

Friend for a Day

I - Rise and Shine

"Welcome to Solar Bean!" Ashiok said, with as radiant a smile as any krakun had ever managed. "What can I do to help start your day?"

"What you can do is wipe that damned smirk off your face, you misbegotten hatchling," the disheveled yellow krakun on the other side of the counter replied. "I don't need your false enthusiasm at such a horrid hour."

Ah. One of those krakun.

"Get me a triple shot, whipped, Mocha Sulfusion."

"And your name, sir?"

"Sarsuk."

Ashiok finished writing "Starsucks" on the cup and put it on the conveyor to his right. It moved along to the anup crew station. Sarsuk made a few swipes on his strand to pay the invoice that appeared on his screen.

"Your drink will be ready shortly," Ashiok said in a bubbly tone. "Enjoy your solar powered day!"

The yellow krakun leered at Ashiok with palpable contempt before lumbering away.

Ashiok didn't mind the grumpy ones. It was hard getting up so early. He was sure that Starsucks guy was a bright and joyful lizard during normal hours.

The rest of the morning went pretty well, there were a couple krakun who shared a brief sentence or two beyond making their order.

There was even one who he almost had an actual conversation with! A beautiful blue incandescent krakun that had flirted a little with him. He was so thrilled when she complimented his few smatterings of white among his red scales! Normally krakun would think it, well, markedly less than attractive.

He gave her his employee discount, but she seemed to be in a hurry to get to work after that.

Still, it was nice to almost make a friend.

II - Warm and Cozy

Ashiok was finally making his way through the apartment complex that evening. He hadn't planned on working a double, but he figured might as well make an extra gold when he heard the manager had called out.

Quit, actually. Got an entry level position at a starship manufacturing company. Now that he was gone Ashiok was the most senior employee at his location, even though he'd only been there a little over four major years or just under a quarter millennium. Maybe the owner would promote him to manager after they hired a replacement to work the counter.

He burst into a little trot the last few steps down the hall to his apartment. Manager Ashiok! Had a nice ring to it.

Letting himself in the apartment, he squeezed past the door that didn't quite open all the way and stood on his bed to clear the path so the door could shut behind him.

It was a snug little room. Had plenty of space for his bed, his mini fridge to one side, and even enough room for him to stand on the opposite side. As long as the door was shut and he moved the waste basket, anyway. He would have loved a window, though, to give something for the eyes to rest on besides grey stone. The small seven meter broadcast monitor mounted to the wall had to suffice.

He had a large shelf in the wall on the open side of his bed. It was on hinges so he could lift it out of the way to stand in that spot, or lower it and sit at it like a desk. He could only sit on the hard stone floor for so long, though.

He knew he should study for his online classes but the day had just been too tiring. He laid in his bed, belly up. His tail unfurled and smacked the wall next to the cleaning crew airlock under his monitor and opposite his headboard. He turned on the monitor and started flipping through channels to find something fun. Would be nice to have someone to watch it with, though. Maybe even... yeah. He supposed he might as well. Better to have at least someone's company.

Kirren jolted out of her chair, high into the air and then landing hard onto the floor, at the deafening bang that accompanied the violent shake to the crew quarters. No matter how many times it happened she would never get used to it.

Wouldn't need to if my owner wouldn't swing the door so hard on his way in every damned day, she thought.

As she picked her face off the floor she noticed a pair of legs next to her and followed them up to meet the face of the ringel standing over her. Rolo reached down and offered her his paw.

"One of these days you're gonna jump straight through the roof of our quarters," he chuckled as he helped her up.

She straightened the fur on her tail and picked up her strand. Glancing over to the corner behind them she saw her pup hadn't been awoken from the ruckus, though she wasn't sure how that miracle was possible.

"Layabout just wants to play all day, eat everything in reach and then pass out as if she earned a hard rest." She looked over at Rolo. "She gets that from you, you know. She has your snoring too."

He laughed. "Well, she had to get something from me. Her beauty is all you."

Kirren rolled her eyes. "I'm not your mate, Rolo, you don't need to flatter me with your corny bullshit."

He shrugged. "It never worked on you anyway. Maybe that's why I desire you so badly." He flashed a smile at her and lifted her paw to his lips. He had almost made contact with the paw when a short ringel behind him smacked him over the head with a small pillow.

"I'm sorry, *who* do you *desire* so badly?" she said.

"You Vamille, dear, of course."

She smacked him again. "Then what were you doing with Benny earlier, huh?"

"You were still out working. You only know because you were with Benny after you got back."

Another smack. "And you didn't even stop me!"

"That doesn't make sense! Why would I stop either of you?"

She started wordlessly hitting him with the pillow over and over.

Kirren couldn't help but think they were cute together. Vamille always got jealous when Rolo was with other ringel, and got annoyed when he didn't get jealous after she did the same. She was an oddball of a ringel, but cute nonetheless.

There was a thud against the bulkhead by the airlock.

“Master is turning in for the night, sounds like,” Rolo stated, seemingly unaware of the huffy little ringel raining blows against him. “You know, I’m always worried he’s going to hit the airlock and break it. Kill us all.”

“Well, you all anyway,” Kirren teased.

“You’re lucky that freaky stuff worked. I thought for sure that sourang took your goods and gave you poison,” Rolo said. “You sure looked dead for a while.”

“That’s because you don’t understand the sourang. They care too much about their reputation, they-”

She was cut off by all of their strands blaring a short but loud tone. The face of a red krakun filled the screen on each strand.

“Attention cleaning crew!” his voice boomed. “I require your presence.”

Rolo moaned. “No, not this. Please.”

Their master smiled, his fangs glistening. “Tonight, I’ll let you decide the form of our evening’s entertainment.”

“As if there was a good option to choose,” Vamille grumbled, hitting Rolo one last time for good measure.

“Which will it be?” he continued. “Drama, action, or rom-com?”

III - Movie Night

A couple of minutes later, four environmental suit clad ringel made their way out of the airlock and into the apartment. Vamille stayed behind to watch the cub. It would have been either her or Rolo, they hated watching krakun videos. Benny and Fran actually enjoyed them, or at least the action packed ones. Kirren absolutely loved them all. All the ones she had seen, anyway.

They made their way to the mini fridge and climbed up the ladder on the side. The top was mostly used as their master’s night stand, but there were also a few pieces of padding arranged to make a makeshift couch for the ringel to rest on while watching the video.

“Okay, you guys chose action so we’re going to watch the third Tenshi Meguna flick,” Ashiok said excitedly. “It picks up right after season four, so forget about the first few episodes of season five you guys have already seen.”

“Good, forgetting these things is something I can do,” Rolo sighed. He had elected not to press the button for the speaker on his suit, so only the ringel next to him could hear.

"I don't know how you dislike Tenshi Meguna!" Kirren exclaimed, nudging him. "A krakun fighting the giant beasts on a newly colonized world using only the blades attached to his forearms? It's so much fun!"

"Can't watch anything that doesn't star a ringel," he explained. "Just feels too alien."

"He's got a ringel slave that helps him in a giant robot!" Benny chimed in. "You could just focus on him."

"Considering season five starts with his funeral, I think that would be unwise for this movie," Rolo pointed out.

"I thought you were good at forgetting this stuff," Kirren teased.

"Not as good as I wish to be."

As the movie went on, Kirren was certain this would be one of her favorites. The lio military had raided the new colony and unleashed their secret weapon teased in season three: a genetically modified lio soldier that was the size of a krakun. He wielded a gigantic black blade that had a gravitation disruptor wired to the edge, letting it cut through solid titanium plate like paper.

"Genetic modification is a fascinating subject," Ashiok said munching on Tasty Frootys. "In my bio-chem classes we discussed ways to alter and modify how DNA will unfold in utero. But modifying an already full grown adult to such a degree would be incredible. I wonder if it's possible."

Kirren giggled. "Beats me!" She wished she could take off her enviro-suit and blow her master's mind, but letting the krakun know about sourang gene-splicing was unlikely to go well.

On screen, Alek, the ringel slave owned by the protagonist, had just used his krakun-shaped mech's ultimate move: Drill Blade Claw. It punched a hole through the monstrous lio's armor and chest and he lifted the lio high over head triumphantly. Kirren let out a huge cheer.

Suddenly the lio's eyes snapped open and he swung the blade into the mechanical krakun. It pierced the seal around the cockpit, leaving the ringel pilot exposed to the sulfuric air.

As the lio ripped the severed claws from his chest, Kirren gasped as the gaping hole healed before her eyes.

"So, that's how you're able to survive our air! Instant regeneration!" a black krakun shouted. "No matter, I shall avenge my fallen comrades!"

"Give hi-" Alek coughed, as his body visibly burned away in the cockpit. "Give him one for me, master."

Kirren was extremely glad this one was an animated flick. With some of the live action, she was never sure if it was CGI or a real slave suffering on screen. She assumed it came down to which was cheaper, and didn't want to find out which that was.

She glanced up at her master, his focus on the screen despite having seen this movie who knows how many times already. He was so adorable the way he got into these videos, almost like a little pup.

She supposed he almost was, at least by krakun standards. Still, it made it easier to enjoy the videos when watching with someone else who enjoyed them just as much.

To be honest, it was nice to enjoy *anything* with a krakun.

IV - Employee of the Decade

Ashiok stretched out his snout in a yawn as he entered the coffee shop. He was pretty used to being clocked in at oh-three-hundred but he had never managed to get over the grogginess that always haunted him at that hour. Thankfully, the discounted coffee he'd make for himself in a moment would remedy that.

After he verified that the anup had started up the machinery and prepared the stations to his satisfaction, he marked a cup for himself and passed it to the conveyor belt. As it moved away towards the slave station, the owner came out of the back office and made his way towards Ashiok.

"Ashiok, punctual as always," the deep orange krakun said with a grin. "As expected of our twenty-time 'Employee of the Decade' winner!"

"Twenty-four-time, Drennor, sir," Ashiok corrected. He had won every decade since being with the company. Not that there was much competition. The manager was exempt and the other employees didn't exactly have enthusiasm for the job. Most barely stuck around for even a scant fifty years before leaving for another job anyway.

"Yes, yes," Drennor dismissed. "You've been a great help 'round here. And that's why I want t'discuss the vacancy left by the former manager's sudden absence."

Ashiok felt a sudden flare of joy.

"Things run pretty smoothly here, but with that damned manager not givin' any notice someone else needs t'fill in or else I'm gonna be stuck going over things here." He snorted as if the notion itself was a grave offense. "So, I need you t'step up for me Ashiok."

"Of course sir!" Ashiok said excitedly. "I often helped fill in for Denit when he had to leave early, so I know all of his duties. I can start right away!"

“That’s the spirit. Let me introduce you t’the new employee so you can get him trained,” the owner said. He turned his head back towards his office. “Trolec, get out here!”

A small olive scaled krakun poked his head out from the office. His attention focused downward at the strand in his talons. “Hold on uncle, this vid is almost over.”

Judging from his size and his voice, he couldn’t have been older than seven hundred years, not even through with his growth spurt.

“You’re on company time now, son. Your mother may have offered a discount on her coffee beans for your employment, but that doesn’t mean you can loaf about.”

The olive krakun angled his head away and to the side groaning, “Fine,” before waddling over. Ashiok imagined teaching such a young krakun to work the counter might be difficult, but he was sure he could do it. It’s not like most krakun had any enthusiasm for the job.

“This here is Ashiok,” the owner said, laying a claw on Ashiok’s shoulder. “He’s gonna teach you how t’manage this place.”

Ashiok looked to the owner, his head tilted in confusion. “You mean, uh, manage the counter, sir?”

The owner snickered. “That’s funny Ashiok! Tryin’ to pass your job off on him,” he said before turning back to Trolec. “Listen close t’tthis one,” he said patting Ahiok’s shoulder. “Does damn near everything around here, but I need you t’make sure you can run the place even on his off days.”

The owner strolled back towards the office. “We open in thirty minutes so give him a quick tour before I show him how t’sort inventory reports.” Without waiting for a response the office door closed behind him.

Ashiok’s eyes began to hurt and he realized he hadn’t blinked in several seconds. He was still staring at the closed office door trying to catch up to what had just happened.

“So, hey,” Trolec said, grabbing Ashiok’s coffee as it came around the conveyor belt to the pickup station. “Just message me what you’re supposed to do and I’ll check later to make sure you did it.” He walked into the lounge of the cafe to take a seat at one of the couches, his talon flicking the screen of his strand trying to find another video to watch.

V - A Slave and her Owner

Ashiok lay in his bed, skimming through the options in his strand to find something to watch. Anything to take his mind off of work. He decided on an old easy-going action flick, hoping some pulpy and un-serious fun ought to do the trick.

He sent a message to his cleaning crew but didn't order any of them to come. *Might not be so bad to just watch this one in silence*, he thought.

The video was just starting when he noticed an enviro-suit finishing the climb up the fridge. The tiny ringel turned and put a paw to the button on her helmet.

"So, what are we watching?" Kirren asked.

"I just put on Millennial Transmogrified Warrior Krakun: The Movie 2," Ashiok answered.

"Oh, I love this one! The Super Slasher at the end is so cool, I wish he had more screen time."

Ashiok grinned. It was nice having someone who could appreciate the classics with him.

Since they had both already seen this one they spent much of the movie talking to each other. Ashiok felt like he should feel weird confiding in a slave, but she was so attentive that it really did help.

"So he complained I got his name wrong, but it's hard to hear sometimes. He was already grumpy before that anyway. Oh, and I met this beautiful blue female! I've never seen scales sparkle like that. And she was so nice! I was really hoping we could be friends. She flirted a little before she had to go."

"Oh, that was the day you had the store to yourself, right?" Kirren asked. "So, did you take her into the back? Give her a little 'tour' of the private office?"

"Why would I do that?" Ashiok asked, tilting his head. "I don't think she would find the managers office interesting."

Ashiok heard her hoarse laughter through the suit even without the intercom pressed.

"Sorry," she said now holding the button for the speaker. "I forget you're a pup sometimes."

"Says the two decade old hatchling," he mumbled, looking away and blowing through his nostrils.

"So, whatcha gonna do without a manager? You have full run of the place now?"

"No," Ashiok sighed. "The owner put his brat nephew in charge. He doesn't know how to do anything, so I'll be doing half of his job too."

"What! That's unfair. You should demand to be manager if you're doing the work."

"It doesn't work like that. He has a deal with one of his suppliers. It's always like that with krakun businesses."

“Well, can't he make you assistant manager?”

Ashiok hadn't even considered that. He *would* be doing at least half the duties, after all.

“It would have been nice if he thought to do it, I guess,” Ashiok admitted.

“You can't just wait for others to give you what you want, you gotta take the initiative!” Kirren stood up on the couch. “Tomorrow, go up to him and demand to be an assistant manager!”

“I'd rather not get... confrontational.”

“What? Why not? You're a krakun, what have you got to fear?”

“Bigger krakun?” Ashiok said with a smile.

“Oh. Yeah okay, that would be scary. But if you have some trouble getting it up, just take a deep breath, gather yourself, and speak with confidence. You'll do great!”

Ashiok smiled. It may have been weird getting a pep-talk from a small mammal, but it was really nice to be able to talk through his troubles with someone.

“Okay,” he said definitively. “Thanks.”

Kirren noticeably froze up for half a second and then quickly switched her attention to the screen, seemingly enamoured with the ending credits.

“Uh, yeah, no problem,” she managed through the intercom after a couple seconds.

After releasing the intercom button her paw started caressing her enviro-suit covered tail. Was she uncomfortable now?

Ashiok silently cursed himself. He always blurted out the dumbest things! The ‘thank you’ had slipped out reflexively. He had meant it, but maybe it was improper to thank a slave. He had never seen another krakun do it. Never seen another krakun interact other than to give orders. So how was he supposed to fix it? Maybe he should apologize. No wait, that would be worse, wouldn't it? Maybe he should order her to apologize? No that didn't seem right either. Maybe...

“Thank you too,” Kirren's voice came through the intercom interrupting his thoughts. “For you know. for the movies and the conversation and... stuff.”

She looked up at him. “It's fun.”

VI - Station in Life

“And your name, sir?”

"Sarsuk," replied the yellow krakun. He leaned in and leered at Ashiok. "Sar. Suk."

"Your drink will be ready shortly. Enjoy your-" Ashiok stopped as the krakun had already wandered off.

Ashiok looked into the lounge to find Trolec reclined on one of the sofas, furiously typing a message into his strand. Ashiok didn't think the young krakun had looked away from the device once since they'd opened two hours ago.

Now that the line was empty it was now or never. The owner probably wouldn't show up in store again for years unless another issue popped up. Ashiok placed a bell on the counter so he could be summoned if another customer came in, and then made his way to the back office.

Inside Drennor sat at his desk going over something at the slate he kept there. He barely glanced up for a second to see who had walked in before going back to his strand.

"Somethin' wrong, Ashiok?" he asked. "You should go t'Trolec for it. He'll be in charge once I leave here. Was honestly thinking 'bout leaving now. Hard to get work done in this stuffy room."

"Actually, I was just hoping I could talk to you, sir." Ashiok entered the room, and shut the door behind him. "About the management position."

"What about it?" the owner asked without looking up from the slate.

"W-well," Ashiok started. He took a deep breath and gathered himself. "I was wondering if you would make me assistant manager."

Drennor looked up now. "And why would I do that?"

"You said yourself yesterday that I do everything around here. I'm sure you would have made me manager if not for your family situation. And I understand that, but how about making me assistant manager? I can perform those duties when Trolec isn't here and still work the counter."

The owner sighed and put the slate down. "I should'a known better than t'compliment an employee. I thought you had accepted your station in life, and so you could handle it." He walked around the desk and made his way closer to Ashiok.

"My... my station, sir?"

"Yeah." The owner moved past Ashiok to the door. "Come with me. I wanna show you somethin'."

Ashiok followed him through and stood on the other side. The owner gestured behind the counter.

There were several stations along a conveyor belt that the cups Ashiok had marked were going through. All around were dozens of Anup operating machinery to make the drinks and keep the process running.

Ashiok had never really gave them much mind before. He checked the stations every morning to see if they were set up and ready, but he never really paid much attention to the anup. They were essentially part of the machinery to him.

He took a closer look now. One of the anup was running along with the cup, reading off the special order instructions written along the side. The anup was about three meters tall, shorter than the cup itself by a fair bit. He was beading sweat, his black fur glistened as he worked to keep up with the conveyor and read aloud the orders at the same time. Another anup ahead of him shouted something back, and the first anup doubled back to race for the next cup so he could start reading that order out to the appropriate stations.

Ashiok never really considered how hard the anup worked. They were always ready for him when he came in every morning. In all the years he worked here all the machines were ready to go. He never had an issue. And they worked even harder throughout the rest of the day, it seemed.

Even the ones not scampering around seemed to be moving as fast as they could to operate whatever station they occupied. He glanced to the cups making their way though the final stations. An anup in a control spire operating the pump stations, another controlling the whip and foam stations. Yet another anup controlling a switch to send some cups down to the blender station if they required it, another adding toppings once they were finished.

Since krakun didn't trust robots after a disastrous event in the past, they had to rely on slaves for this sort of thing, Ashiok knew. But he never stopped to consider how much work went into it. And he had never had a single issue with the anup. Did they enjoy it? How were they rewarded for such labor? Maybe that's what Drennor would be getting at.

"See all them anup running around?" Drennor asked, interrupting Ashiok's thoughts. "They know their place. They know they're gonna work the stations for their entire short lives. They know their job is t'serve their betters." He turned to Ashiok.

"You're really not any differen', asides that you don't know it yet," he finished.

Ashiok stared dumbfounded at the owner. "I'm no-" But the owner cut him off.

"Yeah, no differen'. You got no connections. You're content doin' labor. You take orders well. And you're gonna work t'serve your betters your whole life."

He turned back towards the cafe. "It probably won't be here, but you'll be doin' the same thing wherever you end up. Takin' orders and doing the grunt work. I mean, you been here near a quarter millennium already, right? No one sticks around that long!"

“Sir I'm only here while I pay for Alameda Junior College, just until I decide on a major to-”

The rest of his words were drowned out by the owners laughter.

“Two hundred years in JC? Whelp, most krakun have finished university by your age, even the slackers. You're over a millennium, aint'cha?”

“Not quite, within the next major year.”

“Whelp, you got no ambition, no desire, and worst of all you're comfortable where you stand. You got what most krakun would consider the worst outlook ever: you're happy with your life!”

The owner laughed again. “I mean, mostly. I've seen you try and talk to customers these past two days. I assume you ain't got no friends.”

He gave Ashiok a smile. “They all went on t'better things, right? Like the previous manager. But you got nowhere to go whelp, they all saw it. That's why none kept in contact. I won't give ya the manager title because there's nothin' in it for me. You get a higher pay, and then just keep doin' what you're doin' for me now.”

The owner shut the office door and started to head towards the entrance. “I don't need t'offer anything t'keep you around, and I can replace ya if you leave. You're basically a slave in a krakun's body. Without connections and with all the time you wasted, anywhere you go to work people will know what you are. But I wouldn't worry too much.”

He stopped and glanced behind to give Ashiok one last smile. “Bein' happy with your limited life works well for slaves. So no more talk about managing. It'll only give ya desire for something more.”

Ashiok watched the manager go in silence. The chatter of the cafe seemed distant as he worked to process everything that had just been said.

A chime sounded as an anup activated the mic for the lounge speakers.

“Order ready!” Came a voice speaking anup through the loudspeaker. “Mocha Sulfusion for Saarzuck!”

“By the *dead gods*, whelp!” bellowed an angry yellow krakun in the lounge as he stomped over to the pickup counter. “Do I need to carve the glyphs into your hide?”

VII - Dreams and Desire

Ashiok stared at the ceiling above his bed, as he had for the past three hours. His train of thought had been the same since the conversation with Drennor—going over his hatchling friends, and when they disappeared, thinking of his family, and when they stopped checking in.

His parents had gifted him the five ringel for his first major year moved out on his own, but even then they had sent it via courier. They hadn't even messaged him on the strand, it just had a card saying “keep tidy”.

He spent some time going through social media to hunt down his old contacts. They hadn't all finished with university, like Drennor said they would have, but most of them had. The rest were seniors. Those that graduated held higher positions than even the previous manager had received in his new company.

He took another look at the account of Bel, one of his closest hatchling friends. One of the few who enjoyed the animated videos with him, even when most other krakun had moved on. Ashiok had messaged him a hello and congratulations on his new job of Lieutenant Commissioner for Planetary Acquisitions hours ago, before his shift ended. But there had been no response despite the checkmark confirming Bel had seen the message.

Ashiok put the strand on the charging station on the far side of his mini-fridge, rolled onto his side and closed his eyes.

Ashiok opened his eyes some time later and turned to his strand. Still no response from Bel.

“Why would I respond to you?” came a deep voice from behind him.

Ashiok turned around to face a purple scaled krakun. Behind him was not the wall of Ashiok's apartment but a misty grey void.

“You're a nobody,” Bel continued. “You haven't changed since you were a century old whelping. I bet you still rewatch those old vids too,” he snickered.

“I- I'm not a nobody! I do a good job at my work. I help people with their early mornings!” Ashiok protested.

“Yeah, you do serve them pretty good I guess,” said Drennor walking out from grey mist to stand beside Bel. “After all, that's your place in this universe. That's all it ever will be.”

“No!” Ashiok shouted. “That's not true. I'm still young, I-”

He was cut off by laughter coming out of the mist. Despite being clearly derisive in nature it had a melodious quality to it. The beautiful blue krakun from the other day stepped out, still snickering.

"You really are adorable, believing you have a chance to make something of yourself." She walked past Bel and Drennor, coming right up to Ashiok. He did his best to suppress the blush he felt coming on.

"Look at *you!*" she giggled. "All that blood surging. You actually think some little pup like yourself could attract a mate like me."

She was close now. Her snout practically touching his as she peered slightly downwards at him.

"Hmmm, yes. Just a pup. Like those mammals," she giggled again. "You really are just like a slave, aren't you?"

"I'm not a slave! I'm not!" Ashiok cried. He put his claw up to push her head away from his, but something was wrong with his scales.

He took a closer look. They... they weren't scales at all. His claw was covered in red fur. And they weren't even claws. Bringing his other arm up and turning it over he saw five long fleshy fingers. He looked down and found he was standing fully upright on two paws. His tail swished into view, long, covered in red fur with five rings.

Another fit of the blue krakun's giggles brought his attention upward. His paw was still on her snout trying to push it away, but now her snout loomed over him like a mountain, her giant face filling his entire field of view. His paw below her nostril didn't even span a single scale on her hide.

"Just a tiny, little slave serving your betters," she jeered. "Hop to it pup. Get me my drink!"

She pulled her head back, high into the air above Ashiok and produced a cup in one claw. She dropped it over him and he had to leap out of the way to avoid being crushed by the monstrous plastic container.

A fit of laughter roared in his ears and he looked up again to see a crowd of giant lizards towering over him on all sides laughing hysterically.

He stood and ran, throwing himself left and right, darting between their claws to try and find an escape. He kept bumping into the talons and bounding off them as he ran. No matter where he ran there were just more krakun towering overhead, more laughter coming from the skies.

"-ter," came a faint voice. It was hard to make out among the roaring laughter.

“-aster.” Faster? He picked up the pace, moving as quickly as his paws would allow. The forest of talons he was running through began to blur as he raced by. It dawned on him slowly that the voice hadn't been speaking krakun.

“Master!” he heard the voice clearly at last. Was that Kirren's voice? Something was odd about it.

“Master, please calm down!” She sounded distressed.

He looked around to find her. They should escape these horrible krakun together. No one should be left at their mercy.

“Master, it's okay!” she shouted again.

He looked behind him. No talons were in sight. No laughter roaring overhead. He saw only the void, and a single figure in it. Kirren came forward and embraced him. She wrapped him in her arms and held him to her chest.

“There you go. Nice and easy. It's all right now,” she cooed.

He whimpered softly and pressed himself against her, feeling her fur in his paws.

“There's no danger here. Just you and me. You're safe, I promise,” she said.

As he nestled against her he heard a faint beeping. It grew louder and louder, and he started to have trouble focusing on the world around him. It slipped away as the beeping grew in intensity.

VIII - Compatible

Ashiok slammed a claw on his strand, silencing the alarm. Normally dreams faded from his mind quickly upon awakening but this nightmare seemed etched into his thoughts. Every detail as vivid as though they had actually happened. But why had he dreamed of Kirren coming to comfort him?

He lay back on his pillow, his head knocking hard into the headboard. He heard a scream as something small and furry fell off the board and landed on the top of his snout between his eyes.

“Hey! Would you stop banging things already!” Kirren's voice shouted from where she sat on the front of his face.

“Kirren?” Ashiok sat up.

“Ahhhh! Watch where you swing your head!” She was gripping his snout with all her strength to avoid being tossed off when he moved or spoke.

He reached up and plucked her from his snout. He opened his fingers and let her rest in his palm. “What are you doing out here?”

“Trying to wake you!” she shouted. “You were thrashing everywhere in your sleep. The bulkhead was even dented in one spot. If you hit the airlock you might have killed the whole crew!”

Ashiok was about to apologize when he noticed what was so odd about her voice. It wasn't coming through a speaker. His groggy mind took a few more seconds to realize she wasn't wearing an enviro-suit at all.

He must still be dreaming, right?

“Well, uh, I guess everything is okay now. If you just put me down, I'll-”

He wasn't dreaming.

“How... how are you able to survive in sulfuric air?” he whispered in disbelief.

Her ears lowered in fear. “Oh. That. Shit. Uh... surprise?” she put on a big grin to try and mask her anxiety. Even to one largely unfamiliar with ringel expressions it wasn't convincing.

“A ringel who can breathe krakun air... that's why you saved me in my dream!” Ashiok exclaimed joyously.

Kirren now looked terribly confused on top of anxious. “I... did what now?”

“You're the answer! You're what I need to become a somebody! Once I sell you to a research team I bet every krakun will know my name, and then-”

“Wait! What?” Kirren cried. Her expression reverted back to fear. “You can't do that! They'll tear me apart! Don't send me off to be a lab experiment!”

Ashiok looked at the little ringel as she stared up at him in abject terror. A vision of staring up at an enormous blue krakun flashed in his mind.

“I'm sure you'll be fine. You'll be their star! You'll only live a few hundred years or something, I'm sure they won't want to waste any of it. You'll be treated well.”

“They don't even treat *you* well! Don't you know how other krakun treat slaves?”

His mind flashed back to the cup falling, threatening to crush him.

“That's just... I mean...” Ashiok bit his lower lip, trying to think of a counter argument.

His mind snapped to Bel, chiding him for acting like a hatchling. He took a deep breath and narrowed his eyes at her.

"No. This isn't a negotiation." He closed his claw around her, just tight enough to hold her fast. "You're my possession. You're worth fame and a small fortune. I will no longer be stepped on or ignored!"

He moved off the bed towards the door. His empty claw hovered over the pad to open it when his thoughts turned to running through the krakun towering above, laughing at him. As those krakun looked down in amusement of his plight... is that what her fate would be?

"I thought you wanted a friend?" Kirren shouted.

"A krakun friend. Someone I could spend a millenia or two with."

He turned to face her. "You mammals aren't so bad I guess. But you have the lifespan of insects! It would be like making friends for a day. Would it even be worth the effort?"

Why was he bothering to explain himself? Why was he hesitating at all? The answer to everything was in his claw. Isn't that what the dream had showed him?

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "I have done that. A few of the sourang, I've only met them once but we shared drinks together. But, at least they were real friends! Will any of those new krakun really be your friend? Won't they just use your new position? Won't they eventually turn on you?"

He knew she would say anything to persuade him. Still, he found it difficult to deny such eventualities.

"And who's to say," she continued. "Maybe they don't even give you the credit. Maybe they forget to mention your role in this discovery."

His grip loosened a little. They would do that, wouldn't they? What was it Drennor had said? Everywhere you go, krakun will know what you are.

"Then I lose either way," he said. "But at least this way I have a chance to be something." His open talon moved to the pad by the door.

"You want to be something? Then be *my* friend!" the little ringel shouted.

He was about to press the key to open the door when the vision of her embracing him in the dream flashed in his mind. The feeling of how comforting it had felt washed over him again as if it were a real memory.

"Absurd," he scoffed. A krakun and a mammal. Could they even relate to one another? There was no way such different creatures could be compatible.

He looked closely at Kirren. He hadn't ever seen a ringel up close without an enviro-suit before. She seemed calmer now that he wasn't moving to open the door, though still distraught, about as much as he felt when there were krakun towering above him.

He remembered his thoughts on first hearing her voice, how he didn't want her to suffer the cruel krakun either. What *would* she face at the hands of researchers? Why did he care at all?

The question prompted a realization; he did care, even if he wasn't sure if it made any sense. He loosened his grip all the way. Kirren took a seat on his palm and exhaled in relief.

No different, Drennor had said.

"It might sound a little absurd, so how about we give it a trial run today," she said, resting in his claw. "That's all I got for a lifespan anyway, right?" She gave him a little grin.

IX - One Day

On the video screen a dashing, black scaled krakun stood atop the broken monstrosity of the giant lio.

"You never had a chance, mammal!" the krakun snarled triumphantly. "Your genetic modifications that let you heal instantly accelerated your aging, pushing your cells a major year every day."

The lio beneath his talons groaned as he noticeably withered, his skin sagging off his skeletal frame and his fur fading in color to a dingy grey.

"You may have been able to match our size, but you're still an inferior being to your very core!"

Ashiok took another Tasty Frooty from the bag, breaking off a small chip and passing it to Kirren on the makeshift couch before popping the rest into his maw.

"See, that's what I thought the first time we watched this," Kirren said munching on the Tasty Frooty. "They didn't show any of these side effects at all until the very end. And the movie only takes place over three days right?" She held up her strand. "It says right here lio can live past two hundred. He might be old, but not disintegrating!"

"Lazy writing," Ashiok said nodding. "But at least the fights are enjoyable."

As the credits began to roll, Ashiok turned his thoughts to everything he had learned today. Sourang, the vermin living in the walls, had built a functioning society. They had found a way to modify the genes of mammals to survive sulfur-rich environments. And, hardest to

believe of all, he was finding himself enjoying the company of a tiny mammal slave more than he had any krakun before her.

He stole a glance over at her as she yawned and laid down across the couch. She had said she would be able to get another dose of the serum if he gave her some supplies to trade, then he could sell the serum for fame and golds. But the longer he thought about it, the more he questioned how smart such a move would be.

How would krakun react to the news that their primary hold over slaves was in jeopardy? The sourang had not been enslaved because they were too difficult to control as they could easily live within krakun sulfur-rich environments. If all of the mammals they had enslaved could do the same, could the krakun continue to control them all? Certainly not without incident.

What would have to change now that mammals could access areas thought secure? Could lio slaves be ferrying secrets back to their armies? Individual slave movement was largely unregulated and untracked. It was assumed there were places they simply could not go. Would they have to be replaced as AI servants had been after the threat was realized?

Ashiok shivered at that last thought. There had been a terrible war against the rogue AI, and even outside of the war the krakun society as a whole was thrown into complete chaos as the krakun had to do every mundane task themselves for the first time in countless millennia. If slaves were no longer a viable option, the best case scenario would be at least experiencing that upheaval all over again as they transitioned.

Surely the krakun who brought that upon society would be vilified, not celebrated.

"Well, it's pretty late and your schedule says you work tomorrow," Kirren said as Ashiok turned off the video monitor. "Should probably head back so we can both get some sleep."

"Actually, I was wondering if you wouldn't mind sleeping out here tonight." He still felt so strange asking a slave what she thought. It felt even weirder knowing he was more comfortable with her nearby.

"Afraid you might need another rescue from your nightmares?" She asked with a slightly teasing edge. "Hey, what was your nightmare about anyway? What in the hells do krakun fear?"

He thought about it a moment. "I don't expect it to be much different than what you fear, honestly. Especially the giant krakun," he added with a smile.

"You keep saying there's bigger krakun somewhere out there and *I'm* gonna be the one having nightmares!" Kirren said with a laugh. "Let me see if Rollo and Vamille are alright watching the little pup all night for me."

Only a few minutes later and Kirren was sound asleep, snoring louder than a creature her size ought to be capable of. He shouldn't be surprised, it was a long day. Awakened by the world shaking, worried everyone you know is going to die when the airlock burst, almost being sold off as a test subject.

It had been a long day for him too, he supposed. He was still trying to sort out his feelings. Did he really value her as a friend? Did he view her more as a pet? Was it just desperation and all of this would pass once he made a proper krakun friend again? Would he make a proper krakun friend ever again? And if he did, would she still even be alive by that point?

He didn't know. And he was getting tired of asking. The only thing he wished to know now was if there might be a way to extend her life. Even a brief millennia or two, so they could spend some real time together. It wasn't fair to lose a friend after such a short time, surely there was some way to extend it?

Bio-chem was a major he had been considering. He enjoyed all his electives in the subject, and completed the coursework early as he was always excitedly looking to what was next.

How had she said the serum worked? Reprogrammed her DNA with sourang data? What if he could do the same, make her part krakun? Could he figure out a way to do it in time? She was still young, even for a mammal. Maybe if he had some of that serum to analyze, get a jump start...

He opened his snout wide into a yawn. All of this could wait until tomorrow. He pulled his pillow up over the fridge to the cushions that made up the tiny couch. He laid his head down by the sleeping ringel and nuzzled her with the top of his snout so that her forehead rested against his.

As he drifted off he recalled vividly where she held him tight in his dream to keep him safe. She stirred slightly in her sleep, putting a paw against his snout. He smiled widely as consciousness faded.

It was nice to have a friend.