herself with such matters.

No, at the moment she other, far more pressing matters to attend to. In a surprising spout of bonhomie, Diy had offered to help her establish some connections with local traders and even helped to set up this meeting. Of course, due to Arconan custom, such first negotiations were to be approached like courtship. Or at least so she had been told by Diy.

She found such notions to be *peculiar*.

The trendy café she presently occupied, filled with the carefree chatter of the rich and fortunate to have been spared the worst of the recent conflict and associated carnage involving the Collective, was offending her every sense. The pungent scents of freshly roasted caf, foamed bantha milk and gasser baked morsels mingled with the sensory hell of chirpy chatter, upbeat musical notes and haphazardly strewn tables she could have arranged in a far more efficient manner given half a chance.

The clientele and waitresses, wallowing in their superfluosity and blissfully unaware of how utterly pointless lives they led, were dressed in stark contrast to her simple, kaminoanly elegant gown of blueish beige. The harsh yellows and greens with bombastic patterns were, as far as she gathered, the season's hottest flavor and in that sea of springtime bliss, her pale features seemed even more pronounced. This had earned her a few odd stares, but she'd ignored them as easily as the rest of the café's ambiance. This was not a social call, she was here for a purpose.

"Miss Ha, I presume?" The voice that called out for her was soft and elegant, holding a cultured aire, but betraying a faint edge of fakeness. A rather peculiar combination for a merchant, though she did not dwell on it.

Turning to look at the man, she was greeted by the well-groomed features of a smiling Togruta. The frock he wore was in the same yellow and green as other patrons' choice, but the patterning was far more delicate and the cut unmistakably tailored to his athletic frame. The purple of his skin and deep, dark-blue eyes lay in stark contrast with his attire and the pale, almost bone-white montrals did little to clear up the jumbled nature of his ensemble.

Either the man wished to emulate a prakith peacock, or he simply had no sense for elegance and was merely following the trends of the month. Neither option struck her as particularly comforting.

“Indeed,” Yumni replied, standing upright to give a more formal bow of greeting. As she did so, the man’s eyes seemed to light up, his smile gently widening as he followed her motion in awe, neck craning to behold her as she stood a few heads taller than him.

“Praexus Vans, at your service, miss Ha,” the Togruta finally managed after a moment’s pause to shake himself out of his stupor. “And let me state what an honor it is to finally meet someone of your caliber. When Diy told me about you, I had assumed she must be jesting, but for once I am glad to have listened to her.”

Yumni blinked, taken aback by the forward compliment. Of course, it was flattering to hear someone praise her skills and accomplishments, but that her reputation had already reached so far was, unexpected. “The pleasure is all mine, master Vans. Please, have a seat,” she replied in kind, swaying her hand at the chair opposite.

The Togruta took another moment to look at her, before briskly taking his seat while making sure the hems of his frock were left uncrimped. A stylishly clad waitress came to pick up their orders and a few moments later, the two sat across each other with an expectant look on their faces.

“So, miss Ha, I have to admit that I was not aware of your presence on Selen. Indeed, before our mutual acquaintance told me about you, I did not even know our world was graced by beings of such *stature* as yourself. Truly, an honor.”

Yumni tilted her head ever so slightly to the side, curiosity mingling with confusion. His flattery was perhaps to be expected, but it seemed somehow *misdirected*. “Since we both appear to favor honesty and openness, I can admit the same, master Vans. Indeed, Diy did not even clue me in on what your particular field of expertise is.”

The Togruta’s smile widened, a hint of feline curiosity glinting in his eyes. A remnant of his homeworld tingled his montrals, a call for the hunt. “Why not make it interesting? I will let you find it out over time. Once you think you’ve got it, give me your answer.”

“A game? Are you suggesting we purposefully withhold information for entertainment purposes?” Yumni cocked her head to the side, her insubstantial brow furrowing.

“Yes,” he nodded. “And, to make it even more intriguing, why not wager a bet? If you guess correctly... I shall indulge any single wish relating to my profession.”

“And if I do not?”

“I don’t consider myself an unreasonable man. A kiss will do fine.”

The Kaminoan stared at him blankly, the suave Togruta's expression flinching only after the tenth agonizing second had dragged past. Just as he was about to voice the painful question, the pale woman suddenly leaned forward and planted her lips against his.

"Mmmphg?!" Praexus squealed in shocked surprise.

"There," Yumni stated matter-of-factly as she withdrew from the impromptu kiss. "Now, tell me what I wish to know."

"Tha... What?!" he shook his head, trying to understand what had just happened. "That's not how... You were supposed to..."

"My time is limited and hence of intrinsic value, master Vans. If you wished a game, I indulged *and lost*. Now, please, do go on," Yumni gestured expectantly as the waitress who'd wisely chosen to come around for a second pass finally dared to approach and placed their beverages upon the table.

Having finally regained some measure of composure, Praexus let out a defeated sigh. "Very well, miss Ha. I see you're not afraid to take direct action. I can respect that." He reached for his cup and took a sip of his extra-dark imported single-source caf, while Yumni applied a bit more milk to her filtercaf and waited for it to cool down a bit.

"In fact," his eyes flashed with a hint of playfulness once again, "I *admire* that..." The cup hid his grin almost perfectly.

Yumni stared at him with a blank, expressionless face. The moments dragged on once again. She finally broke the conversational lull. "I am pleased to hear this, now, to my questions." There was the faintest vibrations of irritation in her voice, a tremor of some deeper agitation.

"Oh yes, oh yes," Praexus nodded, tapping his spoon against his cup and placing it down, though he'd never even used it. "How best to describe my work?" he paused for a dramatic sigh as his gaze panned the invisible stars in the café ceiling. "How do you feel about art, miss Ha?"

"I find it convenient to transport, but difficult to sell reliably."

"Not *quite* the answer I was expecting," Praexus admitted with an awkward cough, "but in my eyes it is the barest expression of one's self, a seamless extrapolation of the soul, a vignette that..."

"What does this have to do with your business?" Yumni interrupted him mid-wax, having grown increasingly irritated by his stubborn refusal to speak clearly.

“Oh, absolutely everything, miss Ha,” the Togruta smiled widely. “You see, art is my business and business is my art. It flows from my very soul and I could not imagine doing it were I not inspired, by someone such as you, perhaps.” His eyes flashed a coy glance.

Hers remained as inscrutable as ever.

“You wish to be *inspired* to conduct business?”

“Correct.”

“And you wish to be *inspired* by me?”

“I already am.”

“And so this meeting is...?”

“A chance to develop something deeper and beautiful. I wish to make art of you – *with* you.” His eyes shimmered with desire.

Hers remained as inscrutable as ever.

She reached for her cup and downed her drink in one go before leaving a credit chit on the table. “Thank you for your time, but I believe we are done here,” Yumni stated bluntly as she rose to leave.

“No, no-no! Don’t leave! Not yet, we’ve only met!” Praexus insisted, reaching out and grabbing her wrist.

She looked down at his purple hand, his desperate digits curled around her slender, pale forearm. “I would prefer if you released your grip, master Vans.” The words were a statement of fact, but somehow – *somehow* – they managed to hold the faintest of threats. They were enough to make him release his grip.

“It seems we’ve both been led astray,” she stated coolly. “I suspect you are not a merchant at all and I dread to consider what lies Diy might have told of me.”

“A muse.”

“Beg your pardon? You find this amusing?”

“No! No-no, it’s what she said. Told me you were a muse,” the Togruta hastily explained, hands raised in placating gesture of denied responsibility. “Though, I must admit you have left me *inspired*.”

The Kaminoan’s large eyes narrowed imperceptibly and the man realized he might have gone too far, again. “Let me assure you, that is *not* the case. I came here hoping to establish a working relationship with someone representing Selenian commerce guilds, but it appears

we both were led astray by our *mutual friend*.” If it was possible for a Kaminoan’s voice to drip with sterile spite, Yumni had somehow managed it.

“Ah, I see now,” Praexus admitted, nodding to himself in thought. “There might have been some clues I chose to ignore, like the fact she couldn’t stop chortling when she told me about you. She told me she was drunk, which I suppose she was as well, but in hindsight, there was probably something more to it than that. Girl could always hold her liquor far better than that.”

“*Quite*. Now, since we are unlikely to get anything out of this...” She paused and glanced at him, the man’s gleaming eyes having taken on that familiarly annoying shine once more. She reconsidered her words. “Since *I* am unlikely to get anything out of this, I’d prefer to depart. Apologies and I hope you won’t take offence when I say I wish we’ll never meet again.”

“Perfectly understandable, miss Ha, and let me assure you, I will have some strong and choice words with Diy when I meet her again. However, I also feel dreadful about this all and I would like to make it up to you. Please, sit, and tell me about yourself. It is a beautiful day and it would be a shame to waste it on bad spirits.”

Yumni looked at him like a cheap sausage. The offer was as enticing as investment in an ice cream parlor on Hoth. She resumed her departure.

“You mentioned you’re a merchant?” Praexus insisted, clinging on to the verbal hem of her dress. “Please, tell me more about it. Some of my clients are merchants too. I’ve always found their line of work to be –” he hesitated, audibly “– interesting!” The falsehood was clear, but the desperation genuine. It did not sway her.

“Are you in the same line of work as Diy? I know a few of her friends as well. They come by my place a fair few times, actually. Pick up paintings, though I’ve never seen them displaying them. Must have a whole gallery aboard their ships.”

The verbal flood was irritating, but amidst that torrent of nonsensical anecdotes, she found unlikely morsels of intrigue. “One of them wouldn’t happen to be the good master Gaela’an?” she finally deigned to respond.

“W-why yes, yes he is. He buys a great deal of art, in fact, both mine and others’. But I’ve never taken him as a cultured person, to be frank.”

“That’s because he isn’t. He’s a sleazy bum with as much aptitude for trade as a bantha astromech. However, he sits on the legacy of his father and controls a generous handful of shipping lanes that churn out an indecent amount of credits for him. I could wait for him to run it all to the ground, but that would take more than a lifetime of bad decisions, or...”

Praexus looked on expectantly, suddenly intrigued by what might have actually piqued this odd woman’s interest.

“You can aid me in his downfall.”

“How?!” he blurted, his sudden outburst enough to draw the attention of at least a dozen fashionably disinterested patrons. “How?” he tried again, in a lower tone. “I’m just a painter.”

“Indeed, but seemingly a fairly prolific one. I assume you are fairly productive?”

“Well, one doesn’t wish to brag, but…”

“How many paintings?” she snuffed his self-aggrandizing in the bud.

“Fifty.”

“A year?”

“A month,” he admitted sheepishly.

“I see. In that case, let me rephrase my earlier statement; I believe you’re an over-inflated credit cherner.”

“Beg your pardon?!”

“Your paintings, they’re not being bought because they’re lovely to look at, but because you churn out so many they can be used as currency. A clever way to bypass import taxes, since Arcona’s previous government seemed to have a soft spot for the arts. Especially rainbow colored, peculiarly.”

“So, you’re saying that they keep buying my paintings just because they use them as money? For what?!”

“Drugs, I’d wager. The sad little tubs Gaela’an operates aren’t good for much else and even now there are at least five people in here who are intoxicated on illegal substances. Seems like the perfect sort of contraband.”

Praexus looked bewildered and a little confused. “You are a very strange woman, miss Ha,” he admitted after a moment of thought.

“No, I am not, but I understand the confusion. People tend to mistake a keen mind with a strange one, since most find novel things to be strange and perplexing.”

The Togruta furrowed his brow, not quite sure if he’d just been snubbed or not. He decided it hardly mattered. He resolved the issue with a suspiration. “Very well then, miss Ha. So how could I be of service then?”

“Your books, you do keep some record of what paintings you’ve sold?”

“I don’t, actually, but I remember every sale. Each creation is like a child and a parent would never forget selling their baby away...”

Yumni’s stare was cold and uncomfortable.

“That sounded better in my head,” he admitted with an awkward cough. “Pologies.”

“Unnecessary, as I am more offended by this dishonesty of claiming to remember every sale of your paintings when you produce six hundred pieces a year.”

“That is quite alot, isn’t it?”

“Quite. Now, let me make this as monosyllabic as possible; I want you to keep track of your sales from now on. Understood? And at end of each month, you’ll tell me who bought how many paintings and how much they paid you for them. If you have any acquaintances in –” she scribbled a few names on a napkin and slid it over “– these systems that happen to know the local art scene, you call them up and ask if somebody has been overspending on bad art.”

Praexus looked at the napkin and then at Yumni, then back at the napkin again. “Remember when I said you were a very strange woman, miss Ha? Let me rephrase that. You’re a very *scary* woman.”

“Good,” she nodded, deigning to curve her thin lips into what might have construed a smile. “First sensible thing you’ve said all day, master Vans.” She turned over her cup on the saucer and left.