



Claimed by the Krijese (Krijese Warlords #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Kala

All Krijese have known is war. Between battles and the disease that ravaged our population, we have almost ceased to exist. Which is why when newcomers—humans—arrived on our planet, my people stole many of their females to breed. None survived.

I crave nothing for my kit but to live in peace. After a small group of us left our former tribe and created a new village, we have allied with our former enemies to achieve that peace. But then Sorin meets Iris, a human female newly arrived on our planet, and becomes fascinated with her.

He makes no secret of his desire to bring the two of us together. But I cannot give him what he wants—or what I secretly desire—because it is too dangerous for her.

Iris

All I've ever wanted is for people to see me. It's not until I leave Earth for an alien planet and meet a little boy who belongs to a local tribe that I am.

Then I meet Sorin's father. After hearing how their species murdered humans, he terrifies me. The more I'm around them, though, the more I realize my fears are unfounded.

When Kala offers me a mating of convenience and what may be my only chance at becoming a mother, I accept. Before long, it's not just the child I want, but also his father. Now I have to convince him love is worth any risk.

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Kala

Our world has changed since the first ship filled with humans arrived on Tavikh many moons ago.

I stare up at the bright, clear sky from our small village within the hillside trees and watch as this latest ship slowly descends.

For a brief moment, it obscures the sun, until the alien object dips below the treetops and they hide it from my view.

Unless things have changed from the other ships that have landed here, I already know where it will set down.

Outside of the human settlement that is beyond the trees where the Tavikhi village is located.

I have only a few regrets in life, and participating in the attacks upon the newcomers—and the subsequent deaths of far too many of them—is the biggest one.

King Armik frequently punished me when I refused to force myself on the females my people stole. Warring is all I have ever known, and I have killed hundreds from the various tribes inhabiting this planet since I picked up my first war axe as a kit.

However, I could not bring myself to harm any of the females in that way.

I was willing to endure whatever consequences I must. The weakness of the humans

reminded me far too much of the weakness suffered by Sorin's momo.

She had been small. Thin. Always hungry.

Always sick. While she was not my true mate, I cared for her in the only way a Krijese knows how.

When she wasted away to nothing after the unknown disease spread and joined our god in the holy place, I grieved her.

Sorin races past the main fire and skids to a halt in front of me. "Gogo, was that another human ship?"

"Yes."

"Do you think any of these new humans will go to live with the Tavikhi?"

I lay my hand on his small shoulder that is still far too thin after the illness he suffered the previous cold season. "I do not know."

"Perhaps one of the new females is your mate."

"You know that is not possible."

My kit stares up at me with a small tilt to his head. It is the way he always looks when he does not understand something. "Perhaps these females are different than the other ones."

As much as I tried, I had been unable to fully hide the fact there were humans in our old village that the others attempted to force kits on. Sorin is too young to realize exactly why all those other females died. "I am sorry, but all human females are the

same.”

The flicker of light in his darkened eyes dims. “Healer Sage and the shefira are very different from each other. Healer Sage’s hair is the color of fire and the mounds on her chest are far bigger than the rest of the females.

She also has the most curvy body of them all except for Astrid.

The warrior Remi is tall and slender like one of the fiku trees that fills the forest and her hair color is the most similar to our floks.

How can you say all human females are the same when the mates of the Tavikhi warriors are nothing alike? ”

I had not thought to explain how breeding works to my kit so soon, but if he is to understand my meaning, then he must learn. At least enough to satisfy him about why these new arrivals will be no different than any of the other humans who have come to Tavikh.

“Come.”

With my hand remaining on Sorin’s shoulder, I guide him to the tent we share.

It is one of the few that makes up our village.

Just before the Tavikhi killed King Armik and the males who attacked their people the final time, the remaining members of our tribe—the ones who no longer wished to fight and only wanted peace—moved here.

The cold season was harsh, and we lost two of our elders, so our numbers are even less than they were before.

I guide Sorin into our dwelling and gesture to his pallet. He seats himself on it, and I lower myself to my own.

“Krijese and humans are not able to mate in the ways Tavikhi and humans can. There is something within us that does not mix well their females. When Krijese and humans have attempted to have young in the past, none of the kits or females have survived. None of them.” Far too often I can still hear the ragged cries of the momos as they attempted to give birth until they faded away to nothing.

“As I said, it is impossible for humans to mate with Krijese.”

“What is it within us that does not mix with them?”

I pause to think of a proper explanation. There is only one. “Our seed. Humans are unable to accept the essence Krijese males produce that create young.”

It is the only explanation I have for why the females who did not sacrifice themselves to their god died within two or three turns after giving birth, and why all the kits eventually wasted away.

That stubborn tilt of my kit’s head arrives, although I can tell there is some confusion as well. I can only guess what will leave his mouth next.

“Perhaps it was only those ...”

“No, Sorin.” I slice my arm through the air. “Human females are not meant for Krijese.”

His shoulders drop and he hangs his head.

There is pain in my hearts from being so harsh.

I lean over and stroke his floks. “Let us go hunting. Benham said he, along with Talek and Cecily, would be doing so as well. If we are lucky, we will come across them and you can spend time with your friends.”

Sorin nods without enthusiasm and rises from his pallet to grab the war axe the Tavikhi weapon-maker crafted for him several moons ago. Benham is not only a mighty warrior and hunter, but he is the most skilled of anyone I have ever met at making weapons.

I reach for the war axe that used to belong to my gogo and secure its sheath around my shoulders and chest. Sorin steps outside without a word, and I release a sigh before following.

Ever since Healer Sage saved my kit’s life and my small tribe became allies with the Tavikhi, he has developed great affection for their human mates.

Since the sickness wiped out nearly all of our females, including Sorin’s momo, he has been surrounded by males.

The care he received from Healer Sage during his sickness was the most gentleness and tenderness he has ever been given.

Even before his momo was taken. Krijese know war.

We know survival. We do not know gentle.

We do not know tender. Neither are in our blood.

“Another human ship has arrived.” Ortak approaches from his tent.

“Yes.”

Sorin waits nearby. It is clear he is listening intently.

“How many more will they send?”

“I do not know.” As I am the only one of us who has spent any time in the Tavikhi village, I have learned a few things about the human’s old world.

Perhaps they will not stop sending them until our planet is as overrun as theirs.

“That is something we cannot worry about though. So long as they leave us in peace, they can do whatever they wish.”

“Do you not have concerns?”

“It is better not to invite worries if we do not have to. As I have said, we wish only for peace. If they allow that, then I have no concerns.” I nod and walk over to Sorin.
“Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

We stride out of the village and into the surrounding trees along the path we have carved since arriving here all those moons ago.

Our steps are not nearly as quiet as the Tavikhi’s, but we are slowly learning how to become hunters of more than two-legged creatures.

The mellenje call to one another from high up in the branches.

Their feathers are bright against the leaves and I spot several nests cradled within the treetops.

I sweep my gaze along the ground, keeping an eye out for any leburin burrows.

While far too small to satisfy a grown Krijese, the meat of three or four of them is enough for a single meal for Sorin and Gannen.

They are the only two kits left of our people.

A fact I try not to dwell on. Once they are gone, the Krijese will cease to exist.

“Gogo, look.”

The quiet voice makes the uneasy thoughts disappear like smoke and I focus on where Sorin is pointing.

In the distance, there is the flash of movement.

The dhibani that live within the hills. They roam in herds and when agitated will charge.

I have nearly been gored by a long twining horn on more than one occasion.

“Stay low, and keep your footsteps light.” I stretch my arm backward to keep Sorin somewhat behind me.

Together we carefully make our way toward where at least one beast is located.

A small break in the trees gives view to a relatively small herd.

Several younglings are blocked in by many adults for protection.

As easy as it would be to target them, they will not provide the meat our people need

to survive.

It does not sit well with me to orphan young, but I must see to the survival of my people above all others.

We creep closer and closer still, watching where we place our feet so as to not disturb any twigs or branches, until we are nearly within striking range.

I silently withdraw my war axe and Sorin follows my lead.

When one dhibani jerks its head up and freezes as though scenting predators close, we pause all movement, including our breaths.

Several beats pass before the dhibani relaxes and returns to its grazing.

I nod at Sorin who repeats the gesture, and together we rush forward and throw our blades at our prey.

Both our axes bury into the sides of two different beasts who release pained screams and attempt to escape.

Neither make it far before they collapse onto the bari-covered field. The rest have scattered in fear.

“Excellent shot,” I praise Sorin’s aim and yank my axe from my kill.

His mouth slit widens and he bares his teeth in pride. The humans would call his attempt a smile, but it is not something Krijese are truly capable of doing. Our mouths do not open in such a way as others do.

“Well done,” a gruff voice calls out from the other side of the field.

I ready myself for an attack and only when I recognize the three figures striding toward me do I relax. “Greetings, Benham.”

“To you as well.”

The Tavikhi warrior approaches as I sheath my weapon. At his side are two kits; a male Tavikhi and a human female, each carrying their own small spear. Both of them grin widely and observe the dhibani we brought down.

“You must teach us how to throw an axe like that.” Talek nearly bounces with excitement, while Cecily is calmer in her enthusiasm.

Sorin makes himself stand slightly taller. Although he is younger than both Talek and Cecily by two sun cycles, he is near to the male kit in height. “I will ask Gogo to bring me to your village soon and we will practice.”

“Would you like to join us?” Benham asks. “We will continue our hunting until the sun has nearly descended to the hilltop and then return to the village.”

“We accept.”

The Tavikhi nods, and the three of them wait while I collect Sorin’s and my kills.

I hoist the beasts over my shoulder and join the others.

The kits chitter to each other slightly behind us as we move through the forest, although they keep their voices soft and low as to not scare away any prey.

I glance over at Benham. He is the largest of all the Tavikhi warriors within Zander’s tribe.

We are of the same build and possess an almost equal number of scars on our bodies. They are signs of our strength.

Since I am certain he witnessed it as well—I am not sure Benham misses anything—I bring up the human ship that just arrived. “How many do you think will be on this one?”

He glances at me and does not ask of what I speak. “My keeshla says they have sent anywhere from fifty to over a hundred with each ship that has landed here.”

Whereas Benham is the largest Tavikhi, his mate is the smallest of all the females.

I still find it difficult to picture them together.

They are as opposite as two beings could be.

Yet the ferocity in which he cares for Maeve would make the hardest of hearts soften.

It is no less than she cares for him, either.

All the Tavikhi are devoted to their mates in a way no Krijese has ever been.

“It would appear our planet continues growing.” Perhaps not in ways we wish.

“The unmated warriors in our tribe are grateful for the fact, since it would appear as though none of the females that already reside in the settlement have an interest in seeing if they are the keeshla to any of them.”

Unlike the Krijese, Tavikhi warriors have a single female that is their fated mate—their keeshla .

She is the one who makes their mating marks—dark swirling lines in various shapes and locations on their body—appear with only a touch.

Before Zander touched London and triggered his mating marks, the Tavikhi had also been fearful their species would die out.

“Yes, I am sure they are.” They have far more females and kits than the Krijese do, but Talek had been one of the last kits born to the Tavikhi until recently. It does not surprise me that their people are anxious for more females to arrive. “I wish your warriors well in finding their mates.”

Benham inclines his head, but does not offer the same to me. It is because he knows—just as I do—that humans females are not meant for Krijese.

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Iris

Nervous excitement fills me as the huge ship that's been my home for the last two months finally settles onto solid ground.

I still can't believe I left Earth for an alien planet.

Of course, there was nothing there for me and even though I didn't trust what the government said about what our lives would be like on Tavikh, I had to believe it couldn't be worse than the life I was already living.

I'd had another opportunity to leave Earth almost eight months ago through a bridal lottery for a different planet, but of the twenty women whose names had been called, mine hadn't been one of them.

Maybe it's a good thing I hadn't been picked to go to Bohna as a bride.

What would have happened to me if I'd gotten all the way there, the men had taken one look at me, and every single one rejected the idea of becoming my husband?

What then? I don't really want to think about it.

Luckily, I don't have to since I'm not on Bohna.

I'm on Tavikh. Here, I don't have to worry about impressing a potential husband.

There's no reason for me to try and be anyone other than who I am.

Not that I can hide it, even if I wanted to.

I doubt there are others here with a birthmark covering half their face or who lack one of their hands.

The captain had given instructions right before landing, but I'm glad there's a small crowd for me to follow because I'd been too nervous to listen.

We wind our way through the darkened ship, the recessed bulbs offering the only light—artificial as it is—I've seen for months.

Until now. Even from my place in the middle of the pack, I can see the bright sunshine up ahead from the open cargo hold.

Not only that, but there's a partially obstructed view of...

trees. Except they're not like any trees I've ever seen.

These are towering ones with thick black trunks the color of coal.

Which isn't necessarily odd if not for the bright purple leaves in full bloom.

The shade is a stunning contrast to the lavender sky, but both complement the yellow grass of the field spread out before us.

The dirt-packed earth beneath the soles of everyone's shoes kicks up small puffs of dust clouds with each step we take. Despite the vast differences from my planet, it's weirdly beautiful. And quiet. A breeze doesn't even blow. I've never been in the presence of such stillness before.

A body knocks into mine causing me to stumble and a harsh voice releases a curse.

“Don’t just stand there, freak. Get moving.”

I clutch my small handbag tightly to my chest and hurry out of the way, biting back one of many smart ass remarks.

Just like every other day of my life, I can feel the stares of the surrounding people.

Hear their whispers. I spent most of the trip alone in my cabin, leaving only to dart into the cafeteria to get food before taking it back to my room to eat. It was better that way.

Growing voices reach me and I circle around to the other side of the ship, only to come to a complete stop.

Almost seventy people stand staring, no doubt seeing the same thing I’m seeing.

There’s a giant, concrete brick enclosure with two thick wooden doors parted wide exposing what’s on the other side.

A snort erupts from me. Followed by a giggle. I quickly cover my mouth, but it’s too late. Several people turn and shoot me a death glare. That only makes the giggles come faster until I can’t hold them back. Tears of laughter spill down my cheeks and I snort again.

Two men approach from the doors. Each carries a spear. They reach us and cast me a narrow-eyed glare as I try to rein in my amusement.

“Welcome to Tavikh,” one of the men greets us. “I’m Gary and this is Adam. We’re the ones in charge of the human settlement.”

Settlement . I’m not sure that’s the word I would have used, but it’s an apt one.

Whispers grow louder as people share confused glances. I've barely gotten my laughter under control and it threatens to spill out again. An older man steps forward from the crowd.

"What do you mean settlement? Where are the houses and land we were promised?"

I snort again, because I can't help it. I've been told time and time again that because I'd never have beauty, I at least better have brains.

I might be the most well-read person in the entire bottom tier.

If not for the fact I'm a bottomer, I could have probably graduated from any of the best universities on the planet.

I don't say that to brag, merely to state a fact.

Before either Gary or Adam can reply, I speak up.

"The government has done everything they can to get rid of citizens, especially those of us in the bottom tier." Nearly everyone turns to me, and I swallow, then force myself to continue.

"Why would the government spend money on housing for bottomers on a different planet if they wouldn't even piss on us if we were on fire back on Earth?"

We're here—all of us—because we were so desperate to get away from that place and those in charge know that. You all were conned."

Grumbles and rumblings filter through the crowd and many people shift.

Whether it's from defeat or because they're ready to lay into me for daring to burst

their hope-filled bubble, who knows?

I stand rigid and still, scanning the faces of every man and woman who stares back at me, almost daring them to contradict anything I just said.

They can't because as much as I might disgust or frighten them, they have to admit I'm right.

Gary throws his arms up and pulses his palms toward a group of people that are slowly unraveling. Some look like they're about to get rowdy. "Everyone needs to relax. Let's help unload the ship and put things in storage. Then we'll have a meeting and discuss how things are around here."

The people aren't happy, but unless they plan on stowing away onto the ship and catching a return ride to the one place that doesn't want them anymore, then they have no choice. I'm the first to move and walk to the cargo hold where crew members have begun unloading crates.

A uniformed man glances at me, takes a second look, but quickly turns his gaze elsewhere before handing me medium-sized metal box without meeting my eyes.

It's lighter than it appears although there's still some heft to it.

I head toward the settlement, passing Adam on the way. I pause for a second.

"Where's this go?"

Just like my whole life, he stares at me with mild horror. I can tell how hard it is for him to maintain eye contact. "I'll show you."

He walks toward the settlement and through the open doorway to an as wide as it is

tall, concrete brick building with a single door flung wide. Adams stops just outside of it and gestures.

“We store similarly sized containers with each other. Just stack it on top of whatever pile you find that matches.”

I nod. “You got it.”

Inside, it’s cool, despite how brightly the sun shines and warms the air around us. I find a place to put the container easily enough and nearly collide with someone coming in as I’m leaving. I jump out of the way and sneak out once they’ve gone past.

On my way back to the ship, I pass the other passengers with their arms laden with crates on their way into the settlement.

When I get close to the cargo hold, voices reach me.

They sound like they’re trying not to be overhead with how low-pitched they are.

Too bad for them I’ve always possessed a keen sense of hearing.

“—attacked us yet.”

I pause. Are we in danger? Would I be surprised to find out we were? Not in the slightest.

“I wonder if the Tavikhi wiped them all out?” A second man says.

“Do you think it’s possible?” The first man asks. “I can’t believe the settlement is still standing or that they all aren’t dead by now.”

Unable to contain my curiosity, I close the distance between us. “Why would they all be dead?”

The two men jump apart, guilt flashing on their faces. Both of them sputter.

“For goodness sake, quit acting like your mother caught you with porn.”

They turn even redder, but finally the one who appears slightly older gathers himself.

“There’s a vicious tribe of aliens who have attacked the ship every time it’s landed here.

A lot of people have been killed. They’ve done the same to the settlement after we’ve left as well and more people have died.

But the Krijese are usually here by now.

In fact, so are the Tavikhi. Since neither are, I can only assume that the Tavikhi warriors got rid of them. ”

Maniacal laughter threatens again. “Let me get this straight. There are two vicious groups of aliens on this planet that ambush and murder the humans who come here, but since neither have shown up to kill us all, then you think one group is now extinct because the other group annihilated them?”

The men exchange glances. “Well, no.”

I sag with relief but question my sanity, because I swear that’s what they just said.

“Only the Krijese are the vicious ones,” the younger of the two clarifies. “The Tavikhi have protected the humans.”

Because that's better.

"So one vicious group of aliens have murdered the humans, but since they're late, all is well?" Do they not realize how ridiculous they sound?

The older man clears his throat and scratches at the back of his neck. "I mean, I don't know if they're late or if they no longer exist."

Commotion outside the ship makes the hair on my arms stand and the two crew members rush around in search of...

something. Finally, they grab blasters from a cabinet and race toward the noise.

Do I hide? Do I try and make a run for it to the settlement?

Did I finally escape from the drudgery of the bottom tier only to die on some godforsaken planet filled with aliens?

I wait a moment too long to decide when a pair of bare feet appear in my line of sight. Bare lavender feet. Large, bare, lavender feet. Panic grips me. I'm on the verge of hyperventilating. Apparently death it is.

"Female? Are you well?"

Okay, that doesn't sound like a blood thirsty alien hell bent on slaughtering me.

"Female?" Those large, bare lavender feet move closer.

"Babe, what did I tell you about waiting for me? She's probably freaked out." A boot-clad pair of feet join the bare ones. Small, almost dainty boot-clad feet. And that voice was definitely female. A female that spoke distinct, proper, most certainly from

the upper tier English.

Slowly, I creep to the end of a large stack of crates and peek around them. The lavender feet are attached to a full lavender body covered in black lines that swirl in various patterns along his torso and arms. Golden hair flows down his shoulders, longer than mine when I have it down.

I blink at the sight of his humanoid face. Well, if I don't count the flat bone where a nose would be or the bones angled above his eyes that sort of remind me of eyebrows but aren't. It's the yellow and purple feline eyes that trigger me.

"Shit, shit, shit." I flap my arms in panic and twist back and forth at the waist while my brain short-circuits and I can't figure out what to do or where to go.

"Hey, it's okay. No one is going to hurt you."

I hear the woman's voice, but it's not doing anything to quell the flight-or-fight instinct. A blurry figure steps directly in front of me, and some part of me screams that it's time to fight.

Using strength I didn't know I possessed, I throw a wild punch that doesn't connect. My arm is stuck in mid-air and the lavender alien holds my fist within his directly in front of the face of a tall, slender human woman with thick, black hair tied up in a messy bun at the top of her head.

What tells me that I'm already dead, or dying, and this is just some death dream I'm having is the wide grin on her face.

"Fuck yeah. You're a fighter. I like you already." She takes a step back and holds out her hand like she wants me to shake it. "I'm Remi. And you are?"

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Kala

Before King Armik's death I was never a leader.

I did what I was born to do—kill—and this is all.

Soon though, I grew tired of all the death.

I only wanted peace for myself and for my kit.

That is still all I want. Somehow, because of this, I have become the one our tribe members come to for leadership.

I have been tasked with making sure the few of us that are left continue to live and thrive. Although I did not choose this role, I perform it to the best of my abilities. The responsibility of twenty-nine Krijese falls upon my shoulders. A weight that is often heavy, but I bear it anyway.

I sit near the fire and skin the kills Sorin and I brought back from our hunt.

The first moon has crested the horizon and is halfway to its zenith.

It will not be long before the second moon rises as well.

Two of our elders, Moshi and Ashrif, tend the flames and prepare the meal for the evening, although the former does most of the work.

While he will never admit to it, Ashrif is not well and has not been since last warm season.

There is a sickness within him that is slowly taking his strength.

I do not believe he will make it through the next cold season.

I keep watch in case they need assistance lifting anything.

Until then, I will work by the light provided by the first moon as well as the setting sun.

“You had a successful hunt today,” Moshi praises.

“Sorin’s skill with his war axe is improving.” He was able to bring down two dhibani as well as several leburin.

He dips his head and goes quiet. I toss the fat I finish scraping off the back of the hide into a large vessel to be used later to make cleansing bars as well as fire sticks to burn in our tents at night.

“More humans arrived today,” Ashrif breaks the silence.

I should have expected the newcomers would be the topic on everyone’s tongues. This ship is the first to have arrived on our planet that we did not attack.

“Yes, I saw it descend.” I do not look up from my task.

“Will you greet them and welcome their stay on Tavikh?” Moshi asks.

“There is no reason to do so. I have instructed all the hunting males to keep their

distance from the settlement. Unless they come in search of us, we will never cross paths with them.” It is better that way.

“What if they fear us as much as the rest of them do? Although the Tavikhi have accepted us as allies, the humans still very much have hatred for our people,” Ashrif notes, not untruthfully either.

I set down my blade and meet the elders’ gazes. “Fear and hatred are two different things. Their fear of us will keep them away. It is only their hatred that will lead them to make poor decisions, but if they do not know us, then they can only be ruled by fear.”

Moshi’s mouth claws shift. “The line between fear and hatred is often blurred, and many begin to hate what they fear.”

Ashrif nods, and they both return to tending to the meal preparation.

My elders have given me something to think about.

I am not so stuck in my hopes and beliefs that I will ignore sound words from those who have lived far longer than me.

For the moment, we will remain on the path of avoiding the humans and giving them no cause to fear or hate us.

Our tribe sits on the ground around the fire finishing our meal.

Like I often have, I catch Moshi slipping extra food to Ashrif.

I am sure Ashrif knows it is happening as well, and as prideful as he is about asking for help, he says nothing.

My hearts ache with the knowledge that with each passing season, more of our people will move on to the other side.

Unlike meals in the Tavikhi village, we are mostly quiet. They have nearly four times the number of tribespeople than we do and with the several births of the Tavikhi-human halflings, they have something we do not: hope.

“Talek said Healer Sage’s kit is the tiniest of the three that have been born.

” Sorin has spoken of nothing but the newest member of the Tavikhi tribe since he learned the news.

He has told the same story to almost every tribe member since our return to the village.

Moshi and Ashrif are his latest recipients.

“He said it is female, like the shefir and shefira’s. ”

The two elders appear to be listening intently to his tale.

“Dasha was the first Tavikhi-human kit to be born. She is already many moons old. Of course, Benham and Maeve’s kit was the biggest.” Sorin sounds as proud of the fact as the Tavikhi no doubt is. He turns to me. “Gogo, I would like to go meet Healer Sage’s kit when we are able.”

I dip my head. “We shall, but we must first give the healer time to recover and get some rest. Having a kit is a lot of work, and I am sure the female is not only worn out, but she and Jodah will most likely want to spend time alone with their new young.”

Sorin's shoulders sag in defeat, but he nods in understanding.

"That does not mean we cannot still go to the Tavikhi village for you, Talek, and Cecily to practice your axe throwing."

He perks up at this, and the not-smile comes to his face. "Yes, that would be wonderful."

"Your gogo is an excellent teacher," Moshi praises me. "Of all our warlords, Kala has always been one of the best. You will learn much from him if you continue your lessons and listen to what he has to show you."

My skills have always been used for war.

While I do not revel in the deaths of the beasts I kill, I am glad I am able to use my talent to help feed our people.

The other ten remaining warlords rotate between hunting and guarding our village.

They often do not have time to hone their hunting skills to a level that will keep our stores filled for several seasons.

That is up to me, and when the time comes, Sorin.

"He is better than all the Tavikhi." Sorin pauses. "Except perhaps Benham, but I think they are equal."

I yank lightly on one of his floks. "You are supposed to say I am the best of anyone you have ever met."

A rough sound like two stones being scraped against one another erupts from him.

While I may be teaching my kit how to throw a war axe with precision, it is the Tavikhi kits, Cecily, and Carter who are teaching him how to laugh.

“My humblest apologies, Gogo. Yes, you surpass even Benham when it comes to hunting skills. There is no one better than you.”

“There is no need for you to unnecessarily stroke my confidence in my skills. I know my talents surpass most, but I am also fully aware that one can always learn and become better.” My hearts are filled with contentment that Sorin is learning things I do not know how to teach him.

Things like kindness. Laughter. Like playing and having fun.

He does his not-smile again, which causes the two elders to shake their head. They—along with the rest of the tribespeople—do not understand this human emotion and expression. I, too, often do not understand it, although when I see the human females of the Tavikhi tribe do this thing, I wish I did.

They are an interesting-looking species with their varied shapes, sizes, and even colors of their flesh.

Sorin has tried teaching me the human words for these colors that he has learned from Talek, but they do not stick inside my head.

All Krijese are the same color. As are each Tavikhi—aside from those with mating marks.

The same is true of the Njeri, the Bohnari, and the Trivari who live on the farthest side of our planet.

The distance to where their tribe resides is so far beyond our old Krijese village, I am

unsure if even the Tavikhi know of the Trivari's existence.

There is no reason for me to know the name of the color of any species to recognize which they belong to.

Still, the color of humans range from even paler than the fields made of bari to a dark color that is still several shades lighter than a Krijese.

It is the same with their hair color. Even their eyes are different.

I have never witnessed such a multi-colored species in all my life.

Each variance makes the humans unique in their own way.

Some, even oddly beautiful in an alien way.

Krijese are not beautiful. We are harsh-looking, even the few females of our tribe. Ugly we have been told. It is one of the many reasons we are feared. Yet, I cannot help but look upon Sorin and see beauty. No matter that he is a part of me, he is, perhaps, the best parts.

"You have grown quiet, Kala," Moshi notes, disturbing my fanciful inner thoughts.

"I am merely thinking of things."

"Neither Ashrif nor I are the wisest counsel, but you may always speak with us if you wish to seek advice."

I incline my head. "Thank you. I shall consider your offer."

Moshi returns the gesture. "I believe we shall go rest."

He helps Ashrif up off the ground—a painstaking process, but I know better than to sting their pride with an offer of assistance—and the two of them slowly make their way toward the dwelling they share with two other elders.

Sorin and I watch them until they step inside and the hide door flap slaps down over the opening. He turns to me.

“Ashrif is not getting better.”

“No, he is not.”

My kit is quiet a moment longer, glancing at the tent where the two males disappeared. “Do you think he will be here next warm season?”

As much as I wish otherwise, I will not tell a falsehood. “No.”

Sorin nods slowly before facing me. “Do you think I will ever find a mate, Gogo?”

My hearts ache at the hope that is clear in his question. “I do not believe so, but not because you are not deserving or worthy of one. Do not ever think that.”

“Then why not?”

“Because there are no Krijese left after we are gone. You and Gannen are the last of us.” This is a burden far too heavy for my kit’s shoulders, and I hate that I cannot carry it for him. I tug on his flok again. “But you have something that no other Krijese before you has had. Something precious.”

“What?” Sorin cants his head.

“Peace. Friends . You will grow up with not only Gannen’s friendship, but also with

Talek's, Cecily's, and Carter's.

None of us had that when we were kits." Such a thing did not exist in King Armik's tribe.

"You do not have to battle with other Krijese for a place to live or for food to eat. You do not have to prove you are the strongest. The fastest. The smartest. You can enjoy visiting the Tavikhi and playing with your friends and know peace. It is the one thing I wish for you."

Sorin crawls over and onto my legs to rub the side of his face up and down my chest. It is something he has recently begun doing.

At first, I did not understand this action he took, but I have since come to enjoy the feel of him against me.

I stroke his floks, and he makes little rumbling sounds in his throat.

One of his small mouth claws grazes my flesh, but it is nothing more than a slight itch that needs scratching.

"I am going to say a prayer to our god like the Tavikhi's do to their goddess, and ask him to guide us both and to provide us with what we need."

As Sorin's gogo, it is my place to discourage such pointless prayers, yet I cannot find it within myself to do so.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 11:24 am

Iris

With the help of the Tavikhi and a couple of their human...

mates , we manage to unload all the supplies from the cargo hold of the ship and place them in the storage building.

Now, we've all gathered inside what Gary called the central meeting house, which is laughable since nothing about it gives the impression of a house.

It's a poorly constructed building with four walls and a roof.

The only light comes from the sun shining through the open doors.

Against the back wall is a big stack of tents we're lucky enough to call home sweet home for the rest of our miserable lives.

The utter disbelief on several of the people's faces almost makes me feel bad for them.

Maybe because I've always prepared myself for the worst I'm not more outraged by how we all were played.

Life has dealt me nothing but shitty cards.

Why should coming to another planet be any different?

“Now that everyone’s here, let me start by again welcoming you to Tavikh and New Province,” Gary’s voice carries throughout the building to those of us in the back. “As you’re aware, things here aren’t what we were told when we left Earth.”

Grumbling spreads throughout the crowd and Gary calls for quiet.

“That doesn’t mean this is a terrible place.

In fact, things here are actually better than what those of us from the bottom tier had.

Truly.” He scans the group. “We have real food, clean water, and fresh air. We have a few datapads you can borrow to read books or magazines. You can even watch movies that have already been downloaded to the devices. Are things perfect here? No, but what place is?”

The rumbles of displeasure actually start to die down.

I guess it doesn’t take much to satisfy people.

Of course, who wouldn’t be tempted by some of the things Gary mentioned?

The sad fact is, he’s mostly right, if it’s true we don’t have to eat protein bars, drink questionable water, or breathe in the smoke and grime that lingers in the air far too close to the bottom tier.

How pitiful that we all so easily accept the absolute bare minimum things humans should be afforded as though we’ve been given the greatest gifts ever.

“We do have rules everyone must follow, of course,” Adam adds to the conversation, but his gaze is locked on one of the Tavikhi-human couples.

The woman arches an eyebrow before he finally continues.

“Violence against any woman isn’t tolerated.

Violence against children isn’t tolerated. There are no exceptions to this.”

Clearly there’s a story here, if that’s the first rule being explained. Kind of like common sense warning labels that started appearing on products hundreds of years ago. Obviously someone did something.

“What happens if the rule is broken?” A female voice calls from somewhere up front.

Gary and Adam exchange glances. “Banishment.”

Whispers start up again and people glance around at each other. The two females with the Tavikhi cross their arms and glare at people.

“What do you mean ‘banishment’?” A man I can’t see asks.

Banishment. Exile. You get kicked out. Who doesn’t know what that means?

“It means exactly that,” Gary clarifies. “If you are found to have broken the rule, then you’ll be kicked out of New Province. Where you go after that is up to you. You’re just not allowed within our walls.”

“So you’re saying we’ll be forced to leave here?” It sounds like the same man poses the question.

Adam nods. “Yes. You are welcome to take your belongings and make your own camp elsewhere. The other option is you may be allowed to live with the Krijese. That depends on the severity of the crime and whether Kala allows it.”

That perks me up. Krijese? Isn't that the name of the vicious aliens the two crew members were talking about? The ones who are either extinct—which clearly isn't the case—or are just late in arriving to slaughter us all? I know I should keep my mouth shut, stay under the radar, but I don't.

“So the Krijese aren't extinct then?” I say the alien word slowly, but I still don't think I got it exactly right.

Gary rattles his head slightly. “Who told you they're extinct?”

I wave in a general way. “Just something I heard on the ship. They said the Krijese have attacked every ship that's landed here except this one. Since they didn't, the logical explanation was that they don't exist anymore.”

My comment about the attacks causes a fair amount of chaos as everyone starts talking at the same time.

Gary and Adam try to calm people, but voices rise—as do tensions.

That is, until the woman—Remi—climbs onto the shoulders of her...

mate—I can't get used to that—and, with two fingers in her mouth, releases a piercing whistle.

I wince at the sound. But it shuts everyone up.

“If everyone is done whining?” she snarks.

“King Armik and the rest of the Krijese who would have caused any of the humans harm are no longer alive. However, there is a small tribe living up in the hills that are allies to the Tavikhi. Kala and his people won't bother you.

My guess is, you'll never even see them.

Unless you break the rules. Or you make any other kind of trouble.

As far as the Krijese go, though, you have nothing to be concerned about. ”

Remi scans the room and when no one speaks up, her mate helps her down. Gary glances over at her before returning his gaze to us and clears his throat.

“Yes, as Remi explained, none of the Krijese have bothered us since their small tribe moved to the hills. That still doesn't negate the fact that if you are banished, you will be offered the chance to live with them.”

He and Adam give everyone an opportunity to voice any more complaints, but none are forthcoming.

At least, not yet. They go over more rules and how the settlement runs on a barter system with each person or family being responsible for a task needed to keep things running.

Food, clothing, and weapons are traded and everyone has access to their own water.

“If there aren't any other questions, then everyone will need to form a line to get their tent from Bruce,” Adam announces.

“He'll instruct you how to put it up if you don't already know.

When you've received your tent, you can pick any open spot out in the settlement to set up your home.

If you have a dispute with someone, talk to either me or Gary.

Once again, welcome to Tavikh and New Province. ”

Remi whistles once more, but this time from where she stands.

“Zydon and I have been tasked with extending an invitation to you all to live in the Tavikhi village with us. There are close to thirty humans, including several families, who currently reside there. We’ve also just had our most recent Tavikhi-human hybrid birth, which brings our total up to three. ”

How many women are with these Tavikhi anyway?

Three kids? I study Remi’s husband—I just can’t keep saying mate—as well as the rest of the Tavikhi males that accompany them.

Once I get past the feline eyes, the men are actually quite attractive.

In an alien way. And if seven feet of pure muscle, topped with long flowing hair that would make most women envious is your thing, I get the appeal.

“I’ll go.”

Heads whip to the side and bore into me. It hits me what I just said. What I just did. I swallow and step forward.

“I’ll go to the Tavikhi village with you.”

Remi grins again. “Excellent.” She glances around. “Anyone else?”

No one accepts.

“The invitation is open if you change your mind later,” she says, scanning the crowd

again before turning to me. “Since they’re all set here, we’re going to head out. Are you ready?”

Now ? I’m supposed to go now? “I guess. I mean, I need my bag with my belongings.”

“We’ll wait.”

Okay, then. I walk to the other side of the building where we’d been told our luggage would be delivered. It doesn’t take me long to find mine. When I turn, there’s a huge Tavikhi warrior standing right behind me, practically touching me.

“Greetings, female. I am Katem and would be honored to carry that for you.”

“Okay, Casanova, back up a hair and give Iris some room.” The other woman I’d been introduced to, Abby, approaches.

The poor Tavikhi glances between us and the bones over his eyes shift. “Who is Casanova? I am Katem. You know this.”

I press my lips together to fight a smile. “It’s fine. Thank you, Katem. I appreciate the offer, but I can get it.”

For a second there’s a hint of guilt at declining his offer, because he truly appears disappointed I didn’t accept.

I’m not used to attention from people. At least not this kind.

Not once has any of the Tavikhi or either of the women that came with them stared at me in fear or horror.

They haven't made any snide or hurtful comments.

In fact, they've been far kinder to me than anyone has been.

Finally, he dips his head. "If you change your mind, then know I am happy to help."

He walks away leaving just Abby and me. She turns my direction. "You should probably be prepared for more of that when we get to the village."

"What? People offering to carry my things?" Maybe going with the Tavikhi isn't a great idea after all. Not if they're all going to treat me like I'm helpless or something.

Abby chuckles. "Males offering to carry things. Males asking to take a walk with you. Males asking if you'd like to sit with them during an evening meal. Anything they can do that might provide them with a so-called random chance to touch you."

My spine goes rigid. "I see. So these males want to know what it's like to touch a freak, is that it?"

Abby's head jerks back and she blinks before her eyes widen and her mouth forms an 'O'. "Shit. I'm so sorry, that's not what I meant at all."

I cross my arms—effectively hiding my missing left hand—and wait. "Then what did you mean?"

She flushes and glances at the Tavikhi that have gathered by the door of the meeting building waiting to depart, I suppose. She turns back to me. "Do you notice anything different about some of the guys?"

My gaze narrows, but I slowly shift it in their direction to study them.

Each one has the same golden hair, although a few have theirs either tied back or plaited in some intricate pattern.

They carry similar weapons. Wear similar pants.

They all have long, prehensile tails that make me look twice. But then I do notice a difference.

“Some of them have black tattoos, while others have none.” Katem is one of the ones without a single tattoo.

Abby nods. “Exactly. Although, they’re not tattoos. They’re mating marks. And the only way those mating marks appear is if the male touches the woman who happens to be his fated mate.”

She doesn’t say anything else. Just stares at me, like she’s waiting for the pieces to click. Click they do. “So what you’re saying is that the Tavikhi will try to randomly touch me to see if I make those tattoos show up?”

“Mating marks,” Abby corrects. “And yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying.”

I can’t stop the laughter from bubbling up out of me. These extremely good-looking aliens are going to do what they can to try and touch me to see if I’m their mate? Somebody must really have a twisted sense of humor.

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Kala

After two more successful turns of hunting, Sorin and I head for the Tavikhi village.

We still have much more to do in order to make sure our food stores are supplied with enough to get us through the cold season, but it is important for Sorin to enjoy being a kit.

While I am away, Ortak is responsible for the safety of our people.

It is a pleasant day with the sun shining brightly. It peeks through the leaves making spots appear on the ground. The trees are fully in bloom so the trek down the hillside is sufficiently shaded and protected from most of the heat.

“Perhaps Healer Sage will be feeling well enough to let us meet her kit.” Sorin’s hope is evident in his quickened pace, despite my warning she may still be too tired for visitors. His stubborn need to see them both is wearisome at times.

“We have already spoken of this.” I have let some of my kit’s behaviors go undisciplined since he nearly died and have received many words of caution from a few of the elders. “You will allow Healer Sage to rest. Is this understood?”

Sorin flinches at the harshness in my tone. It has been many moon cycles since I have been this firm and there is a small amount of guilt for causing his reaction, but I do not soften my hard gaze. He must not forget how to listen and follow instructions.

“Yes, Gogo.” His voice is small and he hangs his head in defeat.

We continue descending the hillside path until there is a break within the walls that forms a narrow corridor.

I pause at the opening and breathe in deeply to scent for any danger in the air.

The only things I smell are the blooms of the nenuphar bush, a hint of animal droppings, and the bari that makes up the field separating the hills from the forest where the Tavikhi reside.

Confident in the safety of continuing, I lead Sorin out from the protection of the trees and into the open field with bari nearly as tall as him.

Only his head is visible over the top of it and he follows close to me as I clear the way for him to move unheeded.

Above our heads, two mellenje fly together in loops and patterns.

They dodge each other, only to come together briefly, before separating again.

They call out to one another as they pass, the ends of their wings whispering at the slightest touch between them.

Sorin usually helps the trip to the Tavikhi village go faster with his endless talking, but he is quiet behind me.

Without his constant conversation, the silence is uncomfortable.

I know I am the one who caused it with my reprimand, but I am not skilled enough with words to fill it, so silent we will remain.

Finally, we reach the other end of the field and step into the shade of the forest again.

Another mellenje calls out, only this sound is slightly different.

Most would not notice, but since I am familiar with how the Tavikhi communicate to each other without words, I reply with my best attempt at a dhembe growl.

Like the mellenje call, something about it is just off enough to make it recognizable.

There's a rustling in the trees above, and out of nowhere, a familiar Tavikhi scout drops to the ground with a solid thud. In his hand is one of Benham's well-crafted blades. I incline my head, but keep my war-axe sheathed at my back.

"Greetings, Katem."

"Greetings, Kala and Sorin."

"We come in peace and friendship." I slam my fist over one of my hearts in the Tavikhi sign of respect. Sorin mimics the gesture.

Katem does so, as well. "We welcome you in the same."

Sorin and I leave him to return to his hiding place within the trees and weave along the path.

The echo of several mellenje lead our way, until we reach the clearing that opens to the village.

Two guards are posted at the entrance. They nod in greeting.

Although Sorin and I have visited the Tavikhi many times over the last seven or eight moon cycles, I can still feel the stare of the warriors along my back.

Considering how long our people warred with theirs, I do not take offense at their caution.

I have done the same on the few occasions any of the Tavikhi have stepped into my village.

It is not that they are not welcome, but we have nothing to offer visitors, so they are infrequent.

My people are barely getting by as it is.

This place is far different than where Sorin and I live.

Here, it is teeming with life. Tavikhi and humans alike move around the village with laughter and loud conversations.

In the distance, the sounds of the warriors in the training arena reach me.

Wooden staffs strike against each other, along with capped swords I've witnessed as the males—and a handful of females—spar.

“Sorin, you are here.” Talek’s grin is wide as he runs toward us, his small tail thrashing behind him and a sparring stick in hand.

My kit thrums with excitement, and his sour mood dissolves with the arrival of his young friend. The Tavikhi pounds his fist on his chest and Sorin does the same.

“Greetings, Talek.” He glances around. “Where are the others?”

“They are sparring, but when word arrived that you were here, I came to greet you and take you to them. I have told Carter about your axe throwing, and he is anxious

for you to show him as well.”

Sorin glances up at me in question. I squeeze his shoulder both in permission and apology.

“Go. Enjoy yourself.”

“Thank you, Gogo.”

The two kits run off in the direction of the the rise that descends into the training arena without a backward glance. I head to the healer’s tent to speak with Kyler, but do not make it two steps when my name is called out. I turn and find Zander approaching.

The shefir of the Tavikhi tribe halts in front of me and each of us fist our chests.

“Greetings, Shefir.”

“To you as well. What brings you to our village this turn?”

“Sorin has been anxious to spend time with the other kits. We have had three successful turns in a row of hunting, so I thought we would take a break and resume stocking our food stores on the next turn.”

“Benham spoke of you joining him and the kits. He said you returned to your village with several good kills, including ones taken down by Sorin. Both your and his skills are growing well.” Zander claps my shoulder with a grin. The words mean much coming from him.

“We continue to learn with each attempt. Soon, perhaps my kit and I will be as good of hunters as the Tavikhi.” I cannot perform the smiling the humans and Tavikhi do,

but I hope he can hear the humor in my statement.

He must, because he expels a laugh. “Perhaps. Come, though, and have a drink with the elders and me. We are still celebrating the birth of Sage and Jodah’s kit. It is a joyous occasion.”

Together, we walk through the village, weaving between the growing number of tents, until we reach the area where the elders live, their dwellings surrounding their own fire. They sit on newly constructed benches that circle the unlit pit.

“Greetings, Shefir. Kala,” several call out at our arrival.

I incline my head and wait until Zander gestures to a place for me to sit before I lower myself down.

Once he is seated as well, one of the elders passes me the vessel containing the spirit they craft.

Behind the burning sensation that travels down to my stomach to settle into a nice warm sensation, there is a hint of fruit.

I savor it for a moment longer before returning the vessel so it can be passed to the next person.

“Benham and you spoke briefly regarding the new human arrivals,” Zander doesn’t phrase it as a question, but I answer anyway.

“Yes. I watched its descent. All went well, then?”

“Aye. Remi, Zydon, Abby, and Rojtar were among the mated pairs to greet them. The rest were a mix of mated and unmated warriors who assisted them with unloading the

ship of its supplies and placing them in storage.” Zander is given the special brew and takes a long drink.

He finishes with a sound of satisfaction.

“With the addition of the newest group, their numbers are now well over several hundred. Each one as equally shocked as every group prior to find what awaited them here.”

It has been explained often how the humans arrive expecting their own home and land, but instead they receive a tent within an unroofed enclosure that offers little protection.

“From what I have learned from Healer Sage and Zara their planet’s leaders are less than truthful with them about most things.” My people might know almost nothing but killing, but we do not tell falsehoods.

“It is a shameful thing their leaders do, giving them hope for one thing, only for it to not be true,” one of the elders points out.

Murmured agreements travel around the circle where we all sit. Yet again, I am given the vessel of brew and take a second drink before passing it along.

“London has shared many things with me about her former planet. For some of the humans, coming to Tavikh is an improvement over their previous life, regardless of the conditions in which they now live. The place she came from did not even give its citizens proper food.” Zander’s disgust is clear in the way his lip curls.

I do not blame him for the anger on behalf of his keeshla . London is a kind and generous shefira who has welcomed us into her tribe. “Your goddess has looked upon your tribe with favor.”

The shefir gazes in the direction where his and London's dwelling lies and slowly nods.

“Yes, Deeka has blessed us with great fortune by bringing the humans here, but especially my keeshla . In fact, one of the new females accepted our invitation to leave the settlement and join our tribe. The unmated warriors are hopeful that perhaps she might be a mate to one of them.”

This news surprises me. Not that the warriors want her to be one of their mates, but that a female would come here alone. To my knowledge, there are no longer any unmated females residing with the Tavikhi. It is now only mated pairs and families.

“I wish good favor upon one of your males then, that perhaps she is his keeshla .”

“Whatever path Deeka has laid out for us is where we will be led.”

The elders nod in agreement and continue passing around the brew.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 11:24 am

Iris

It's taken me less than two days to become obsessed with the adorable Tavikhi children. Back on Earth I was never around kids, although not for lack of trying. Any time I approached them or their families, they were quickly ushered away like I was diseased. After a while, I stopped trying.

"Iris, Iris," Talek calls out from halfway down the hill, his hand waving madly like I can't hear him and he wants to make sure he has my attention.

I wave back and pause briefly at the child running down with him.

A child who is most definitely not Tavikhi.

As someone who has been harshly judged by her appearance my entire life, I don't judge anyone else's because I know how hurtful and damaging it is.

But even I'm slightly taken aback by the...

alien ness of what I'm guessing is a little boy.

The two of them come to a skidding halt in front of me and Talek lays his arm over the shoulder of the other child taking care to avoid the sharp-looking blade of the axe strapped to his back.

"Iris, this is Sorin. He is going to teach us how to throw his war axe."

At least I was right about his gender. I stick my hand out in greeting—not even thinking. He probably has no idea what I’m doing. “Hi, Sorin. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Iris.”

To my surprise, he slips his small hand in mine—his tiny claws gently prick my skin—but he doesn’t shake it.

He just holds it while he stares up at me with black eyes that contain the tiniest silver spark in the center that shines like it’s been freshly polished.

He studies me for so long in silence, the self-consciousness I haven’t experienced since the first day in the village returns and I brace myself for the mocking.

“You are even more beautiful than Healer Sage,” Sorin finally rasps.

Tears burn my eyes and my face gets hot. I’m what ?

“Sage is Sorin’s favorite human. It is a great honor to be compared to her,” Talek says.

“Oh, thank you for your kind words.” I barely manage to speak without sputtering. Sage is the one who just had a baby and I haven’t had a chance to meet her yet, but she’s his favorite? And he thinks I’m more beautiful than her?

“Are you guys going to just keep standing there, or are we going to practice?” Cecily walks over to us and throws out a hand, gesturing toward the target that Benham had set up.

I smother my laugh. She doesn’t let the boys push her around at all. I love how she stands up for herself and makes sure they know she’s their equal, and at times, superior. If only I had a fraction of her confidence.

“Yes, let us practice,” Talek announces like it was his idea in the first place.

We walk to where Carter already waits. I don’t realize until we stop that Sorin still holds my hand.

The longer I look at him, the cuter he gets.

I’m still processing his features, including the vertical slit of his mouth, and the two little tusks that bracket the lower portion of it.

He doesn’t have a nose, but there’s a shadow of nostrils within the craggy furrows.

“Would you give us a demonstration?” I gently squeeze Sorin’s hand.

He slowly withdraws from me and I give him what I hope is an encouraging smile. His mouth opens and he bares some scary-looking teeth that freak me out a little. At least, until I’m struck with the knowledge that he’s trying to smile back.

Okay, he’s stinking adorable, no matter that he’s an alien.

Sorin slides out the child-sized axe from its sheath strapped to his back. He glances at the other three kids. “My gogo says your power comes from your legs and not your arm.”

He positions himself so the target that’s a good distance away is just to his right.

In a single move faster than I expect, he raises his weapon above his head, takes a step with his left foot, and launches the blade.

It hurls end over end until it embeds directly in the center.

The kids cheer, and Sorin ducks his head, but I can tell he's pleased with the praise.

"Excellent job." Even if he'd missed, I would have still given some kind of compliment. Making kids feel good about themselves has to be one of the most important things a person can do.

"Thank you, Iris." He jogs over and yanks the axe out of the target and returns to the others. "Keep your eyes on the place you wish to strike, no matter what. Your hand will go where you direct it. Accuracy will improve with each throw."

I don't know who—or what—a gogo is, but the instructions Sorin gives don't sound like something a little boy would say. They sound like he's repeating words from someone much older and wiser.

"Who would like to try first?" Sorin asks.

Three hands go up at once, and to my surprise, the boys defer to Cecily.

I'm not sure if it's so they can see what they're up against and prepare themselves, or because they expect her to fail and they can show off.

She steps up, and Sorin carefully hands her his axe by the handle.

She mimics his pose, and her little tongue sticks out of the corner of her mouth.

Cecily relaxes her shoulders, straightens her spine, takes a deep breath, lets it out, and throws just how Sorin showed her.

I've watched her spar with the boys, and she's better than Carter and nearly as good as Talek, so the fact she hits the target doesn't shock me at all.

What impresses me is that Cecily hits it almost dead center.

The boys, Sorin included, gape. I clap—maybe a little extra loudly—and congratulate her.

She practically struts forward to grab the axe. Her raised brow when she passes it to Talek makes me snort, because there is clearly a challenge in her gaze. It's an unspoken, "Let's see if you can do any better."

We all watch as Talek approaches the same place Cecily stood.

Like her, he gets into position, but there's a tension in him that she didn't present.

It's obvious he's worried about his performance.

His throw is off-center, but considering I doubt I'd even be able to hit the target, it's still a great shot.

"Well done." I clap for him, too.

Talek's disappointment is tangible, but he doesn't throw a fit. He walks to the target, gets the axe, and brings it back to Carter. A small hand slips into mine again, and I glance down. Sorin doesn't look up, but keeps his eyes on the human boy who takes his turn.

It's unfair to not watch Carter, but I can't turn away from the boy at my side.

I observe a few more details with him this close, including the fact his hair isn't like human's or Tavikhi's.

It's thick and ropery and appears coarse.

He has it loosely tied back with a piece of leather and it barely skims the top of where I assume his shoulder blades are, if his anatomy is similar to mine.

Sorin glances up at me and the tiny silver spot in the center of his eyes sparkles.

Cecily and Talek cheer. Crap, I missed Carter's throw . I quickly check the target to see how he did. The axe is buried right on the edge, but at least he hit it.

"Way to go." I make sure to throw in a few extra woohoos, since I can't clap with Sorin holding my hand. "That's way better than I could have done."

His cheeks are flushed, and he trudges over to get the axe.

I feel for him, because he probably tried his best. Talek and Cecily offer their congratulations as well.

I'm so glad they try to make him feel good and don't gloat over how much better they did.

If only everyone built up their friends like that.

Humans could learn a lot from these kids.

The four of them continue taking turns practicing. Sorin is the only one who's consistent. The other three are all over the place. They rib each other good-naturedly and in no time, they're all laughing and having a good time. Until Sorin turns to me and holds the axe out.

"It is your time to practice, Iris."

"Oh, no. Weapons and I aren't a good combination." I raise my left arm to remind

them of what I'm missing.

Four pairs of eyes widen.

"Is that what happened to your hand?" Talek is the first to ask. "Someone cut it off?"

I snort-laugh at his sweet innocence. "No, I was born this way. My right arm and hand might be stronger to compensate for the lack of my left one, and while I can certainly hold a weapon, wielding it with any kind of skill would take a lot of strength and a lot of practice. Which also probably includes a lot of accidents. Ones I'm not sure I'm up for. "

"This is practice," Sorin points out. "Besides, you are at least as strong, but most likely stronger, than the four of us. If we can throw it, then I have faith you can as well."

Echoes of "yes" from the other three fill the air, and the kids stare at me expectantly. I sigh.

"Okay, fine, I'll try. But if I cut off my other arm, I'm going to be rather annoyed." Not that I really have any concerns that'll happen. It's just kind of fun to needle them a bit.

I swipe my now sweaty palm on my pants and carefully take the wooden handle of the axe from Sorin who still holds it.

To my surprise, it's weightier than I expected.

Then again, I'm not exactly sure what I expected.

I position myself where the kids did in relation to the target and glance out to gauge

the distance.

From here, it looks a lot farther away than it did when the four of them were throwing.

I try to relax like Cecily did. To loosen my shoulders and hips and any other part of my body that's tight, which is all of it, basically.

Like her, I take a deep breath and try to recall what Sorin said at the beginning.

Something about keeping my eye on the target no matter what, and using the power from my hips, not my arm. Sounds easy enough, right?

My focus narrows on a single spot in front of me, and when I feel like I'm as ready as I'm going to get, I raise my arm and the axe with it, breathe, and throw.

Two things happen at once. The axe goes soaring and it's obvious I overestimated my strength and underestimated my eyesight.

The loss of the weapon, plus my extreme lack of grace makes me lose my balance.

I brace myself for impact with the ground, but it doesn't happen.

Instead, I find myself suspended mid-air with a large, warm body at my back, and two thick arms supporting me under my armpits.

I tip my head back and gaze up at my savior.

If I had any breath left in my lungs it would have been released as a scream.

Instead, I flail and scramble to my feet on my own.

Once there, I spin and stumble back a few steps, nearly falling on my ass, my attempt at being non-judgmental about appearances tossed out the window.

Before me is a larger, much, much scarier version of Sorin.

In fact, he's terrifying. He has the same greenish-black skin that's more black than green in certain angles.

His thick, black ropey hair is unbound and sweeps back off his forehead to fall nearly to his waist. There is no pretty silver spark in the bottomless eyes that bore into mine.

They're nothing but dark shadows on top of dark shadows. I shiver at the darkness within them.

Sorin's little tusks that bracket his vertical mouth slit are cute. Adorable, even. This man's—and there's no mistaking him as male—are huge. Pointy. Dangerous. As are the black claws that tip his fingers.

“Gogo, you saved Iris.”

My gaze darts to Sorin who moves to stand next to the large version of him.

I glance at the adult male, to the child, and back again.

At least now I have an idea what ‘gogo’ means, because my guess is I'm looking at Sorin's father.

Another guess tells me he's one of the Krijese that used to slaughter the humans.

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Kala

I have almost forgotten what it is like to be feared.

Until now. Until her . It radiates from the human.

Not only from her eyes, but her scent reeks of it.

The unpleasant odor makes my nostrils itch.

I also do not like the fact that Sorin is witness to it.

He is only a kit, and there are two things in this world I have wished to shield him from, even if I know it is impossible.

Fear and hatred for our kind. Yet, I have exposed him to it once again.

“You have nothing to fear from me, female.”

“Iris?” Sorin tilts his head, and there is confusion in the way he says her name.

Talek and the two human kits stare back and forth between her and me, but remain silent. There is a tension in the Tavikhi kit. This ‘Iris’ glances at Sorin, and to my surprise, there is a softness in her gaze. One she did not look upon me with. The female clears her throat and attempts a smile.

“Sorry, I was just startled for a second there.” She turns her gaze to me. “I’m Iris. Are

you Sorin's father?"

"Aye."

She wipes her palm on her leg, but in a way that I do not think she wishes it to be noticeable, and takes a small step, then another, toward me until she is within an arm's length.

Then she carefully reaches out her hand—one that trembles—as if she thinks I will grab her. "It's...it's nice to meet you."

I stare at her outstretched arm, unsure what it is I am supposed to do with it.

"You are meant to hold it, Gogo," Sorin rasps quietly beside me.

Iris moves to withdraw her hand, but before she can, I clasp it within mine, taking care not to scratch her with my claws.

Her palm is warm and slightly damp. But her skin is soft.

Perhaps even softer than the fur of a leburin.

I try to recall if I have ever touched the flesh of another human, if only by accident, but I cannot recall.

Surely I would remember if they were as soft as this Iris is?

"Um, actually, you're supposed to..." her voice trails off and she swallows. "Never mind, it doesn't matter."

"No, if I am doing this incorrectly, I would like to know the right way." Perhaps it is

a failing in me, this need to do things the proper way in which they are meant to be done.

“It’s a human way of greeting people called a handshake. Like this.” Iris gently, but firmly grips my hand and moves it in a shallow up and down motion before pulling away and dropping her arm to her side.

“I would like to be shown one more time so that I may fully understand.” Perhaps because it is also an excuse to experience the softness of her skin one last time.

“Oh, okay.” She holds her arm out again, and I take it within mine, mimicking to the best of my ability this shaking thing she did.

“Greetings. I am Kala.” I study her eyes that speak of hardship as well as strength and determination.

She clears her throat. “I’m Iris.”

“Iris.” It is a soft name, like her skin. Like her voice.

“Gogo, it is my turn.” Sorin interrupts.

She and I let go of one another, and she quickly turns her gaze upon my kit.

I rub my fingers together almost as if I can feel the touch of her against them still.

Sorin has his hand out, and Iris slips hers around it.

The two of them do this handshake, and that rough stone rubbing sound falls from his throat again.

“I am next,” Talek announces, clearly not wanting to be left out.

The Tavikhi kit shakes her hand, but the two human kits decline.

“No offense, Iris,” Carter says. “We just already know what a handshake is.”

“None taken.” Whereas the amused sound Sorin makes is rough, the one that comes from Iris is lyrical.

It is a sound unlike any other. It is more harmonious and melodic than the call of the mellenje.

I do not have a word for it, but the way it hits my ear is soothing.

It is a sound I am not sure I would ever grow tired of listening to.

“We were practicing our axe throwing.” Sorin glances in the direction where the target sits. “Although, I think Iris needs a bit more.”

She makes that beautiful amused sound again and her lips spread in a wide grin that exposes her blunt, human teeth. “In my defense, I’ve never held a weapon before today. Didn’t I tell you it was a bad combination?”

“At least you did not cut off your other arm,” Talek speaks up.

Iris expels a loud noise. “There is that. Given my poor performance, though, it could have gone either way.”

“Your form is sufficient, and with more practice, you will improve.” I do not know what compels me to speak such words. Her fear has appeared to diminish, and I do not want to smell the acrid scent of it again by bringing myself to her attention.

She arches one of the thin furry lines over her eye. “Sufficient, huh? Careful there, or you’re going to make my head swell with all the pretty compliments.”

I freeze in uncertainty. My words were meant to be encouraging, but by a tone in her voice it would appear as though that did not come across. “Is sufficient not the appropriate thing to say?”

Iris makes her amused sound. “Relax, Kala, I’m just giving you a hard time.”

I cock my head and am certain I resemble Sorin when he is confused. Perhaps because I am.

“She means she’s messing with you. Joking around. Teasing you,” the human kit Cecily speaks up.

Teasing me ? I glance between the humans and focus on Iris again. She shows me her teeth once more and both my hearts stutter, then beat again. I have never been teased before, expect possibly by my kit. Who else would do such a thing?

“I’m sorry.” Iris takes a small step forward and raises her arm slightly before dropping it again. Had she been about to touch me? “That wasn’t kind of me, since you probably don’t know what teasing is.”

“No, it is fine for you to do this teasing thing with me. I do not mind.”

The one side of her face turns a similar shade as the other, although the darker color appears to be permanent, since it has not changed once.

She is the first human I have seen with skin consisting of two completely different colors.

The others are either all a light color, all a dark one, or somewhere in between.

Was she in battle, back on her planet? Is that how she came to lose her hand?

“Oh, okay, then.” Iris ducks her head and turns it slightly from me so the darkly colored side is hidden.

“I will practice axe throwing with you, if you would like.”

“Yes,” Sorin agrees. “Gogo is the best teacher. You will be as skilled as me in no time, Iris.”

She glances at my kit, and there is that softness in her eyes again.

“Thank you for the vote of confidence.” She shifts her gaze to me.

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m sure you’re busy in your own village or hunting or other things.

Besides, as tempting as it is, my time is probably better spent learning a skill I can actually use to help the village.

We all have to pitch in and something tells me axe throwing—while cool—doesn’t really have any benefits. ”

“You could come hunting with us,” Talek says. “Once you have adequate skills. I am sure Benham would take you with him like he takes us on occasion. We could all join a hunt together.”

For some reason, I am not sure I like the idea of Iris going hunting with Benham. Why? The Tavikhi is mated, and I, along with Sorin, have joined him many times on

a hunt when we have come across each other. She glances between all of us with a wrinkle between her furry brow lines.

“You’re actually being serious, aren’t you?”

Now it is Talek who turns a confused look at her.

“Why would I not be? Remi and Abby go hunting with their mates. Cecily and Carter go with me and Benham when he is not training the warriors in the arena or spending time with Maeve and their kit. There is always need for someone to bring back more food for the tribe. The cold seasons have grown colder, and each one brings more cold dust and less creatures.”

“What’s cold dust?” Iris cants her head.

“Snow,” Cecily answers. “Cold season is basically what we call winter and lasts about three months, give or take. The rest of the time, we call warm season, although that’s really a combination of fall, summer, fall.

Kind of warm, hot, and then kind of warm again.

After that, the snow comes. Once it starts, it doesn’t stop. At least until warm season returns.”

Iris blinks. “I see. What do you all do during cold season when it snows?”

“The same thing we do during warm season when it doesn’t,” Carter answers. “We hunt what we can and try not to freeze our asses off.”

“You need not worry. Zander and his people make sure none of their people suffer during cold season. There are many fires going and many furs available to keep

warm.” Far more than we have in my village. Cold seasons will only continue to get worse for the Krijese.

The smile Iris bestows on me makes my hearts stutter again. “I guess that does make me feel a little better. Thanks.”

I dip my head. “You are most welcome.”

“Does that mean you will let Gogo teach you?”

She pulls her bottom lip in between those blunt teeth of hers and the silence stretches long enough for me to know she does not have an answer. Or perhaps she does, but does not want to say it.

“You do not have to decide in the moment, if you are not sure. I will not take offense either, if you do not wish to learn.” I will actually be surprised if Iris agrees. “We have been invited to take the evening meal with your tribe. You may take more time to think on it if that is agreeable.”

“I’ll let you know what I decide before you leave, then.”

“Retrieve your blade and let us go to the river to wash before we eat.” I set my hand on Sorin’s shoulder.

“Yes, Gogo.” He runs a few steps before he stops and turns back to us. “Would you sit with us during the evening meal, Iris?”

She glances briefly at me before quickly darting her gaze back to my kit. “I don’t want to intrude.”

“It is not an intrusion,” I tell her.

“Okay, thanks.” Iris swipes her palm on her pants, again in a way that appears unobtrusive. “I’m going to wash up in my tent. I’ll see you at the central fire, I guess.”

“We shall see you there.” I incline my head.

Sorin skips forward and throws his arms around Iris in what Healer Sage calls a hug. He has only ever done this human thing with her. Until now.

“I am glad you will be joining us.”

“Thanks for inviting me.” She strokes his floks, although there is surprise in her gaze as she stares down at the top of his head. “All right, you, don’t keep your dad waiting.”

He releases her and bares his teeth in his not-smile. Then, while I wait, he rushes over to where his axe still lies after Iris’s wild throw and sheaths it at his back like I have taught him. Iris walks past me and glances swiftly in my direction before hurrying along without a word.

Long after she is gone, a sweet, fragrant scent—not fear—remains.

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Iris

What the hell am I thinking agreeing to sit and eat dinner with Sorin and his father?

Especially considering the elder scares the living daylights out of me despite all the reassurances by Remi, Zara, London, and all the other women that Kala and his tribe are 'friends'.

In the short time I spent with him, Sorin grew more adorable.

It was mostly because of just how sweet he is.

How could a child who holds my hand and gazes up at me with sparks of silver shining in his eyes be scary?

Kala, on the other hand? Terrifying.

I rush toward the tent I was given on my first night in the village, acknowledging, but not speaking, to people I pass.

Apparently, it had belonged to Remi, Zara, Sage, and Maeve at one time when they were all single and roomed together.

One by one, they found their mates and left until it sat empty.

I push aside the door flap and step over the threshold.

Inside, there's an earthy, herbal scent from all the plants that have been stored in here since the women vacated it.

With the growth of the Tavikhi village, and the fact there are two full-time healers now, Kyler and Sage added a special, curtained off section to the healer's tent for the humans who wanted some additional privacy to use.

It's also where any future births will take place.

Because of that, they needed a place to store all their medicines and the plants they use to make them.

Interestingly enough, I learned that Bohna is the closest planet to Tavikh and that the Bohnari actually trade with the Tavikhi for a special plant that is also stored in my new home.

It would have been wild if I'd actually been chosen in the bridal lottery to go to Bohna.

Maybe I would have ended up visiting this planet anyway.

The basin on the table is filled with clean water and the leather cloth next to it is folded neatly.

I didn't really need to wash like I told Kala, since I took a bath in the river this morning and haven't done anything strenuous to get dirty.

It had just been an excuse to get away. Once I'd recovered from my initial fear, the wariness lingered, even though Kala was pleasant enough.

Recalling the intensity in which he studied me makes me fidget in discomfort.

My entire life I've been stared at, whispered about, openly talked about without shame, but no one has ever made me as acutely aware of myself and of them as Kala.

And now I get to spend the next hour or more sitting near to him and Sorin.

The unease is already settling in my gut.

Not wanting to be rude by making them wait, I quickly dip the cloth in the water and swipe my face and the back of my neck.

Some of the excess water I hadn't been able to squeeze out runs along the length of my spine making it itch.

I try scratching it, but it's in one of the tricky spots I can't quite reach.

Instead, I rub against one of the wood support beams and let loose a sigh of satisfaction.

"You in here, Iris?" A woman's voice calls out and she slaps on the hide of the tent like she's knocking.

"Be right there." I toss the cloth onto the table and swing away the door flap.

Astrid stands on the other side. "Evren and I wanted to invite you to sit with us for the evening meal."

Of all the human women in the Tavikhi village, she's been the most welcoming and has tried to encourage a friendship between us.

Not that the rest aren't friendly, but the shefira, Remi, Zara, Maeve, and Sage tend to stick together most times.

Which isn't surprising, considering they all became friends on the flight from Earth to Tavikh.

Well, except Sage. She'd already been here when the four others arrived.

Abby is nice enough as well, but she says herself she's not really a people person.

"Thank you, but I already accepted an invite from someone else."

Astrid perks up in the genuine bubbly way she has. "That's wonderful. Who?"

I hesitate. "Kala and Sorin."

Her wide smile doesn't falter in the slightest and I love the fact she's no longer self-conscious about her top two front teeth being crooked like she said she once was.

"I didn't realize they were in the village today. Sorin is the sweetest, isn't he?" Astrid cants her head and her forehead wrinkles. "Wait. How do you know them? You've only been here for a few days."

My cheeks grow warm. "I was in the training arena with the kids when Talek brought Sorin down so they could all practice axe throwing. They wrangled me into trying once and I nearly fell on my ass. Kala caught me before I hit the ground."

Astrid sighs and her entire body sort of melts when she crosses her hands over her heart. "Awww, that's so romantic."

I stare at her. "Romantic? You heard me say Kala, right? The terrifying alien who used to murder humans and Tavikhi apparently."

She waves me off. "That was ages and ages ago. Besides, people do what they have

to to survive. Their previous actions shouldn't be held against them if they regret their choices, are truly bone-deep sorry, and make amends.

Kala and Sorin have been nothing but loyal friends to us.

He's helped our people in more ways than I can count. ”

I rear back at the passionate defense Astrid takes on behalf of the Krijese. “Kala's clearly made a good impression on you.”

She winces. “Sorry. I just know what it's like to be lonely and desperate for someone to see deeper to the real person that's hidden behind the preconceived notions and opinions of other people as well as any past misdeeds. Especially ones that are truly regretted.”

It's my turn to flinch, because she's summed up my entire life in a single sentence. I'm not sure even I can admit to the depths of my loneliness. People look at me and rarely, if ever, try to see beyond what's on the surface. To be guilty of the same thing is hypocritical of me.

“You're right. It's not fair to judge anyone before I get to know them.

If anyone should know better, it's me. The entire interaction with Kala, after the initial shock, was...

well, he did his best to appear non-threatening.

” I'd been surprised by how gently he held my hand during the handshake lessons.

His palm had been slightly rough, but not unpleasant.

It was the skin of someone who worked a lot with his hands.

Astrid nods. “Kala’s a little gruff, but that’s because it’s all he’s known. It’s how the Krijese are taught. Sorin is different, because his father is doing his best to be different and to raise him in the way he wasn’t. I think it’s admirable.”

Now I feel even worse about how I reacted to Kala, especially when all he did was keep me from bruising not only my tailbone, but my pride. Although, I still wouldn’t call what he did romantic. It was...kind, though.

“All right, you’ve made your point.” I smile to take out any of the harshness of my words. “Kala and Sorin are friends and it will be nice to sit with them for the meal.”

Astrid grins back. “Yes, it will. Which means we shouldn’t keep them waiting.”

I step out and let the hide door slap closed behind me so we can start for the central fire. “Kala offered to teach me how to properly throw an axe. Talek then suggested I could use my skills and go hunting with them.”

She side-eyes me. “Oh, really? What did you say?”

“I said it was a ridiculous idea for me to become a hunter and that I would be better off finding some other way to contribute to the village. You know Talek, though. He’s innocently positive and couldn’t see any reason I can’t be a hunter like Remi and Abby.

” I did also promise Kala I’d think about it before making a final decision.

“What’s so ridiculous about it?” A wrinkle appears between Astrid’s brows. “I’m with Talek on this one.”

My steps falter a second before I catch my balance. Is this an alternate universe I'm living in? Of course, I didn't take Talek's assurances too seriously because, well, he's a child. But now Astrid appears to be championing this idea that I could potentially become a hunter?

"You're kidding, right?"

Astrid stops me with a hand on my arm causing me to turn and face her.

"I think the idea has merit if you possess the skills for it, yes. You won't know if you have them unless you practice, right?"

I'm not saying you should do it if it means getting hurt or if you aren't fully trained and prepared.

But if you discover you're good at it, then why not? "

On impulse, I hug Astrid. "Thank you."

She chuckles and pats my back. "You're welcome."

We break apart and reach the central fire.

I can't believe I'm giving serious consideration to this idea.

Actually, it's more than consideration. I think I've already decided to take Kala up on his offer. Kala's about a head taller than any of the Tavikhi.

He's also much bulkier. Not fat, but solid muscle.

I felt the hard lines of his chest and stomach when he caught me.

The memory of them won't be easy to forget.

It's probably the closest I've ever been to a half-naked man before.

None of the Tavikhi wear shirts either, but for some reason I haven't looked twice at any of them. At least not after the first day.

The Krijese, on the other hand, is...compelling. Maybe because I'm trying to reconcile what I've heard about his people and the fact that he is nothing like what I expected. Meeting Sorin first probably helped since I didn't know he was Krijese and I only saw a little boy, albeit an alien one.

Kala spots me and although his eyes are a solid black, there's a slight shift in their color.

Not a lot, but certainly enough to be noticeable from this distance.

I don't know what's caused it. He touches Sorin's shoulder and the young boy swivels his head until his gaze lands on me.

He bears his teeth in that different smile of his and weaves his way through the various tribespeople approaching the fire until he reaches Abby and me.

"You came."

"Of course I did. I said I would, didn't I?" I tug on a lock of his rope-like hair.

"Gogo said I should not be disappointed if you decided you were unable to join us after all."

I glance over at his 'Gogo' and back to Sorin. A wave of fierce protectiveness rushes

through me.

“You should know one thing about me, and that is: I don’t break my promises. Ever. If I tell you I’m going to do something, I’ll do it. Okay?”

“Okay.” Sorin jerks his head in a short nod. “Come, let us get Gogo and find a place to sit.”

He snags my hand and I let him lead me toward his father.

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Kala

A shift happened within my gut when Iris arrived to the central fire.

I had not actually expected her to come.

There could have been many reasons for her absence, and while I find I would have been disappointed, I would not have been surprised.

It has taken many moons for the Tavikhi to fully accept me.

For a human to do so within only a few ticks of the sun across the sky—it is unusual.

Then again, my head tells me there is something different about Iris than the other humans, although I cannot say for sure what it is.

Sorin leads her over with his hand clasped in hers.

Affection comes so easily for him since his introduction to the human healer.

I am glad for the fact. He has learned much about emotions and softness from the human females, especially Healer Sage.

I will always be in her debt for that alone.

There is nothing in this world I would deny her if she asked.

She will not, though, because that is not her way.

Iris and Sorin come close and stop at my side.

More Tavikhi join the growing number of people around the fire, including a few of the elders, as well as the human families who live in the village.

Benham and I have spoken often during the various hunts we have gone out on together about their human tribe-brothers and -sisters.

They had reluctantly joined the Tavikhi at the beginning, and merely for protection from King Armik and the rest of our former tribe.

It is promising to see they have fully embraced the Tavikhi as their people.

“I am glad you were able to join us.” I dip my head at Iris.

“Sorin got the impression you thought I would bail.”

Bail? I do not know this word, but given my only thought was that Iris would not come, I can guess. “I did not know if you would do this ‘bail’ thing or not.”

She narrows her gaze. “Like I told your son, I don’t say things I don’t mean.”

“That is a good way to live. Following through on commitments is important.”

“Of course it is.”

“Not everyone believes as you do.” Far too few people do.

“Those aren’t the kind of people I want in my life, then.”

This feels important. “I will be sure to remember that.”

“Gogo, we should sit before all the good spots are taken.” Sorin tugs on my hand.

I glance down. “I was unaware there was such a thing. Perhaps it is best if you show Iris and me where they are.”

Without releasing the hold he has on either of us, he leads us to a narrow bench that is far enough away from the smoke being released by the flames, but close enough to where several Tavikhi and human kits sit.

“Iris and you can sit there, and I will sit on the ground.” Sorin points to the spot.

“You’re not sitting on the ground, young man,” Iris scolds. “We either sit someplace where we’ll all fit, or you and your father can sit together and I’ll eat with you the next time you’re in the village.”

“I can go sit with my friends so you and Gogo can share the bench.” My kit is nothing if not persistent.

“You invited Iris to eat with us. How do you think she will feel if you now decide to eat elsewhere? That is not what I have taught you.”

Sorin ducks his head, properly chastised. “You are right. I am sorry Iris.”

“Apology accepted.”

“We will go elsewhere so that we all may sit together.” There is an appropriately sized wooden seat not far from here.

I guide the two of them over to it. We will have to approach the fire soon anyway to

be served our meal.

We have adopted this way in my village as well.

There are those who tend to each meal while the rest of the tribespeople form a line, and those responsible for that meal serve each person as they pass by.

Different people rotate through the role so the same ones who serve others are given a chance to be served themselves.

Sorin is never without words and yet he sits silently between Iris and me. I glance over at her. She sits stiffly and her gaze travels everywhere, but to me or to my kit.

“How are you liking Tavikh? Do you miss your Earth?” The moment I ask, I regret it. If Iris misses her own planet, I should not bring up the fact.

Except she makes that melodic sound I have found to enjoy more than I expected and far more than I should. “There’s not much about Earth to miss. At least not for those of us from the bottom tier.”

“That is the part of your planet that does not have much?”

Iris cocks her head. “You know about Earth?”

“I know how your people are divided, but that is really the only thing.”

“So you don’t know that people from the bottom tier have to scrape and claw through life to even survive?”

We’re teased with opportunities for better , but every time we get a little closer to obtaining it, another obstacle is thrown in our way that’s meant to keep us exactly

where we are.

Of course, those who are offering the opportunity come up with some way to blame others.

It's never their fault we can't get out of the shit hole they put us in in the first place.

"Iris lifts her arm slightly. "Sorry, you probably didn't care to hear my bitter take on my old life. "

"King Armik did the same to his people." To me.

To my tribe-brothers. "Our people were starving because he would take the food we hunted. Each time, he would tempt us with the opportunity to earn extra meat by defeating another Krijese in battle. He would hold great tournaments where he would pit his people against one another to fight for the right to eat. The winner would receive rancid meat and it was always another Krijese's fault besides King Armik's because they did not smoke it properly to keep it from going bad. "

"Your king sounds like a world-class prick. It's probably a good thing he's dead."

My translator—one that was provided to our people by the Bohnari when I was Sorin's age—tells me that prick is another word for cock. An unfamiliar rough, grating sound tears through my throat. Tavikhi and humans alike, including Iris, jerk their heads in my direction and stare.

"Gogo, did you just laugh?" Sorin stares up at me with wide eyes.

Is that what that noise was? It is not a sound I have ever produced before. Yet it came about because of Iris.

“You know, you should do that more often.”

I glance over at Iris. “Why is that?”

Her light-colored cheek darkens to match the other side again. “I didn’t mean to say that. At least not out loud.”

“Was it wrong to say?”

She shakes her head. “No, I don’t suppose so.”

“Then you should always speak the truth.”

“You’re right,” Iris says.

“My question remains unanswered, though. Why should I do that more often?” Not that I will have many chances to do so since it is not a sound Krijese other than Sorin make.

“Because it makes you less…” her voice drifts off.

“Less what?”

Iris blows out a heavy breath. “Fine. It makes you less scary.”

“We are scary to you?” Sorin speaks up.

She and I both glance down, startled, because my whole focus had been on her and I briefly forgot where I was.

“How could I be scared of you?” Iris tugs on one of his floks with a grin. “You’re

adorable.”

That does not satisfy my kit though. He cocks his head. “But you are scared of Gogo?”

She shifts her gaze to me and back to him. “I was at first, but maybe not so much anymore.”

“Why were you afraid at first?”

“Sorin.” There is a slight hint of reprimand in his name.

Iris holds up her hand and turns toward me.

“No, it’s okay. He should be able to ask questions.

Knowledge is important.” She looks at my kit.

“I overheard people say something about the Krijese when I arrived on Tavikh, and I believed them even though I’d never met one.

So, when I first saw your gogo, I jumped to conclusions instead of learning for myself what he is really like.

People have done the same thing to me my entire life. I was wrong to do it to your gogo.”

“Why did others not take the time to know you?” Sorin has always been curious and asks far too many questions.

Iris points at her face. At the side that is darkly colored. “When people initially look

at me, they only see this. The next thing they see is this.” She raises her arm that is incomplete. “I’ve been seen as scary, too, and I know how hurtful it is.”

Scars and other wounds come from warring. The more wounds you carry, the stronger you are. I do not know the reason for Iris’s missing hand, but that she thrives without it only tells me she is a strong female.

“Is your coloring unusual for a human? All the ones I have seen on Tavikhi come in so many different colors that I did not realize a person who has more than one is considered scary. I believe you to be special for having something the others don’t.

” It is my turn to ask a question, because I have been cursed with the need for knowledge as well.

Iris laughs, but it is not the sweet melodic sound I have become used to. This sound is tinged with a sour note I do not care for. “Little kids have cried when they see me. Whether because of my face or because I don’t have a hand, I don’t know. Not that it matters. This is who I am.”

“I still think you’re the most beautiful female I have ever seen,” Sorin tells her.

Iris’s eyes shimmer with a sudden wetness. “Thank you, sweetie.”

I too see the beauty Iris possesses. It is in the harmonious sound she makes and in the softness she gives my kit. It is also in her ability to make me create a noise of amusement I would never have experienced prior to this turn. Prior to Iris.

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Iris

When I woke up this morning, I never expected I'd meet one Krijese, let alone two of them. I also certainly hadn't expected to open up old wounds I thought long sealed. Maybe I needed to, though. Because it's pretty obvious I have some unresolved hurts to heal.

"Neither Sorin nor I meant to bring up painful memories. We did not intend to cause you harm."

I wave off Kala's concern no matter that I appreciate it. "You have nothing to apologize for. I've never been able to hide any parts of me so it's not like I'm going to start now."

"You should not hide anyway," Sorin says.

This little boy really is too good. Far too often, the sisters at the orphanage would scold me for being too inquisitive. They would tell me that too much knowledge was dangerous. Especially a female from the bottom tier. Those from the upper tier wanted to keep us ignorant.

God forbid should we learn and know too much. It would mean us realizing that every promise they ever made about wanting to make our lives better was nothing more than a lie.

"How about I make you a deal? You keep asking questions and gaining knowledge and I will stop hiding." I extend my hand to Sorin who glances down at it and back

up to me with the small tilt to his head.

“Why are we doing this handshake thing again if it is a greeting between people? We have already met.”

A grin splits my lips. “A handshake has more than one meaning. It’s not only a greeting, but a way to seal a bargain.”

He slips his small hand into mine. It has a slightly different feel to it than his father’s. Sorin’s is softer, less calloused. It also doesn’t make my own palm sweat.

“We shall make this deal, then. You do not hide while I continue to learn.” He and I shake on it before he glances up at Kala. “You should make this same deal with Gogo. He is always wanting to increase his knowledge of things as well.”

My cheeks grow warm.

“I do not require any deal to be made to trust Iris’s word that she will not hide. Hers with you is enough for me.”

“But you need to be able to ask questions as well,” Sorin insists.

Kala’s mouth opens, and I’m sure he’s about to argue further, but I’ve learned it’s best to pick your battles. I shove my arm out toward the elder Krijese. “No, it’s fine. We can shake on it too.”

Slowly, he grips my hand and the slight abrasion of his calloused skin against mine makes a shiver dance across the back of my neck and travel down my spine.

“We have this deal as well,” he says.

I clear my throat. “Looks like it.”

Kala releases the hold he has on me, but his gaze remains. The shadows in his eyes almost appear to shift and swirl. It’s fascinating. He blinks and they stop moving. Either that, or I only imagined the entire thing.

“We should make our way to the line if we wish to eat.”

His words break whatever this weird tension is between us, and I wipe my palm on my pants.

It’s a habit I developed at the orphanage anytime my anxiety levels spiked slightly.

And as much as I don’t really want to admit it, there’s something about Kala that has me off-kilter. I nearly jump to my feet.

“I’m ready.”

He rises far slower than I did. Same with Sorin, who stares at me with his small head cocked a smidge to the left like he can’t figure out why I’m so twitchy.

With me in the lead, I walk to the end of the line.

Luckily, it always moves fast so before I know it, we’re through with a plate full of some seasoned meat, a root vegetable, and a type of bread made from a recipe one of the human women has been trying to perfect over the last year I was told.

Kala, Sorin, and I take our seats again. We eat in silence for several minutes before Kala speaks.

“How do you enjoy the food on Tavikh?”

“It’s excellent. Took me a while to get used to some of it, but everything’s been really good.” Way better than the protein bars I’ve eaten my whole life.

“Do you not have this kind of meal where you come from?” Sorin asks.

“We don’t. The part of Earth where I lived was only given these hard bars that provided sustenance, but not much more than that. We had to dip them in water that wasn’t nearly as clean as the river here to soften them enough to not hurt our teeth.”

Sorin’s silver-sparked eyes widen. “Our tribe does not have much, but at least we are able to hunt beasts that provide us meat to eat. Moshi even shares his with Ashrif sometimes. Gogo does with me as well.”

I lean over and stroke the top of his head. “You’re a lucky little boy, that’s for sure.”

“Gogo would never let you go hungry, either, if you were part of our village.”

Of course, I can’t help but glance over at Kala with my cheeks growing warm.

He stares back at me with that intent way of his.

Funnily enough, I don’t think there’s anything to read into with its intensity.

I feel like that’s always how the older Krijese is.

But it’s certainly becoming clear that Sorin has some ideas about things. I turn toward the young boy.

“I’m sure your gogo takes excellent care of all members of your tribe.”

“He does. I only wish there was someone to take care of him in the same way.”

It takes every bit of effort I possess to not glance Kala's way again. "Maybe one day he'll find someone."

Sorin shakes his head. "There are no Krijese females left."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Perhaps you?—"

"Sorin," Kala barks out his son's name in a harsh enough tone that I flinch and people's heads turn our direction.

The young Krijese snaps his mouth closed with an audible sound and ducks his head.

I feel bad for him, but it's not my place to get in between father and son, so I keep quiet.

Kala doesn't say another word either. Nor does Sorin.

Instead, the three of us eat in an uncomfortable and awkward silence.

I know I should attempt some neutral conversation topics, but none come to mind.

Finally, we all finish our meal and Kala holds his plate out to Sorin. "Take these to the fire so they can be washed. If Iris is finished, you may take hers as well."

"Yes, Gogo." He stands before me, but won't meet my eyes. "Have you eaten your fill, Iris?"

I carefully place my empty plate on top of the two he has stacked together. "I have, thank you."

Sorin nods and slowly heads for the fire where everyone places their empty dishes when they're done for the people assigned to wash them to gather up. I keep watch.

“Please excuse my kit.”

I turn my head to face Kala, his gaze locked on Sorin. Although his face is far different than the Tavikhi's and a human's, I can somehow still read it. Or at least I think I can. Written on it is regret—I assume for snapping and hurting his son's feelings—but also embarrassment.

“Can I ask where Sorin's mother is?”

Kala's attention shifts to me. “Dead.”

“I'm sorry to hear that.”

He inclines his head but doesn't say anything.

“How long has she been gone, if you don't mind me asking?”

“It has been about five sun cycles.”

My forehead wrinkles. “Sorry, I don't know how long that is.”

“He is currently almost ten sun cycles in age and she has been gone since he saw five sun cycles.”

Ah, that makes sense now. “On Earth we would call sun cycles years, I think.” So, Sorin is ten years old and his mom has been gone since he was five.

Which also means the older Krijese has been without his wife for five years as well.

That must be hard, especially if there are no women left. “I’m sorry for the loss you both experienced.”

“She was not my true mate.”

I study him for a minute. My gut tells me he didn’t mean to say that. “I’m sure you still cared for her. She was, after all, Sorin’s mother.”

“Perhaps she died because I did not care for her enough and that was my punishment.”

After growing up surrounded by nuns who shoved their religion down my throat, I’ve given up believing in any higher power. I know, though, that my views are my own and are skewed towards cynical so I try not to bash anyone else’s beliefs.

In this case it feels like I need to make an exception.

“No offense, but any god that punishes someone by killing a person they care about even in the slightest isn’t a god worthy of my devotion. Where I come from, we’re taught God is supposed to be merciful and loving. Not petty and vengeful.”

Kala cocks his head in the same way I’ve seen his son do several times today. “Perhaps you are right.”

I shrug a shoulder. “Maybe. Maybe not. Gods of any kind and I don’t really have a relationship so I’m probably not the best person to be handing out religious advice.”

“It is sound advice.”

“I’m sure there are others who would disagree with me.”

Kala mimics my shrug and it's such an alien gesture for him that I can't help the fact my mouth curls in a small half-smile.

Sorin returns just then still looking glum.

I shouldn't encourage a closeness between us since I don't want to give him mixed messages, but I pull him in for a hug anyway, because it breaks my heart to see him sad.

"Thank you for being so sweet and for inviting me to have dinner with you."

He returns my hug and I breathe in the woodsy scent that clings to him. "Will you still let Gogo teach you to throw a war axe so you might go hunting with us?"

I really should say no. "Yes."

Sorin squeezes me tighter and I extend the hug a little longer, even knowing I shouldn't encourage his affection.

"Come," Kala says. "We need to return to our village."

The young boy finally releases me and steps over to his father's side. The elder lays his hand on his son's shoulder and it's clear how much love they have for each other. Sorin leans his head against Kala's side.

"I enjoyed the meal." I feel like I should say something.

"As did I." Kala dips his head. "If you are truly still interested in learning to hunt, I will ask one of the warriors to bring you to the base of the hill where we have settled and meet you there on the next turn."

“I don’t want to be a problem for you.” Or for the Tavikhi.

“There is no problem.” He sounds so sure that I guess I have to believe him.

“All right. I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

Kala guides Sorin away from the central fire and in the direction where the front gate lies. I keep standing there, watching and questioning the decision I just made.

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Kala

Our trek home last evening had been as silent as the trek to the Tavikhi village and continues to be just as silent throughout this turn.

I was still upset with Sorin and his veiled comments to Iris.

It had become obvious to me and I am sure to her as well, what he had been doing, despite the many times I have told him that human females cannot be with Krijese males.

I did not understand how much affection he had developed for her in such a short amount of time.

I should have told her it is not a good idea for me to teach her to wield an axe, yet I find I could not.

Neither the elders nor our god need to tell me that continuing to be around her—and allowing Sorin to be around her—is a bad idea.

Many human females reside with the Tavikhi and I have spoken to nearly all of them at some point in time if only briefly.

None of them have affected me the way Iris does.

There is no explanation for it, either. Aside from the darkly colored patch on her face and the limb that has not fully formed, she does not appear any different from any of

the Tavikhi mates.

They have all been just as kind as her and have treated Sorin and me with fairness.

We have been welcomed and are trusted allies.

Yet she is still different in ways I cannot name.

“Gogo, can I come with you to meet Iris?” These are the first words he has uttered to me since before we left the Tavikhi village.

“Only if you remember what we have spoken about countless times and do not suggest things to Iris that can never be.”

“I remember.”

“Be sure that you do or you will not be allowed to join us during any future lessons she and I might have.”

Sorin nods. “Yes, Gogo.”

“Then come.”

Katem had still been at his scouting post when we left the previous turn and agreed to escort Iris to the base of our hills.

I did not care for the idea of him performing this task, but he made it clear she is not his keeshla .

I wish it did not make me feel better, but it did.

Katem is a worthy male who is deserving of his own mate and I hope he is able to find her one turn.

Together, Sorin and I leave the village and travel down the worn path between the trees that are in full bloom.

Now that warm season has reached us, we will have pleasant turns until cold season returns and brings with it the cold dust. Voices reach me when we are nearly to the bottom.

I cannot make out their words, but already I recognize the gentle lilt of Iris's.

We arrive at the break in the wall and despite knowing who is beyond it, I pause and sniff the air for danger.

I will never lose the instincts I have had since birth.

The same scents as always assault me, except this turn there is another one mixed with them.

Instantly I know it is Iris. It is the same fragrance I breathed in when I held her in my arms after her fall.

I do not have a name for it, but I will forever recognize it as hers no matter how long I live.

I step through the partially hidden opening and out into the bari field.

Not far from here are Iris and Katem. Neither has spotted us, but from the stiffening and then relaxing of the Tavikhi, he is aware of our presence.

He turns his head slightly in my direction and gives a short nod.

Iris continues speaking and I continue listening to the pleasant sound.

At last, she pauses and Katem breaks in.

“Kala has arrived.”

She swivels her head around until she spots me and our eyes lock onto one another’s.

Her mouth curls up and her lips part enough to bare her blunt human teeth.

Once again, my hearts skip a beat before they race.

My vision shifts as well, which has never happened until recently.

Not until I met Iris. I do not know what it means.

To my knowledge, none of the elders have ever spoken of such an occurrence.

Iris raises her arm and waves it. A gesture Sorin returns before he leaves my side and rushes over to throw himself against her.

She laughs and enfolds him into her embrace.

For only a brief moment, I am envious of my own kit and wonder what Iris’s arms would feel like wrapped around me.

I quickly dash the thought away, because it is an impossibility.

Hoping for a different outcome will bring nothing but heartsache to my kit.

And perhaps to you as well .

That too is a thought I push far, far down.

Iris thanks Katem for the escort, and I fist my chest to offer my own thanks as well. He returns the gesture and departs. With his hand clasped in hers, Sorin leads Iris over to where I wait.

“Katem says he will return to this spot after the evening meal to collect Iris,” he tells me.

“We will make sure you are here and ready for him.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you ready to start learning?” Sorin asks with a small bounce of excitement.

“I’m not sure if I’m ready or not, but I’m here so I guess I better be.” She chuckles.

“You can use my war axe until we can commission Benham to craft one of your own for you since Gogo’s is too big for either of us.”

Iris nudges Sorin lightly with her elbow. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves here. I’ve only thrown the thing once and was less than stellar at it. After today, your dad might give up on me as a lost cause, which means there’s no need for me to have my own anything.”

Sorin shakes his head. “You will become the greatest hunter to use a war axe when Gogo has finished teaching you.”

The melodic sound erupts from Iris and she throws her arm around my kit’s shoulders

and squeezes. “You’re sweet, but also a little delusional.”

“What is delusional?”

She snorts. “Delusional. It means you’re mistaken.”

“I do not believe so.”

Iris presses her mouth to the top of his head. “Thank you for the confidence you have in me.”

I have often seen the human females touch their mouths with their Tavikhi mate’s mouths, but I have never asked the meaning of this.

It did not feel appropriate, no matter how much I wished to know.

Since I struck a deal with Iris that I would be allowed to ask questions and gain knowledge, she is the best person to answer.

“What is this mouth touching thing you humans do?”

She jerks and glances up at me, almost as though she forgot I stood nearby. Once again the pale side of her face darkens to match the color of the other side. This has happened many times since meeting her and its reason is yet another piece of information I wish to collect.

“It’s called a kiss.” There is a note in her voice that causes my head to tilt.

“A kiss.” It is a difficult word for my mouth to form so it does not sound exactly the same as when she said it. “What is its meaning?”

Iris shifts her weight and breaks the eye contact she had with me. “Um, it’s a sign of affection.”

A sign of affection? How does pressing one’s mouth to a place on another being display affection?

“Can I give this ‘kiss’ to you?” Sorin tugs on her hand.

There is a look of uncertainty that crosses Iris’s face as she studies my kit.

His mouth does not form a smile in the same way a human’s or Tavikhi’s does and we both struggled forming the word.

How is a...kiss even possible for Krijese?

It is clear he is eager to try, but it is equally clear how unsure she is.

“You should not ask Iris for this thing Krijese do not do.”

Sorin turns his head to me. “But Gogo, we have never tried. The Tavikhi do it with their human mates. Talek said that when he grows he is going to try this mouth touching with Cecily if she will let him. I would like to show Iris my affection for her.”

“It’s okay with me if he tries as long as you’re okay with it as well.”

“I promise to be gentle so I do not hurt her.”

With both of them staring at me in this way, I cannot say no.

I jerk my head in a short nod. Sorin’s excitement is nearly tangible as he pivots

toward the female.

Slowly, she leans down and presents him with her pale cheek.

He takes a step closer so to be almost touching her and as he does against my chest, rubs his mouth across her skin.

Or at least attempts to do so, except his small mouth claws are in the way.

Sorin draws back and disappointment is evident in his slumped shoulders. “I did not do it right, I do not think. It did not feel the same as when you did it to me.”

“I think you did it just fine.” Iris smiles. “Besides, it won’t feel exactly the same since our faces and mouths are shaped differently.”

He sighs. “I wish they were not different.”

Before I can speak, she squats down to be eye-level with Sorin and palms his jaw.

“You are perfect exactly the way you are, because this is what you’re supposed to look like.

Just like this is how I’m supposed to look.

Like how your gogo is supposed to look. Please don’t ever wish to look like anyone other than who you are.

You wouldn’t be the Sorin that we all know and love if you looked like someone else.
”

His eyes widen. “You love me?”

“Of course I do.”

Yet again, he throws himself into Iris’s arms nearly knocking her over in the process.

Until this moment, I do not know if I realized the depth of his need for a female in his life.

Sorin has always appeared content with the affection he receives from the Tavikhi mates, but he only sees them on the occasions we visit the village.

Now that they are having their own kits, their time will be spent attending to them.

Once again, my kit will most likely miss out.

Finally, they separate and I am surprised to discover her eyes shimmer with wetness. Iris swipes across them and it is wiped away. I will ask her later what it means.

“Come, we should get started.”

As though he cannot stand being apart from her any longer than necessary, Sorin takes her hand.

They follow me onto the path that begins at the break in the hillside wall and we walk up the winding path through the trees.

I set up a target not far from our village, so we will be close enough if anyone needs me.

Ashrif had shown increased signs of pain at the morning meal.

He had tried to hide it, but it was obvious to anyone who paid attention.

“We are near our home. Perhaps you can come visit when we are finished training and I can introduce you to our tribespeople,” Sorin tells her.

“I am sure Iris will be anxious to return to the Tavikhi village when we are done.” I glance back over my shoulder and narrow my gaze at him.

“Why don’t we see how late it is when we’re finished? You might be so frustrated with me by then you’ll be glad to see the backside of me.”

Sorin shakes his head, his unbound floks twirling through the air. “I only ever wish to see the front side of you.”

Iris produces her sweet sound that is a delightful melody. “Thank you.”

We continue along the ascending path, the silence broken by my kit’s constant chatter. It is a good thing we are not hunting at the moment or he would scare away all the prey.

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Kala

“Are you listening, Iris?” Sorin asks.

“I’m sorry. My mind was elsewhere for a second. Can you repeat what you said, please?”

What had she been thinking of that had her so distracted?

“Have you seen Healer Sage’s kit yet?”

“Not yet. She and her mate have been staying in their tent with the baby since she was born. I’ve heard from London and Maeve she’s adorable though.”

“I had been hoping to see her on the previous turn when we were in the village, but Gogo said we need to let Healer Sage rest because giving birth is hard work.”

“Your gogo is right. Plus, babies don’t sleep a lot when they’re babies. Which means neither do the parents.”

“I slept a lot when I was a kit.”

Iris chuckles. “You’re still a kit.”

“When I was a littler kit.”

“Your parents were very lucky then.”

“What about your parents? Were they lucky?”

I glance over my shoulder after the silence extends an unusual length of time.

Iris has lost the amusement that I often see her with.

To my surprise, Sorin must sense it as well, because he does not push her to respond like he normally would when someone is not fast enough to answer one of his many questions.

“My parents gave me away when I was a baby,” Iris finally says.

“Why would they do such a thing?” Sorin’s anger is evident.

“I only know what I was told by the sisters at the orphanage who raised me and that was my parents didn’t know how to care for me.”

“What is an orphan...age?” I say the word slowly.

“It’s a giant building that houses children without any families. The people who run it are called nuns. They’re a devoted group of women who worship God and never have children of their own, which doesn’t make them the greatest people to raise them.”

“These are the females who told you your gogo and momo could not care for you?” Sorin asks.

“Yes.”

He is quiet a moment longer before speaking again. “I do not like those females that raised you, nor do I like your gogo and momo.”

I do not either. What kind of parent gives away their kit? When Sorin was born, I did not know how to care for him, but I learned. Mistakes were made, but with each one, I gained knowledge and could improve.

“Thank you for being so protective of me, but now that I’m an adult, I can understand why they did what they did.

It’s hard enough on the bottom tier to take of oneself.

We never have enough credits to pay for our homes, let alone the protein bars required so we don’t starve.

Add in a special needs child, and it can be nearly impossible.

That part of Earth is difficult to survive, and it is unkind to people perceived as ‘different’,” Iris says.

“I used to be angry they abandoned me, but I don’t hate them for it.

Not anymore. I truly believe they did what they thought was best for me.

At the orphanage I had a roof over my head and a bed to sleep in.

That’s more than some people who live in the bottom tier can say. ”

What Iris says makes sense, but that still does not mean I like the fact she grew up with a momo or gogo to love and take care of her. Sorin’s momo nor I know much about affection, but every turn I learn more, and I hope my kit knows he is cared about by me.

“Then I am sorry you did not have a gogo like mine who makes sure you always have

food to eat and who teaches you how to throw a war axe or who takes you to the Tavikhi village where your friends live so you have someone to play with,” Sorin says.

Iris sniffs, and I glance over my shoulder. The wetness is back in her eyes, only she does not wipe it away this time. Instead, a single droplet spills down her cheek, leaving a wet trail.

“Thank you, Sorin.”

I come to a stop and turn to wait until they reach me.

Unsure of what compels me, I reach out and brush my thumb across her flesh, taking care not to scratch her with my claw.

Iris widens her eyes, and her cheek darkens in color, along with her neck and the top of her chest, barely visible over the covering she wears.

“What does this wetness mean?”

She takes in a shuddering breath and my gaze drifts down to her chest. The mounds she possess change shape and develop a hard point in the center.

I lift my eyes to meet hers, and there is an unfamiliar emotion swirling in their depths.

A new scent joins the one that is all Iris.

Except it is not a scent I have never smelled before, only not as strongly.

“They’re called tears.”

I blink, because I have been lost in her gaze and forgot I even asked a question. “Tears?”

She nods. “Humans release tears which is called crying. We cry for a lot of different reasons. It might mean we’re sad or happy or in pain.”

“Humans do this crying when they are sad and when they are happy? How do you know which is which?”

She laughs lightly. “You can usually tell.”

“Were you happy or sad just now?”

“Maybe a little of both.”

I cock my head, because I do not understand how one can be both happy and sad at the same time. Iris reaches out a hand and lays it on my arm. A strange sensation races along my flesh and a throbbing pulses within my sac.

“Humans are a confusing species, I know.” Iris smiles broadly exposing her teeth.

Those are my favorite kind from her.

“I do not want you to be sad,” Sorin speaks up.

She draws her hand away from me and turns to my kit, but I can still feel her touch linger. “I’ll try my best not to be sad then. How about that?”

“All right.”

Before I say or do anything I might regret—like stroke her soft skin again—I beckon

them to keep moving since we are nearly to the clearing where I have set up the practice target.

Through the break in the trees up ahead, I spot it.

We step out into the open and I pull my war axe from its sheath strapped to my back.

“This is where we will practice.” I turn toward Iris. “I will demonstrate first how to stand and the position you should place your body in to prepare to throw.”

Sorin pulls her off to the side, a safe distance from me. I ready myself, and with my eye on the target, I launch my axe, which embeds itself directly in the center.

Iris makes a loud screeching noise, and I whirl in her direction. She grins broadly and repeatedly slaps her hand against her opposite forearm to make a clapping sound.

“Excellent shot,” she calls out. “Although it’s not fair of you to show off on your first throw. At least try to make it look hard so I don’t feel so bad when I get up there and suck terribly.”

That rough noise rumbles up through my throat again, and Iris’s sweet laughter follows.

“I will do better the next time to try and...suck,” I tell her.

“See that you do.” Her grin broadens to my favorite one again.

“Your turn, Iris.” Sorin holds out his much smaller axe for her.

She carefully takes it and moves to stand in the same place I just vacated. I let her get into position before I correct her form.

“Like this.” I place my hands on her hips and turn them slightly.

She freezes and sucks in a sharp breath but then relaxes enough to let me shift her. Her fragrance grows stronger, including the other one which I have scented coming off the human mates of the Tavikhi when they are close to each other and doing the mouth touching.

“Now raise the axe, and keep your eye on the target.”

“Like this?” Iris asks, her voice breathy.

An urge unlike any other surges through me, and I take a single step closer, so my front brushes against her back. The throbbing in my sac increases, and my cock hardens at the feel of her soft body against mine and the scent of her that has grown stronger.

“Yes, like that.” I rasp into her ear.

Iris shudders and nearly drops the axe. I grip her hand wrapped around its handle and tighten her grasp.

“Focus.” Is it her I am telling or myself?

“Yes, you need to focus, Iris, or you will miss the target entirely,” Sorin calls out from the spot where he stands.

I jerk my body away from hers, and we both nearly lose hold of the weapon. She fumbles with it and I snatch it from her so she does not injure herself. I hiss as the blade slices across my palm.

“Oh my god, Kala. Are you okay? I’m so sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for. It is barely a scratch.” It is the truth.

But my word must not be good enough for Iris, because she tosses the axe to the ground, grabs my arm, and turns it over to study my hand. Blood leaks from it, but it truly is nothing to be concerned over.

“Shit, you’re bleeding. Sorin, get me something to wrap this wound with, please?”

“We are close to the village. I will grab a cloth from there.”

Before I can stop him, he takes off running, while Iris continues to worry over me. I will admit—while unnecessary, it is a nice feeling.

“I’m so sorry. This is all my fault.”

“No, it is my own. I should not have been...close to you. It was wrong of me.” No matter how right it felt.

She shakes her head. “You didn’t do anything wrong. I...enjoyed it.”

I study Iris, and she will not meet my gaze. “Will you not look at me?”

Slowly, she lifts her head. With my uninjured hand, I palm the side of her face.

Slowly, I lean in close. Her eyes drift shut, and I press my mouth to hers which fits perfectly in between my mouth claws.

They are as soft as the rest of her. I am unsure if there is something else I am supposed to do so I do nothing.

There is a light touch against my mouth slit and instinct has me parting it. A small,

damp thing slides inside and before I can guess what it is, Iris jerks away with a small pained sound. I stare at her and she licks her lips with a tongue that is now bleeding.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 11:24 am

Iris

I'm not sure I've ever been more embarrassed in my life. Not because I kissed Kala, but because I made myself bleed doing it. Who does that? How could I have forgotten how sharp his teeth are? But also, what was I thinking?

"Iris, are you well?" Kala reaches out, but drops his arms to his side before he can touch me.

A droplet of blood falls from his palm to plop onto the ground. In a weirdly fascinating way, I study the green liquid that absorbs into the dirt. Crap, we're both bleeding. Aren't we a pair?

"Yes, I'm fine." I wave away his concern. It's just a tiny cut anyway.

"I am sorry," he says. "I should not have done that."

Anger that I know is completely irrational hits me. "Stop apologizing for things you didn't do wrong."

Kala jerks at my harshness, and I wince.

I'm annoyed for some reason and not sure why.

My first kiss might not have gone exactly how I thought it would, but it also wasn't the worst thing I've experienced.

I mean, it was actually nice at the start.

Really nice. Until I decided to stick my tongue in his mouth because I wasn't thinking straight. He's got me all flustered.

"I didn't mean to snap, but I don't need you to apologize for kissing me. I'm the one who initiated things in the first place."

The vertical slit of Kala's mouth parts, but I hold up my hand to stop whatever it is he might be about to say and he closes it.

"How about we just forget it happened, and move on?"

"If that is what you wish."

That's the problem. I don't know what I want.

Sorin comes running out of the trees toward us with a large leather cloth in his hand. He comes to a skidding stop and thrusts it at me.

"I hurried as fast as I could."

"You did great." I'm actually glad he didn't get here any sooner or he would have witnessed what happened between his dad and me and I have no idea how to explain it. I turn to Kala. "Here, let me."

He hesitates only briefly before closing the distance between us.

I take his hand in mine, thankful Sorin thought ahead to wet the cloth, and lay it over my shortened forearm.

I gently wash away the blood that has already mostly dried on his palm.

It doesn't look deep enough to require stitches, which is a good thing, since I can't sew for shit.

I can feel Sorin's gaze bouncing between his father and me. I can also sense his confusion, because the tension in the air is thick and uncomfortable. Finally, I've gotten as much blood off Kala's palm as I can.

"Here." He holds out his uninjured hand and I pass over the blood-tinged cloth. "Are you ready to try again?"

"What? No. This is a terrible idea. I'll probably cut off your toes the next time I decide to pick up that ridiculous axe." I shake my head. "I'm obviously not meant to learn how to throw it."

"Do you always give up on things so quickly?" Kala asks.

"Excuse me?"

"You have not even put forth your best effort and yet you are choosing to give up."

"Did you forget the cut on your hand already?" I jab my finger in the general direction of his arm.

"I forget nothing. I also know you did not cause it to happen, but you appear to be using it as an excuse to not make another attempt."

Here I thought I was starting to like Kala, but I take it back. He's a jerk. "Fine. You want me to try again, then I'll try again, but if I cut off one of your appendages you might deem more important, don't come crying to me."

I cast a quick downward glance in the direction of his crotch to get my meaning across. Then I stomp over to Sorin's axe, pick it up, and get into position. My gaze homes in on the center of the target, and I don't take it off of that single spot as I raise the weapon over my head and launch it.

End over end, it turns before it embeds itself in the target.

Not exactly in the middle where I'd been aiming, but pretty damn close.

I stare a minute longer, not sure I'm really seeing what I'm seeing.

But judging by the sounds Sorin makes, my eyes aren't deceiving me.

I whirl around and before my brain sends a message to my body, I run to Kala, throw my arms around his neck, and kiss him squarely on that vertical slit in between his large tusks.

I drop down to flat feet from my tippy toes and grin up at him. "You did that on purpose, didn't you?"

"Perhaps."

My hold on his loosens and I playfully smack him on the chest. "You're a jerk."

"Perhaps."

I snort and shake my head before turning to glance at the target again.

I'm stopped by the sight of Sorin staring at me and his dad.

The silver speck in his eyes sparkles and shines brightly.

Crap. He's going to read more into that kiss than he should.

It was an impulsive move I should have stopped.

"Iris, you kissed Gogo."

"Yes, I suppose I did."

He cocks his head. "Does that mean you have affection for him?"

This is exactly the reason why I'm glad Sorin hadn't seen the earlier kiss. Why couldn't I have reined in the impulse this time? Of course, Kala remains quiet and leaves me to explain things.

"Sometimes humans get over excited about certain things and they express that excitement in odd ways. Kissing is kind of like crying. We cry when we're sad or happy. There are a lot of meanings behind actions." I already know my answer isn't going to satisfy Sorin before he speaks.

"How do you know what meaning to give an action if it has many meanings?"

"It's called context."

"What is context?"

He doesn't pronounce the word like I do, but I still understand it.

How do I explain context to a ten-year-old?

"It sort of means the situation where this particular action happens. When you wanted to kiss me, it's because you wanted to show your affection."

I kissed your gogo because I was excited that I accomplished a task I didn't think I could.

It was just a demonstration of that excitement. ”

Sorin continues staring and it's clear the wheels in his head keep turning. “I have never seen any of the human females in the Tavikhi village give a kiss to anyone when they are excited.”

“What I believe Iris is saying is that the kiss was an accident,” Kala finally adds his own thoughts to the conversation.

That's not at all what I was saying, and I'm annoyed at him for putting words into my mouth. But I let it go, because adult emotions are complicated and I don't know how to explain them to myself, let alone to a little boy.

“Yes, it was an accident and won't happen again.” I glare at the older Krijese and hope I'm getting my point across.

Except Kala won't meet my eyes. The only person he'll look at is Sorin.

“I still do not understand.”

“You do not need to understand. All you need to know is what Iris says. It will not happen again.” Kala walks over to the target and yanks the axe from it. “I do not think it is a good idea for us to teach Iris how to throw. Take your weapon and we will escort her back to the Tavikhi village.”

What? Is this because we kissed?

“But Gogo.”

“No, Sorin. I have made a decision and it is not for you to question. Now do as I say.”

He takes the axe from his father and sheaths it without another word. Kala turns to me. “We will go.”

“Lead the way.”

I’m not going to argue in front of Sorin, but I do plan on finding a way to get the older Krijese alone so he and I can have a little chat.

He can’t accuse me of giving up quickly on a task and then turn around and do the exact same thing.

Especially when it’s an issue that’s far more important than throwing some weapon at a target.

Kala practically stomps across the field toward the trees and the path hidden within it. Sorin falls in line next to me behind his father and takes my hand. He’s so dejected, my heart aches at his downcast head. I squeeze his fingers. It’s the only reassurance I can offer at the moment.

The walk down the hill takes far more time than it did going up or maybe it just feels that way because the silence is so damn uncomfortable.

I’d enjoyed the fresh air of the day as well as the beautiful weather and the clear lavender sky.

If Tavikh has cloudy days I’ve yet to see one.

The sun has shined brightly since the ship arrived.

I'm grateful to be on this planet for that alone.

It's also a long trudge through the grass field.

Or bari field, according to the Tavikhi.

It's a pretty yellow color and looks less like grass and more like cotton balls on skewers.

Yet another different, but lovely view Tavikh offers.

We might have been played by Earth's government in regards to many things, but at least they offered us a beautiful planet to settle on.

It could have been a far worse place where the ship brought us.

Just past the field, a weird bird call resonates in the air.

Kala responds with a rough growl. The trees rustle and a large body falls out of one to land on two feet.

I screech and jump back, dragging Sorin with me until I recognize that it's a Tavikhi warrior.

My racing heart takes forever to slow to a regular rhythm.

"Greetings, Evren." Kala fists his chest. "We ended our target practice early, and I am bringing Iris back."

The Tavikhi returns the gesture. "You are always welcome in our village."

“You have my thanks.”

Kala inclines his head and takes off again through the trees, forcing Sorin and me to follow.

Evren watches the two of us pass, and I force myself to smile.

Astrid’s husband is a nice guy who’s also been as friendly to me as she has.

I’ve observed them at dinner and his love and devotion to her makes me yearn for someone to feel that way about me.

Instantly, my gaze shifts to the back of Kala.

Not that I had any expectations he could—or would—be that someone. But he’s the first guy—alien or human—that’s remotely interested me. Or maybe I’m just projecting the adoration I have for Sorin onto his dad. I’ve never been so confused in my life. That much I do know.

At last, the front gate of the Tavikhi village comes into view as well as the two guards who man it.

Kala stops just before he reaches it and waits for us to join him.

He still won’t look directly at me. Sorin and I come to a stop and the younger Krijese releases my hand and moves to stand next to his father and doesn’t take his eyes off me.

When the silence extends to a greater level of uncomfortable, I figure it’s up to me to break it. “Thanks for letting me practice.”

Kala dips his head, but remains silent. I rock back on my heels and forward. Well, I guess that's that then. Since it's clear Kala's finished with me, I turn my gaze to Sorin.

"Thank you for being my friend." I sniffle, because this feels like goodbye. Although judging by his father's tense form, it probably is.

Before I can blink, the little boy runs forward and hugs me tightly.

I wrap my arms around him, breathe in his woodsy scent, and kiss the top of his head, just so he doesn't forget what it feels like.

He holds me far longer than I suspect Kala wants him to, but I'm grateful that he doesn't rush us.

Finally, Sorin releases me and tips his head back.

To my surprise, the shiny silver sparks in his eyes are slightly tarnished.

"I love you, Iris."

Son of a bitch. The tears I didn't want to fall do. "I love you, too, Sorin."

He returns to his father's side and Kala's hand goes to his shoulder. Together they turn and walk away from not just the village, but away from me.

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Kala

It has been several turns since we left Iris at the Tavikhi village and nothing has been the same since.

Most especially Sorin. Gone is my inquisitive, playful kit.

In his place is a sullen, quiet one who no longer laughs or smiles.

Not once has he asked to go to the Tavikhi village.

Nor has he asked to see Iris. Or Talek. Or even Healer Sage's kit.

My hunts have been on my own, because any time I look for Sorin to join me, he is nowhere to be found.

He no longer sits beside me at meals, but with the elders.

No longer does he seat himself across my legs and rub the side of his face up and down my chest, lightly scratching me with his mouth claws.

That is what I miss the most, I believe.

“You need to fix whatever is broken between you and your kit,” Moshi says from his place at the main fire where he works to prepare the evening meal and opposite of where I sit.

“I thought you said you were not the wisest counsel.”

The elder Krijese glares at me. “I may not be, but even I am wise enough to know there is something wrong that needs to be corrected. Things have not been the same since you returned early from your training session with the human female.”

I glance at him in surprise. “I did not realize you knew of that.”

Moshi snorts. “The entire village knew of that. Your kit made sure to tell every one of the tribespeople that his Gogo was teaching the female how to throw a war axe so that she could join you on hunts. He spoke of this Iris constantly. Now, he never mentions her name.”

I sigh. “It is my fault.”

“Then you should fix it.”

“What if I do not know how?” No matter what I do it will lead to heartsache for either my kit or for me. My own I will deal with, but I do not want Sorin to suffer.

Does he not already ?

“You will figure it out,” Moshi says matter of factly.

If I want Sorin to return to who he was previously, then I must. Which means I need to speak with Iris and make things right with her. Only then can I make things right with my kit.

“Will you keep watch over Sorin? I am going to the Tavikhi village.”

“Go. He will be fine with Ashrif and me.”

“You have my thanks.” I incline my head.

Moshi waves off my gratitude and I get to my feet.

I reach for my war axe that had been lying beside me and strap it to my chest and shoulders before heading out.

My pace is quick and my steps are sure as I travel down the hillside path.

Like always, I pause at the bottom and check for danger. No unfamiliar scents reach me.

I hurry through the bari field and into the forest on the far side of it. Yet again, I am greeted by a mellenje call and a Tavikhi scout. We salute each other once he makes his presence known, but I do not make conversation. I am intent on my destination.

At last, I reach the village and stride past the warriors guarding it.

We acknowledge each other and I head straight for the central fire since it is time for the evening meal here as well.

I am sorry to be interrupting Iris while she is eating, and only now am I rethinking I should have waited until the next turn to speak with her.

It is too late though as I am already here.

Except, when I reach the fire and search for her, she is not.

“Kala,” a male calls out. “Is all well?”

I glance around for the owner. Zydun, the shefir’s brother, approaches. I am not used

to seeing him without Remi at his side. They are never far from each other.

“Greetings, brother.” I clasp his forearm as he does mine and we clap each other on the shoulder. “I have come to speak with Iris.”

“Ah, yes.”

I cock my head at his tone. “Is she well?”

“No one has seen much of her in a few turns. She has stopped taking her meals with us and prefers to eat in her tent. I believe Astrid has attempted many times to coax her out to join us, but Iris tells her she is not feeling up to company and would prefer to remain where she is.”

That does not sound like Iris is keeping the deal she made with Sorin that she would no longer hide. “Can you direct me to her tent, please?”

“It is this way.” Zydor leads me from the central fire until he comes to a stop in front of a large tent and slaps on the hide door. “Iris, there is someone here for you.”

He walks away with only a brief nod to leave me standing alone waiting for Iris to appear. Moments later, the flap is swung open and she is there.

“Oh, it’s you.”

She does not sound happy to see me. Nor does she look well. There is a dark coloring beneath both her eyes, her hair is a tangled mess, and the coverings she wears are wrinkled.

“I have come to speak with you.”

Iris crosses her arms. “I’m pretty sure you said everything there was to say the other day.”

“That was not well done of me.”

She raises one of the frown lines over her eye. “You don’t say?”

It is clear she will not make this easy for me. “I thought you made a deal with Sorin and me you would not hide any longer?”

Iris glances away. “Since you went back on your deal to teach me how to use an axe, then there’s no reason I shouldn’t go back on my deal not to hide. Besides, why do you care?”

“Because it was wrong of me to go back on our deal. I should not have done that no matter what things occurred between us.”

“By ‘things’ you mean the kisses.” She does not make it a question, because we both know that is what I mean.

“Yes.”

“What happened to not giving up quickly? Isn’t that what you accused me of doing when I told you it was an awful idea for me to try and throw Sorin’s axe again? Then we kissed and suddenly it was an accident and you’re just done with me?”

I do not understand what is causing the most anger in Iris, but she is most definitely angry. “I thought it was what you wanted.”

She throws up her arms. “How would you know that, since you didn’t bother to ask me?”

You're the one who announced to Sorin that I said it was an accident—which I didn't, by the way.

Where I come from if you're going to fight and argue, doing it in front of kids is not the best time or place.

So I went along with it for Sorin's sake, but had every intention of holding a private conversation with you later. Except you ghosted me completely."

My translator tells me a ghost is the spirit of a dead person, which does not make sense. "I do not know what ghosted means."

Iris sighs. "It means you disappeared without another word. You stopped talking to me. You didn't bring Sorin to see me. You left me completely alone."

"I am sorry that I...ghosted you. I am sorry I did not ask you what you wanted." When Sorin apologized to her, she forgave him instantly. She does not do the same with me.

"You really hurt my feelings." She folds her arms around her waist and curls her shoulders inward.

"That was not my intention."

"Intent doesn't matter. It's what you did."

"Then I am sorry for that as well."

Once again, Iris sighs. "What happens now?"

"What do you wish to happen?"

“No, that’s not how this works. I want to hear your answer first.”

I have many ideas for what I would like to happen, but I am not sure either of us are ready to hear them.

I am definitely not ready to say them. Because what if Iris does not wish for the same thing?

Or worse, what if she does? What if things I wish for cannot be?

I do not want Sorin to love her any more than he already does and then have to let her go.

“Have any of the Tavikhi or their mates told you about the Krijese and the human females my tribe stole when they attacked the ships that arrived here?”

Iris shakes her head. “I had no idea you stole women.”

“You know that my people are dying. We have been for many sun cycles. Soon, there will be none of us left.” A fact I must live with every turn. “King Armik believed the human females would repopulate our tribe so they were stolen and forced to breed.”

Horror marks Iris’s face. “Please don’t tell me you raped these women?”

“Not me, but others of my kind did. Except none of the females survived. Nor did the kits.”

She gasps and covers her mouth with her hand. “What happened to them?”

“Some of the females sacrificed themselves to their god before they were bred or soon after. Some died during the birthing process as did some of the kits. The females

that did survive either slowly faded away or they also chose to sacrifice themselves.” No matter how they died, all of their cries still haunt me.

“What happened to the babies that survived birth? Is Gannen a full Krijese or is he a hybrid?” Iris asks with tears in her eyes.

“He is a Krijese orphan but Ortak looks after him. All of the hybrid kits died shortly after their birth. They were all too small or too weak to survive.”

“Oh my god, that’s awful.”

I nod. “Sorin is desperate for a momo. I have finally realized the depth of his need, and it has become apparent to me that he wants you to fill that role. Or at least as close to it as you are willing to get. I have also explained to him many, many times that human females and Krijese are not meant to be mates. I have witnessed enough deaths to know the truth of this.”

To my surprise, Iris steps outside of the tent and lays her hand on my chest. “I’m so sorry you lost your mate—even if she wasn’t your true one like you said—and that Sorin lost his mother.”

“Thank you. Now do you understand why I thought it best to stop any further interactions between us? You are not someone I can have, and it would only cause Sorin pain when he had to say goodbye to you.”

“Maybe I could be different? Maybe it was the circumstances surrounding the women that caused their deaths as much as anything?”

The rough sound rumbles out of me again, but it is tinged with bitterness and sorrow. “You sound like Sorin.”

Iris strokes my chest more. “You do have a pretty smart kid, you know?”

The one thing I never thought to experience bubbles up inside me. Something I believed only the Tavikhi had and that is hope. “I could not risk your life though, Iris. I will not risk it.”

“You haven’t figured out by now that I get a little annoyed when people make decisions for me? Why don’t you let me decide for myself what I believe is worth taking risks for?” She taps the strap that binds my axe sheath around me.

“Because the risks you take affect Sorin, and I am his gogo.” This is something I will not budge on.

Iris sighs. “You’re right. But if we move forward with whatever it is we are both thinking about, I’ll be his mother. His momo. Which means you’ll have to trust me to make decisions that may not align with what you would choose. But I will always put the needs of Sorin before my own.”

“I cannot make any promises I do not know if I can keep, but I will do my best.” If it means Iris will be my mate, even in name only, then I will try.

“That’s all I can ask,” she says. “I don’t want anybody’s heart to be broken, especially Sorin’s.”

“Neither do I.”

“At least we can both agree on that. So, what exactly happens next?”

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Iris

“Are you sure you don’t need any help?” Astrid asks while I pack up the last of my few possessions.

Kala waits for me at the central fire with Zander and the other Tavikhi people.

“I think this is everything, but thank you.”

“Just let me know if there’s something you missed or forgot and I’ll have Evren take me to the Krijese village so I can bring it to you.”

Astrid’s always been the one to initiate hugs between us, but on impulse I move first this time and throw my arms around her. “Thank you for your friendship and for welcoming me so warmly here. I appreciate your kindness more than I can ever say.”

“It was my pleasure. Don’t think you’re getting rid of me so easily now that you’re moving to Kala’s village though.

” She chuckles. “I plan on visiting on occasion so we can catch up on all the girl talk and you can tell me all about what it’s like to be a mother. I’ll need someone to give me pointers.”

I draw back, but don’t fully release her. “Astrid! Are you pregnant?”

“Not yet, but let’s just say Evren and I are doing our best to make it happen soon.”

“Good luck. I know you’ll be an amazing mother.”

Her cheeks flush. “I think so too. We both really want kids.”

“I hope you get as many as you wish for.”

“Thank you.” Astrid gives me another quick hug. “All right, don’t keep your soon-to-be mate waiting any longer. I’m sure Kala is anxious to get back to his village and introduce you to everybody.”

The thought makes my stomach a little woozy. What will the other Krijese think of me? Do they know I even exist? Will they take one look at me and think I’m not strong enough or good enough to be Sorin’s new mom? God, I think I might get sick.

“Breathe, Iris. Everything’s going to be fine.” Astrid grips my biceps and gets right in my face so I focus on her. She breathes deeply in and out and I follow her rhythm until mine slows back to normal. She keeps breathing and nods in encouragement.

“I’m okay now.”

“You sure?”

“Positive. Thank you again, Astrid. For everything.” I step back and pick up my overstuffed bag. My handbag is slung across my body.

“You’re so welcome. Don’t forget I plan on coming to visit you.”

“Please do.”

Together, we walk out of the tent I’ve made my home since arriving on this planet. Who would have thought that two months ago I’d leave a shit life in the bottom tier

on Earth only to move to a second alien village to become a mate as well as a mother?

People wave and nod as we pass by on our way to the central fire. I may have only been in the Tavikhi village for just under two weeks, but this place has felt more like my home than any place else. I only hope Kala's village feels the same, if not better.

We get close to where everyone is gathering for the meal and I instantly go on the lookout for Kala.

It only takes me a second time find him, because like the last time he was here, he towers over the lot of them.

Well, all of them except for Benham, who stands at his side.

The two of them are speaking, and I can only assume they're planning their next hunting trip since they often go together, along with Talek and Cecily.

As though he can feel my gaze, Kala shifts his attention away from Benham and our eyes meet.

The shadows I now believe are real and not imagined swirl in the depths of his.

There's no shimmery silver spark like Sorin has, but there's definitely something in them.

I can't wait to get a closer look and see if I can figure out exactly what they are.

I smile to let him know I'm glad to see him.

He doesn't return it, but there's just enough shift to his expression and the lines

around his eyes and forehead that tell me he's happy to see me too.

Of course, I could be making my own assumptions about his emotions, but I'm sticking with it.

Kala glances away briefly, says something to Benham, who turns his head in my direction, and then departs from the Tavikhi's side to head straight for me.

"Let me carry that." He takes the suitcase from my hand before I can protest. Not that I'm going to, because sometimes it's nice to let others do the heavy lifting.

"Thank you."

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot people approaching so I turn. Zander and London—who's carrying their daughter, Dasha—walk toward us.

"Congratulations on your future mating," the shefir says when they reach where Kala and I stand.

"You have our thanks," Kala returns.

"Yes, thank you. For everything." I'll never forget how they both accepted me into their tribe.

"Of course. You will always be welcome here." Zander inclines his head.

London gives me a one-armed hug since her other is filled with a young toddler. "I'm so happy for you and Kala. If you need anything at all, please ask and I'll make sure you get it."

Tears of happiness threaten to fall, but I sniff them back. "I really appreciate that."

She releases me and moves closer to Zander who wraps his tail around her waist. I love that the Tavikhi males all do that to their mates.

It's such a sweet, affectionate gesture.

Kala doesn't have a tail, but maybe he and I can come up with our own gesture of affection. Maybe a head nuzzle or something.

"We best leave if we would like to make good time. I am sure Sorin is wondering where I have gone."

The two males fist their chests in a show of respect and then Kala places his hand on my lower back and we're on our way through the village toward the front gate. I wait until we're outside of it and into the forest before I ask my question.

"Sorin didn't know you were coming here?"

"He has not been speaking to me since the day of our attempted training."

I wince. "I'm sorry to have caused a rift between you."

"You did not cause any rift. All the fault lies with me."

From his firm tone, I decide it's best not to argue. Pick my battles and all that. If he really wants to take the blame, then I'll let him even if I know it's not the full truth. I'm equally at fault.

"He will be happy to see you," Kala says.

I can't help but smile. "I'll be happy to see Sorinas well. I've missed him."

We fall into a comfortable silence as we trek through the field toward the hills.

The sun is just setting and the first moon has already risen partway into the sky.

It was weird seeing two moons that first night and discovering the days are a lot longer here than they are on Earth and the nights are much shorter.

There have been some nights where it's been hard to sleep because it's still too light out and then it feels like it's time to get up just as I've finally fallen asleep.

Out of nowhere a thought occurs to me. "What sort of things will I be responsible for in your—our—village?"

"Taking care of Sorin will be most of it."

I side-eye Kala. "What else? I mean, Sorin is nearly ten and he doesn't need a lot of 'taking care of'. Love and affection, on the other hand? Absolutely he needs that and I'll give him as much of it as I possess."

"You can assist the elders with their tasks if you would like."

"Okay and what tasks are those?" I'm not sure why Kala is making this a difficult question to answer.

"Moshi and Ashrif spend the most time preparing and serving the meals."

Now we're getting somewhere. "I'm happy to help them in whatever way they need. Any other tasks?"

"Sadly, we are not as organized and regimented as the Tavikhi are," Kala admits. "Most of our time is spent just surviving. I should have made that more clear before

you accepted my offer to be Sorin's momo."

My steps falter for a second, but I catch myself. 'Just surviving'? I spent my entire life on Earth just surviving . Now I'm leaving a place where I feel like I was actually thriving and going back to survival mode? A heavy weight settles in my stomach.

"Iris?"

"Yeah, sorry." I wave off his concern. "Just thinking."

Kala stops in the middle of the field. "We can turn back if you wish, and we will continue on as before. I will not think harshly of you if you have changed your mind. I know your life was difficult back on Earth. I do not wish for your difficulties to continue."

I swallow and for an instant I almost take him up on his offer, but I shake my head instead. "No. I made a commitment to both you and Sorin. What kind of person would that make me if I gave up already because it might not be easy?"

Kala studies me a bit longer. "It will be harder on Sorin if you decide later that our way of life is not one you wish to live any longer and you do not wish to stay."

He may have said Sorin's name, but there's an obvious hint of vulnerability in the way he watches me that makes me think it's not just Sorin who will take it hard if I choose to leave later.

I move closer until I can reach out and lay my hand on Kala's chest. It's weird how easy it's becoming to touch him. I like touching him, in fact. A lot.

"Back on Earth, I was alone. I didn't make friends easily so it was really just me.

So, not only was I alone, but I was lonely.

Not once since I've gotten to Tavikh have I been lonely.

Knowing I have people to care for and who care for me in return changes so many things.

"I drop my gaze from Kala's face to where I trace a random pattern on his greenish-black skin.

"I plan on making our village my home for the rest of my life. Not just where I'll live, but my home .

Because that's where you and Sorin are. I have no plans to leave.

Not now and not in the future. Sorry to say, but you guys are stuck with me. "

Kala lays his hand over mine, stalling its movement. Beneath our connection, there are two sets of beats. I lift my gaze to meet his. Those shadows swirl faster than I've ever seen them do before.

"I too have been lonely. Until you. There is no need for you to be sorry about being 'stuck' with us, because then I will have to be sorry that I do not think I would ever be able to let you go anyway. And I am not."

We study each other a bit longer and then I rise up on my tiptoes.

Kala meets me halfway and I press my lips to his mouth slit.

His tusks are just far enough apart that it's a perfect fit.

I don't think our kisses will ever be more than this—a mere pressing of my lips against his mouth—but I'm okay with that.

He rises up and I drop down, but I don't step away from him quite yet. I want to enjoy this closeness a bit longer.

“I wish I could give you the kind of kiss a male gives his mate.” It's almost as though Kala's read my mind.

“We can try different kisses and find one that works for us. If it ends up being the kind we just shared, then that's the kind of kiss you give your mate. It'll be perfect for us no matter how we wind up doing it.”

“You are too good and kind for a male like me.”

I lay my finger against his mouth slit. “None of that. Now, are you ready to head home?”

“With you? Always.”

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Kala

I left my village only meaning to make things right with Iris.

Not once did I ever expect she would be returning with me as my future mate and momo for Sorin.

Still, despite her reassurances, I worry I will be unable to provide sufficiently for her.

I worry that somehow she will be taken from us.

The worst of it is, I do not know if I could survive that.

No matter what she says or believes, we cannot have a true mating. She must understand I will not risk her life. We must both settle for whatever kisses we decide will be ours. Neither of us can have more no matter how much we might wish otherwise.

We have finally reached the level area where we branch off the path to where our village lies in a clearing between a small grove of trees.

“It is just up ahead.” I point in the direction where smoke is barely visible.

Iris nods. Her nervousness is evident and understandable.

She is arriving at a village filled with Krijese, a people who are far different than the ones she has been residing with.

We number so few and we do not have all the resources she might have grown accustomed to while living with the Tavikhi.

Our food supply is not nearly as robust, although there is a fresh, clear water source close by.

Also, the tent she was given there is bigger than the one I share with Sorin. I hope Iris is not too disappointed.

She always appears relaxed when she and Sorin hold hands, so I do the same with her. It must be the correct thing, because she glances up at me and gives me my favorite kind of smile. Until her, I have never held a female's hand.

Affection is not something Krijese show. It is not because we do not feel it inside, but because it is just not our way. I suspect Iris will wish for it often and I discover I want to provide her with it.

We step out of the trees and into the clearing where our small village sits.

From what I can tell no one has noticed our arrival yet, although it appears nearly everyone is around the main fire eating.

I know we should have scouts monitoring for intruders the way the Tavikhi do, but we do not have enough warlords to do so.

They are all sent out hunting to make sure we have enough food for our stores.

At last, someone spots us, because heads lift and tribespeople point in our direction, and even from here, their voices reach me. I scan for Sorin and spot him sitting beside Ashrif who nudges him. He turns and there is only a brief pause before his eyes widen and he scrambles to his feet.

“Iris?” he calls out. “Iris!”

Sorin rushes around the outer perimeter of the circle where everyone sits and runs at us faster than I have ever witnessed him move.

His mouth slit is spread wide and he displays all his teeth in his not-smile and does not stop until he collides with Iris.

I have already freed her hand and she throws her arms around him just as he does her.

She lays her dark-colored cheek on the top of his head so she is able to look at me.

Tears fill her eyes and spill from their corners.

But she is smiling so I assume they are the tears of happiness.

They embrace for several long moments before Iris finally loosens her hold and she stands upright. Sorin turns to press his side against her and faces me. The tarnished specks in his eyes shine once more.

“Gogo, you brought Iris.”

“Aye. She has agreed to be your momo if you wish her to be.”

He jerks his head and looks up at her. “You will be my momo?”

Iris squats down to his eye-level—something I notice she has does often—and lays her palm against his cheek. “If that’s okay with you.”

“Every evening when I go to bed, I have said a prayer to our god that he would bring a momo. From the moment I saw you, I knew he had answered my prayer. I have

prayed every evening since then that you would realize it as well.”

She sniffs as the tears fall from her eyes. “I’m sorry it took me so long.”

“It does not matter. You are here now.” Sorin takes Iris’s hand. “Come, momo, I want to introduce you to our tribespeople.”

He leads her away from me and toward the fire. I fall in line behind them as she glances over her shoulder at me with uncertainty. I nod in encouragement and try to convey without words that I will not leave her side. Several members of our tribe have risen to their feet as well, including Moshi.

Sorin brings her to the head of the circle and stops. Pride shines from him. “Tribe-brothers and -sisters, this is Iris. She is my new momo.”

Iris inclines her head and scans the small number of people. “It’s nice to meet all of you. I’m so happy to be here and to call this village my home. I hope you will teach me your ways, but also be patient with me if I stumble.”

Moshi slowly makes his way over and stops directly in front of her.

As one of the elders, his opinion is extremely important to the others.

If he does not approve of someone, it is some times difficult for them to be accepted.

He reaches for Iris’s arm and holds it between his hands.

Although she trembles, she does not jerk it away from him.

Instead, she waits for whatever Moshi will do next.

To my surprise, he lowers his head and presses his brow bones to the end of her arm, which is a sign of the greatest respect. He remains in that position as he speaks.

“Greetings Iris, momo of Sorin. I am Moshi. We welcome you to our village and are grateful for your presence.”

He stands upright and Iris inclines her head. There are more tears, but they do not fall. “Thank you for your warm welcome and your kindness, Moshi.”

One-by-one, several more tribespeople approach and offer her the same respect given by the elder, until nearly everyone has welcomed her.

The only few who remain are a few of the elders who have difficulty getting up and down.

She speaks softly to Sorin and the two of them walk around the circle, stopping at those who have remained seated.

Iris lowers herself and it is she who takes their hand, presses it to her brow, and greets them until there is only one elder left to receive her.

“Sorin tells me your name is Ashrif. It is an honor to meet you.” Iris moves to lift his hand when he stops her.

Instead, he, like Moshi, is the one to take her incomplete arm in his hands and honors her the same way. “You are a worthy female and I am glad our god answered young Sorin’s prayer.”

“I am equally as glad.”

Now that introductions have been made and Iris has been both accepted and

welcomed by our people, it is time for us to eat.

“Sorin will get you food while I take your belongings to our tent. I will return shortly to join you.”

“All right.”

While my kit leads her to the fire to prepare her meal, I walk to our dwelling and place her bag next to my pallet.

Tonight, I will sleep out beneath the moons and Iris can use my furs until I can gather enough for her own use.

It has been over six sun cycles since I shared a pallet with a female.

Near the end of Teeva's life, she had been far too sick and was placed in our healer's dwelling for care.

I slept alone after that, except for when Sorin would crawl into my pallet with me during the cold seasons in order to stay warm.

I make my way back to the main fire where nearly everyone has already finished eating except Iris.

Sorin and she are seated where he and I always sit together until he was angry with me.

They have left room for me to join them and my hearts warm at how pleased he is that Iris is here with us.

I have not enjoyed the silence I have received from him no matter that I understood

why he did not speak with me.

Iris glances up at my arrival and she pats the ground next to her. “We got you a plate already.”

“You have my thanks.” I lower myself next to her and she passes me the platter of food. It holds far more than hers does and I am a little ashamed I do not have more to offer her.

“Sorin was telling me several of the warlords brought back a small herd of dreri.”

“That is welcomed news.”

“He said after the evening meal they will all be skinned and prepared for storage. If you or someone else can show me how, I’ll do my best to help,” Iris offers.

“Momo, I can show you.”

She strokes the length of his floks. “Thank you, sweetie.”

Sorin cocks his head. “What is sweetie?”

“It’s a pet name. A name of affection,” Iris clarifies when he continues to appear confused.

“You have given me an affection name already?” he bounces slightly and she makes her sweet sound.

“Of course. Unless you don’t like it or want me to only call you Sorin.”

“I love this affection name very much.” He glances over at me and back to her. “Do

you have an affection name for Gogo?”

Iris turns her gaze in my direction and studies me for several beats. “What do you think? Does your gogo look like a honey or a dear?”

The scraping rock sound exits his throat. “I think he is honey.”

She taps the tip of her finger on her chin. “You might be right about that. What do you think, Kala? Can I call you honey?”

I will take any name of affection Iris grants me, because she gave it to me. “Honey is acceptable.”

She nudges Sorin. “Did you hear that? It’s acceptable. That’s right up there with sufficient.”

That is the word I used regarding her form the first time she threw Sorin’s war axe when she was practicing with the kits. “Are you...teasing me again?”

Iris gasps and widens her eyes. “Would I do that?”

Beside her, my kit continues to produce the rough sound in his throat. If I did not already have strong emotions for her, I would now if only because she makes Sorin laugh. “Yes, I think you would.”

She grins widely. “You’re right, I would.”

“I like that you tease me.”

“Good, I’m glad. We all need to be teased once in a while, so long as it’s done playfully and not in a cruel way.”

“You will tell me if anyone ever teases you in a cruel way.” They will never tease her—or anyone else—ever again.

Iris leans over and places her arm on mine. “I doubt you’ll need to worry about that, but thank you.”

Long after she removes it and returns to eating, her touch is seared into my flesh. I do not know how I will resist more of her touches for the rest of my life.

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Iris

I'm still reeling from the beautiful welcome I received from Kala's people.

Never would I have suspected the Krijese would accept me so easily.

The whole walk here, I'd been stressing out about my reception and all that time I had nothing to worry about.

It had been nice holding Kala's hand though.

Other than Sorin, I've never really held hands with anyone.

Certainly not the sisters at the orphanage.

Ever since we sat down to eat, Sorin has been attached to my hip. He hasn't stopped touching me in small ways almost like he's reassuring himself I'm really here. The first time he called me "momo" I had to bite my tongue so I didn't break down in sobs. It's the best name I've ever been called.

I've always wanted to be a mother, and never thought I would be. Kala offered me something I couldn't pass up.

I lean in close to Kala and am overwhelmed by his smell.

It's muskier and holds more earthy notes than Sorin's scent.

Whereas my...son—that still doesn't feel real—smells like a sweet wood, his father has a bolder, more masculine odor.

I want to bury my nose against Kala's skin and just breathe him in.

The thought alone causes my center to throb and I squirm a little in my seat at the sensation.

He glances over at me like he knows exactly where my thoughts traveled.

"These are all of your—our—people, then?" I need a distraction for both of us.

He scans around the fire slowly as though counting heads until finally he nods. "This is all of us. We had two more elders, but we lost them during the last cold season."

"I'm so sorry to hear that."

"I fear we will lose at least one more before the next warm season arrives."

Sorin mentioned the elder named Ashrif was ill. When I met him, he did appear old, frail, and in poor health. He was the thinnest of all the Krijese and his skin coloring held a dull, grayish hue. Kala hadn't been exaggerating when he said his village was much smaller than the Tavikhi's.

"I have a small amount of medical knowledge. Granted, it's medical knowledge about humans and when I say it's small, I truly mean that, but I will do everything I can to help nurse anyone who gets sick."

Sorin speaks up. "Gogo, maybe Momo can become a healer like Healer Sage. She and I could travel to the Tavikhi village for her to learn. She could apprentice with Kyler."

I turn toward Kala, trying to hide my excitement. “What do you think?”

For several moments, he doesn’t say anything and I brace myself for disappointment.

“I cannot speak for the Tavikhi healer and whether he would be willing to take on another apprentice, but if he does, is this something that would interest you?” Kala darts a glance at Sorin and then back to me.

“Do not say yes just because our kit suggested it if it is not truly what you wish to do.”

I stare at him in complete awe. “You called Sorin ours .”

He cocks his head. “You are his momo and I am his gogo. Would that not make him ours?”

My excitement bursts out of me and I lean over and give him a quick kiss. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome.”

“Can I have this kiss again, too, Momo?” Sorin asks.

I laugh, because he’s just too adorable. “Of course.”

He scrambles to his knees and I kiss him right above his brow bones.

He returns to his place with a small huff of satisfaction as he glances around at everyone as if to see if they saw what just happened.

Of course, the tribespeople stare in confusion, probably because kissing isn’t

something Krijese do.

They'll just have to get used to it since I plan on smothering both my son and my soon-to-be mate with the affection they both so desperately deserve.

"We still have not come to a decision regarding the apprenticeship with Kyler," Kala points out.

"If he is willing to take me on, then I'm definitely interested. I can't promise I'll be any good, but if I can at least learn enough to help our people if one of them gets sick, then I'll count that as a win."

"Some time in the next few turns we will return to the Tavikhi village and speak with Kyler. If he agrees, then Sorin and you can travel back and forth. However," Kala says quickly putting a damper on my excitement. "You must practice with the axe every turn between now and then."

Is that all? "Deal."

"Deal," Sorin echoes.

"Let us clean up then and we will return to our tent for the evening so you can sort your belongings before we attend to the dreri with the others."

Our kit rushes to his feet and takes mine and his father's plates.

Kala stands and helps me up, but doesn't release my hand.

Together, we follow the path Sorin took and make our way to the rushing river that grows louder the closer we get.

We reach it while Sorin is quickly cleaning the dishes with something that suds.

“There is a shallow place just downriver from here where we bathe. We have a supply of cleansing bars you can use to wash yourself and your coverings. I only ask that you do not go there alone.”

“I’m not arguing with you when I ask this, but is there a reason I have to have an escort? When I lived in the Tavikhi village I often bathed and washed my clothes alone.” Granted, there were always scouts close by as well as warriors within shouting distance.

“There have been far too many sightings of wild creatures within the forest. It is too dangerous for anyone to go alone, so it is not something I ask only of you. It is a rule all follow aside from the male warlords, but only because they are able to protect themselves. All the elders, the few remaining females, and both kits all must have at least one other tribe person present.”

“While a little bit sexist, I can understand why you require it. I’ll make sure I don’t go by myself.”

Kala nods in appreciation.

“All finished,” Sorin calls out and carries the now clean platters over to us.

His father takes them from him and the three of us walk back to the village with Sorin holding my hand.

After Kala’s placed the clean plates with the rest of them we head toward what I assume is their—our—tent.

By now, most everyone has left the fire, but a large group of people sit outside

another tent we pass and skin the dreri the hunters brought back from their hunt.

“We will join you shortly,” Kala tells them.

They nod and we continue walking. Sorin lets go of my hand, rushes ahead, and draws aside the hide flap covering the entrance.

“This is our dwelling.” There is pride in his voice.

I step inside and glance around. It’s neat and tidy, but also a little bare.

There are two piles of furs on opposite sides of the fire pit and it’s a lot smaller than the tent where I slept in the Tavikhi village.

That’s understandable though since it was used as storage, and it had housed four women previously.

Still, it’s the perfect size for the three of us. I’d call it cozy.

“Gogo sleeps here, and this is my pallet.” Sorin points out.

“Until I can gather a few more furs to create your own sleeping place, you can sleep within mine and I will sleep outside.”

Excuse me, but what? I turn to Sorin. “Sweetie, will you do me a favor and go start helping with the dreri. I need to speak with your father in private for a few minutes and then we’ll join you.”

He glances between his father and me before he gives me a short hug and then darts out of the tent. I wait until I’m sure he’s gone before facing Kala.

“You’re not sleeping outside.” If I wouldn’t let Sorin sit on the ground and eat a meal, I’m certainly not letting my almost mate sleep out there.

“It is best that way.”

I fist one hip. “Says who?”

“We have spoken of this and the kind of mating that is not possible between us.”

“Having sex and sleeping beside each other in the same bed are two completely different things. I’m supposed to be your mate, which means we’re supposed to share a bed. What will Sorin think if his parents sleep separately?”

Kala stalks forward until he’s in my personal space. I take a step back, but stop myself from taking another. Kala moves again until his chest presses against my breasts. Beneath my shirt my nipples harden. Damn him. I tip my head back and stare up, daring him to argue.

Against my belly a hardness grows and my knees tremble. Kala breathes in deeply and closes his eyes, blocking me from viewing the dark shadows that dance and swirl in their depths.

“How can I sleep beside you and not touch you? I have become addicted to your flavor and your scent. If I lie beside you, I know we will touch, and I will become addicted to that as well. It will be torture for me knowing it can go no further than a single instance.”

Kala’s become addicted to me? To me? From the tightness in his face and, in fact, in his entire body, maybe it’s already torture for him. I hate that he might be hurting, but deep down, I’m also reveling in the fact that I might be able to make him lose control.

“Why does it have to be only once? I may not be experienced, but I know there are ways we can touch and bring each other pleasure that don’t include sex.

At least there are for humans. Krijese can’t be much different.

Why does it have to be all or nothing?” My face is so hot I’m worried I’ll burst into flames, but I feel like my questions are valid.

Kala’s eyes open, and for a second I swear there’s a small fleck of shiny silver similar to Sorin’s but then it’s gone. “You tempt me like no other female ever has.”

I circle my arms around his neck, rising on my tippy toes to reach. “That doesn’t have to be a bad thing. How about we make another deal?”

His brow bones shift. “I am listening.”

“We start slow. Kisses and some exploration. Find out what gives the other pleasure. Then we can progress to a place where we’re both comfortable. What do you think?”

“Kisses and some pleasure?”

I nod.

Kala narrows his gaze. “And that is all?”

For now. “We can reevaluate things later, how about that? Do we have a deal?”

He’s silent long enough that I think he’s going to turn me down, but finally there’s a shift to him, a kind of resignation that I know he’s going to say yes.

“Deal.”

“Excellent.”

“Should we not shake hands on this deal? That is how it is done, yes?” he asks.

“How about we seal the deal another way?” I can’t believe how bold I’m being. I’ve never been a seductress, but Kala apparently brings it out of me.

“In which way?”

I try not to grin too broadly. “I’m so glad you asked.”

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 11:24 am

Kala

There is a look on Iris's face that despite what I've come to expect it to mean—that she is happy—there is a devious element to it.

Which makes me believe I am going to regret—in some way—whatever she has planned.

She presses her lips to my mouth slit. Having learned my lesson from the last time, I do nothing but let Iris give me whatever kiss this is.

I expect her to be done after several moments, but she is not.

There is caution in her touch, but she softly bites at me with her blunt human teeth.

I would never have believed being bitten—even as gently as she does—would bring me to the edge of control.

My cock aches with the need to bury itself between her tender thighs.

This must be her plan. To tempt and tease me until I give in. I cannot.

My head says this, but my body says something different, because I carefully part my mouth slit.

Just barely, but enough that it feels as though I too am participating and not just a passive recipient.

It is not quite the way Iris kisses, but it is most likely as close as I will be able to get.

It will have to be enough. I don't dare risk hurting her again.

She does not give me her tongue like last time, but moves her kisses from my mouth slit—after a final nip with her teeth—to the small indentation beneath it, then to the base of each mouth claw.

She continues along my jaw, nibbling as she goes until she returns to my mouth slit.

With each bit of flesh she kisses, my cock grows harder and leaks seed.

My hands find their way to her hips. I grip her tighter and the tips of my claws press against her rear.

I measure how tightly I hold her so I do not puncture her tender skin.

Iris presses herself harder into me and the pebbled tips of the mounds on her chest dig into my own chest. She rubs herself against me and the heat of her cunt warms my thigh.

The scent of her arousal fills our tent and I already know sleep will elude me, because I will breathe it in the whole night.

My control hangs by a short tether and if I let Iris continue, I will forget all about our kit and skinning the dreri and, instead, throw her down into my furs and bury my cock so deep inside her, she will not know where she ends and where I begin. We will become one and I cannot let that happen.

“We must stop, Iris.” I nearly beg.

At first she does not respond, but continues her intoxicating kisses.

“Iris.” It takes all of my strength to draw away from her.

She stares up at me with hooded lids and shiny lips. She stumbles slightly as though she has been drinking the special brew made by the Tavikhi elders. I hold her until she has steadied herself and her eyes gain their focus. Her mouth is swollen as if she has been stung by a swarm of mushkanja.

“You are not sleeping on the ground outside.” Without another word, she exits the tent.

I remain where I am until my swollen cock softens enough that I am not entirely uncomfortable which takes far longer than I wish.

Finally, I adjust myself and step outside to breathe in fresh air that is not comprised of my almost mate’s arousal.

Except it lingers. I follow the scent until I come upon Iris seated next to Sorin who is showing her how to remove the innards of the dreri.

Her flesh is pale, but she studies our kit’s technique and listens intently to his instructions.

At my approach, she glances up at me, but immediately turns her gaze to what Sorin is doing.

Doing my best to ignore her, I pick up one of the kills and get to work.

Several of the elders have joined the warlords who brought back the prey and they talk amongst themselves.

While not a difficult task, it does require a little bit of concentration.

I keep glancing over at Iris who has been given her own blade and is hard at work skinning and prepping her own small dreri.

I pause my own task and observe her technique.

She impresses me with her ability to adapt her hold on things using her incomplete arm.

Her pace is slower, but I can tell it is not only because she is new at this and needs to make adjustments, but also because she works to be precise.

Even if she is not. There is no hastiness to her work.

Almost like she is striving for perfection.

Has that been her life previously? Constantly trying to be perfect to make up for what she lacks, even if she is the only one who thinks that way?

Then again, from what Iris has said about her former planet, the people did treat her as lacking.

I am grateful then that she is no longer there.

It is clear she was not appreciated or looked at the way Sorin or I look at her.

“You are distracted.” Moshi stands over me.

“If your beautiful almost-mate sat so near to you, would you not be as well?”

He lowers himself to sit at my side. “You have not made her your mate yet?”

“We decided to wait until Iris made her home here in the village before we had a mating ceremony. Although we will not be mates in any further ways beyond that aside from some small displays of human affection.”

Moshi stares at me. “You believe Krijese and humans cannot mate in all ways.”

“How many stolen females died? All of them and not only because they sacrificed themselves. The ones who did not and attempted to birth a Krijese kit died as well, along with the kit. No matter if it was right after birth or within a few turns. Not a single one survived and the only explanation is because our seed is not meant for humans.” It is exactly as I have tried to explain to both Sorin and Iris.

Why is it that no one else understands or accepts this?

“Did you ever think it was a mercy that the females and kits died? Our people were barely surviving already. King Armik would have worked them to their deaths anyway. Or perhaps it was the circumstances in which their breeding occurred?” Moshi cocks his head.

“The Krijese males who took the females did so cruelly. Krijese females were built to take our males. They are large and strong. Human females are soft and small. They need gentleness, and if there is any Krijese who could learn how to be gentle with his mate, it is you.”

He rises to his feet and walks away. I turn to Iris again and try to imagine being gentle with her.

Being tender. To my surprise, it is not difficult to think I could be that for her.

Are both she and Moshi right? Was it the cruel and vicious way in which the females were bred that caused their deaths?

Am I willing to risk Iris's life because I am selfish enough to believe this is the case?

Not yet.

But I am more willing to agree to her terms of pleasuring each other than I had been before.

I am just selfish enough for that. Although I am not sure how often we will be able to pleasure each other with our kit nearby.

He is a heavy sleeper, unlike me who was forced to sleep lightly for fear of being killed by another tribe brother during any challenges created by King Armik.

Perhaps some of the elders would be willing to let Sorin stay with them for a few nights once Iris and I become fully mated?

Already I am planning. With that settled, I return to my task as I have fallen behind.

By the time the last dreri has been butchered completely and all parts gathered that will be used, the first moon is fully risen and hangs high in the sky.

Sorin's eyes have drifted shut many times and all of the elders have taken their leave and retired for the evening so all that remains are the younger male warlords.

Iris has done well, even if she has skinned and cut apart far less number of dreri than the others.

But for these being her first, she should be proud of what she accomplished.

I stand and approach my mate and our kit.

“It is time for sleep.” I first pick up Sorin whose head collapses onto my shoulder and then reach a hand out for Iris, who takes it after only a short hesitation.

Together, we return to our tent. I carefully lay our kit down and wet a cloth besides the water basin to clean his chest and hands.

I get a new pair of leg coverings and change him out of the dirty pair.

He remains asleep through all my caring.

I can feel Iris observing our routine from the other side of our dwelling.

One turn I hope she will become a part of it and together we will care for our kit. Like a family.

Once Sorin is as clean as he is going to get without submerging himself into the water to bathe, I rinse out the cloth in the basin and turn to Iris.

“Come, it is our turn to wash.”

Slowly, she approaches and tilts her head. “Are you going to clean and dress me like you did our son?”

I pause a beat. “Is that what you wish?”

“Maybe, but only if you’re not going to run away when you’re done.”

This mate of mine will be the death of me. “I will not run.”

“Good. That’s what I wish, then.”

Are all human females as bold with their mates as Iris appears to be? From what I know of them, I suspect, in most cases—except perhaps Maeve—they are. Within the privacy of their dwelling, perhaps Maeve is as well.

“What are you thinking about?” Iris asks.

I do not believe she would like to know that my thoughts have drifted to other females even if only to compare her to them. “That I like your boldness with me.”

Her cheek darkens in the dim interior of our tent. “It doesn’t turn you off? Some men don’t want a woman to ask for—or demand, really—what it is she wants.”

“I am not some male. I am your mate. Besides, I do not know your mind like you do so it is only right that you share your needs and wants just as I should share mine with you. How else will we know?”

Iris makes her sweet melodic sound. “There would be a lot more happy women in the universe if they had mates like you.”

I gently run the back of my finger over her dark-colored cheek. “The only female whose happiness I care about is yours.”

“You really are too good, you know that?”

“You make it easy to be so.” No one else besides Sorin could make me this way. “Let us wash.”

Iris nods, but makes no move to do so. Since she did say she wished for me to clean and dress her then it is up to me to move. I go to her bag that I placed beside her

pallet and squat down.

“Do you have a preference for what you would like to wear?” I glance over at her.

“I have a pair of pajamas.” She laughs and joins me. “You probably have no idea what those are.”

I offer her the bag and she searches through it until she finds these...

pajamas and hands them to me. They are made of a soft material and consist of a top and bottom covering similar to all the other items she wears.

I guide her to the water basin and place her coverings beside it.

The cloth I used to clean Sorin is dirty, so I grab another one, wet it, and wring it out.

Then I gently wipe Iris's face.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 11:24 am

Iris

No one has washed me since I was little, and even then, the sisters weren't as gentle as Kala is being. In fact, my nipples harden and heaviness builds in my pelvis. My stomach has butterflies, but in a good way.

Kala washes my face, and once he's satisfied, he switches to my left arm first. He cleans all sides of it and the end of my limb.

I didn't realize how sensual it would feel until he runs the wet cloth around it.

A shudder runs up the length of my arm, and all the hairs stand up while gooseflesh appear.

He finishes, rinses out the cloth, and cleans my right arm and my hand, even getting in between my fingers, which causes another full-body tremor.

I stare up at him while he cleans me, and it's hard to tell in the dim light, but there appears to be a flicker of something shiny within the shadows that dance in his eyes.

This is only the second or third time I've noticed it, but it's definitely there.

Nowhere near as bright as Sorin's, but at least I know now I'm not imagining it.

Kala lifts his gaze from his ministrations to meet mine. The intensity in the depths of his black eyes makes my core throb. I press my thighs together to ease the ache he's caused, but it doesn't do any good. The only thing that will satisfy the yearning inside

me is him.

He shifts a step to the side, and I realize it's to block Sorin's view of me in case he wakes up, although as exhausted as he was, I doubt that'll happen.

Still, I'm grateful for Kala protecting my modesty.

Although I should have expected it to come, I'm not actually prepared for him to lift my shirt up and over my head so I'm only in my pants and ratty bra. No sexy lingerie for this bottomer.

He drops his gaze to my breasts with their hardened nipples peeking through the thin and tattered lace cups.

His breaths quicken. When he traces one tip with the sharp edge of his clawed finger mine does as well.

I've touched myself a million times over the years and not once have I felt an echo of the same touch on my breast in my core.

But Kala's makes me wet. Really, really wet. Embarrassingly so.

"Your scent." He nearly groans. "I have never smelled anything like it before."

"Is it bad?" I cringe. Man, do I stink?

He rattles his head. "It is the most desirous scent, and hardens my cock painfully."

Oh .

Kala washes the top of my chest next and the water drips down to soak my bra

making the thing even more transparent than it already was.

I reach behind and unhook it with a confidence I've never felt before.

But the look in his eyes and his comment about my scent gives me the boost to go for it.

I drop it on top of where my shirt fell on the ground and stand proudly with my shoulders back.

Kala doesn't say anything, but he also doesn't take his intent stare off me while he runs the wet cloth across my heated flesh.

When he brushes over a nipple, I suck in a sharp breath and my knees quake.

More wetness soaks my underwear. He thoroughly cleans both breasts and my belly even though it wasn't dirty.

At first I think he's done since he drops the cloth into the water basin and disappointment fills me. Except I'm wrong. Kala palms both breasts in his large, calloused hands.

"Is this all right?" he rasps out in a gruff whisper. "This kind of touching?"

I nod, because I'm having trouble speaking.

"You must say the words, Iris, so I know it is the truth."

I clear my throat. "It is more than all right. Don't stop."

He doesn't. Kala explores at will. He cups me, squeezes, kneads, and molds my flesh

in various ways, and I can tell that he's cataloguing each of my responses because the ones that cause the greatest reaction, he repeats.

I'm nearly a puddle on the floor and have to grab his forearm to steady myself.

"Is this the kind of pleasure you wanted to give each other?"

"Yes." Although it was meant to be more a mutual thing, but for once in my life I want to be a little selfish.

"So you enjoy this?"

I bark out a harsh laugh. If I enjoyed it any more, I'd orgasm. Which isn't that far off to my shock. "Very much."

"I am glad. You should only ever experience pleasure, Iris."

"Don't stop," I beg again.

"Not until you tell me to cease."

Not gonna happen.

"Perhaps we would be more comfortable in our pallet? I still need to wash the lower half of you."

Having Kala see me topless hadn't felt like such a huge deal.

Maybe because I actually think my boobs are pretty spectacular.

Not that the rest of me is terrible, but he'll also be the first man to see me completely

naked.

As bold and confident as I was a second ago, it's slowly wearing off. I hate that it is, too.

A warm hand palms my jaw and I glance up at Kala.

"If this is all the pleasuring that occurs this turn, it is all right. We have the rest of our lives to learn each other's bodies and what pleases the other."

My heart skips several beats. How did I get so damn lucky to land a guy like Kala?

He might be an alien who has come from a troubled species who has literally killed my people and who is probably the farthest thing from human, but he's only ever treated me with kindness.

Our mating might be for Sorin, but I have a feeling it won't always be that way.

"Are you sure you won't be too disappointed?" I suck in my bottom lip and bite at it.

His mouth slit parts and he shows me his teeth. It reminds me so much of Sorin's attempt at a smile that it starts up a funny feeling in my belly.

"I could never be disappointed in my...sweeney."

My forehead wrinkles. "In your what?"

Kala cants his head. "Is that not correct? This name of affection we call one another?"

I snort and cover my mouth with my hand to smother my laughter. "Do you mean sweetie?"

“That is what you call Sorin, yes? Was there not another name you called me? I thought it was what we call each other.”

Oh my gosh, my mate is so freaking adorable. “I was going to call Sorin sweetie and you honey, but I actually kind of like sweeney. It’s like my own special nickname.”

“It is not foolish that I made a mistake?”

“Honest mistakes aren’t foolish in the least. Besides, there are no rules when it comes to names of affection. If you like sweeney, then so do I.” I rise up on my toes and kiss his mouth slit.

“You are special to me so you should receive a special name of affection.”

I stroke Kala’s chest. Which also makes me remember I’m standing topless in the middle of our tent with our son only a few feet away.

I glance around my mate to check on Sorin.

He’s still fast asleep if the quiet rumbling snores are any indicator.

Love for him fills me up. I shift my gaze up to meet Kala’s. There’s deep affection for him as well.

“Let’s go to sleep. We’ll have many more nights to feel each other up.” I grin.

“I will wash myself if you would like to change your leg coverings for your clean ones.”

“Only if I get to clean you next time.”

“Deal.” For once, Kala initiates a kiss between us even though he just barely brushes my lips. Still, I love that he made the first move.

I slip my top over my head, grab my pajama bottoms, and sit down next to our pallet to wiggle out of my pants, which is awkward to do sitting, but I manage. Before Kala is cleaning up, I’m fully clothed and lying on the bundle of furs. It’s warm inside the tent so I don’t think we’ll need blankets.

My mate rifles through his own chest and brings out a clean pair of hide pants.

Before I can guess what he’s going to do, he strips himself of the dirty ones.

They pool around his ankles and he steps out of them.

He’s partially turned away from me, but it doesn’t matter because there’s no hiding the cock that hangs from between his thighs.

Look away .

Except, I can’t. I stare as Kala grabs the wet cloth and washes himself...

there. He cleans two large sacs that sit at the base of his cock before wiping the long and thick length that makes my pussy ache but also clench in a little bit of fear.

I’ve never been with a guy, and knowing that someday that might be inside me is more than intimidating.

Although, judging by how wet he made me just by playing with my breasts, I might not have anything to worry about. Or at least not much.

The ache only grows worse the longer Kala washes himself. I can’t—don’t want

to—stop from sliding my hand inside my pajama bottoms and under the elastic band of my panties, through the hair that covers my sex, until I reach my clit. It throbs and pulses like it has its own heart beat.

I don't take my eyes off Kala while I rub my sensitive flesh.

I've perfected the art of masturbation over the years and I've learned exactly how much pressure and speed to use to get off.

My breathing speeds up and for a second he pauses what he's doing.

I nearly whimper in need, but then he continues.

I'm not sure how long it takes me to realize Kala's no longer only cleaning himself.

Far too long most likely, because suddenly I know he's not just washing for the sake of washing.

He's making a show of it. He's stroking himself—pleasuring himself—the same way I am.

It's confirmed when I glance up and our eyes meet.

There's no hiding what either of us are doing, especially when Kala gives up any pretenses and tosses the cloth in the water basin and uses only his hand to stroke his cock from its base to its tip.

He speeds up the motion and I do the same.

My release is right there . It takes only another few rubs and it hits me. Hard.

I cry out and smother the sound with my forearm.

Kala groans and his whole body tenses. He grabs the wet cloth from the basin and covers himself as he comes.

Our gazes remain locked as he shakes and braces himself on the table while his pelvis jerks.

I drag my hand out from my pajamas and feel the heat pouring from my face and chest. Never before have I done that in front of someone let alone with someone.

Kala tosses the cloth in the water again and grabs his pants.

He pulls them on and takes the basin outside.

I hear the splash, and when he returns it's empty.

He sets it back on the table and comes over to where I'm still lying.

There's a brief hesitation where I wonder if he's going to break his word and leave to sleep outside, but finally, he lowers himself beside me.

Kala's rigid and stiff on his back with his arms at his sides.

Then again, I'm lying equally as tense. This is dumb .

I roll to my side facing him and pick up his arm so I can crawl under it.

He doesn't resist, but he also doesn't help.

I situate myself so his arm is draped over my shoulders and I can rest my head on his

chest. Snuggling closer, I release a long sigh and force my body to relax.

“Do you regret what just happened?” I can’t help asking even though I’m not sure I want to hear his answer.

“No. Do you?”

Phew. “Not in the least.”

“I am glad.”

“Me too.” I lay my arm over his stomach. “Maybe next time we can touch each other instead of ourselves.”

Kala doesn’t say anything at first, but finally there’s a soft, “I would like that.”

I smile against his skin. “So would I.”

Kala

I did not sleep the entire night. Instead, I remained still within my pallet holding Iris while I stared at the inside of the roof of our dwelling listening to the soft sounds she made.

Not once did she stir. Not even when Sorin woke and joined us.

He wiggled his way in between our bodies and promptly fell back to sleep.

Every time I closed my eyes I saw Iris pleasuring herself and coming apart.

What started as merely cleansing myself for the evening turned into far more than I ever expected.

Her arousal scent filled the tent and I could hardly believe my eyes when I glanced over at her and witnessed what she was doing.

Even now my cock slightly hardens as I picture the flush of her cheeks and the desire that shone from her gaze as she met mine and did not look away in shame or embarrassment.

Beside me, Iris stirs. Her eyelids flutter and slowly open. She breathes in deeply and releases it before staring up at me. Her smile is like a thousand moons shining brightly down from the sky. It is nearly blinding.

“Good morning.” Her voice is a whisper and rougher than usual.

“Good morning to you as well.”

She glances down and strokes Sorin’s floks. “This is a nice way to wake up.”

“It has been many sun cycles since he has shared my pallet.”

“Is it okay that he’s in here with us?” Iris turns her gaze up to me. “I know this is our bed, and Sorin’s a little old to be sleeping with his parents.”

“While I would have preferred to wake to just my mate in my arms, our kit will only be a kit once. One turn, far too soon, he will be grown and wish to live in his own dwelling without his gogo or momo. But until then, he is welcome to lie with us for a part of the night so long as I get you to myself for the rest of it.”

“I’ve never cuddled with anyone before so I’m glad it’s all right that he’s here. I like that he shows so much affection. All three of us have missed out on too much of it,” Iris says quietly.

Before her, I would not have thought I needed affection, but I have become spoiled by it. From what I’ve received from both her and our kit. “Perhaps you are right.”

“What’s the plan for today?”

“I need to go hunting.”

“Will you take Sorin with you?”

Normally, yes, but I suspect he will wish to stay here with his momo.

At least until he is confident she is not going anywhere.

“Not this turn. You and he can spend time together around the village. When I return, I will find a chest for you to place your belongings. If there are any changes you would like to make to our dwelling, you are welcome to do so.”

“It would be nice to add some color. Maybe some flowers to brighten it up and give it a nice smell. Not that it stinks in here,” Iris hastily adds. “I just think they’d be a nice addition.”

“Whatever you wish to do is fine with me.”

“Will you be gone the whole day? Just so I can have an idea when you might be back so if it gets too late I don’t start to worry.”

I study her. “You would worry?”

Her brow crinkles and she pushes herself up onto her elbow. “Of course I would. I know you’ve been hunting your whole life and you’re skilled at it, but that doesn’t mean I won’t worry you might get hurt out there. I want you to be safe.”

No one has ever expressed their worry over my safety. They worry they’ll go hungry if I don’t return with food. But worried about me as a Krijese? Not to my knowledge.

“Thank you for your concern. It means much to me. To put you at ease, I will most likely be hunting until the evening meal.”

“You’ll be careful? Not that I don’t think you will be, but Sorin is usually with you.”

I reach out and thread my fingers through her hair that has escaped its confines during the night and spills down around her shoulders. “I will always come back to you.”

Iris leans into my touch. “You better.”

Sorin is next to stir. He slowly opens his eyes and focuses in on his momo. “You are real. I thought perhaps I had only imagined you in our tent with us.”

She leans down and kisses his brow. “Good morning, sweetie. Did you sleep well?”

“I slept at ease.”

“Good. Looks like you and I get to hang out together today. What do you think we should do?”

Sorin glances up at me. “Will you be with us?”

I shake my head. “There is more hunting that needs to be done.”

Our kit turns back to Iris. “There is much to show you.”

“Then I suppose we better get our day started,” she says. “I also need a few minutes of privacy, please.”

“Come, let us go see if they need help with the morning meal.” I stand and wait for Sorin to rise as well, which he quickly does. I help Iris to her feet next. “We will be at the main fire when you are finished.”

“I’ll be there in a few minutes.” She brushes her lips between my mouth claws and then does the same to the top of Sorin’s head.

I guide him out of the tent and give Iris the privacy she asked for. Together, he and I walk across the length of the village to the main fire where one of only three remaining females and an elder who shares a tent with Moshi and Ashrif ready the meal.

“Greetings. Can we assist you with anything?”

They nod at our arrival and the female shakes her head. “It is nearly ready.”

Since our help is not needed, Sorin and I sit near the fire.

“We should build seats like the Tavikhi have for Momo and the elders. It is getting more and more difficult for them—especially Ashrif—to get up off the ground,” he says.

Wood-crafting is not a skill any of the Krijese possess. Sorin knows this. “We have survived this long without them and we will continue to do so.”

“But we should not have to.”

“I understand you have learned of many things while spending time with the Tavikhi and I am glad for this. But we are not Tavikhi. We are Krijese. None of us know how to craft these seats you wish us to sit upon and there are none of us who have the time to learn. What we have time to do is hunt and make sure we have enough food to add to our stores so more of our people survive the cold season.”

“Is everything okay out here?” Iris approaches wearing fresh coverings instead of the ones she calls pajamas.

“All is well.” It is the first falsehood I have spoken.

She cocks her head. “Are you sure? Because it doesn’t actually appear that way. What are you two arguing about?”

“Sorin suggested we build seats similar to the Tavikhi. However, we do not possess these skills or do we have time to learn them. We have never needed to because we

have always sat on the ground during meals. It is the Krijese way.”

“I see.” Iris glances between our kit and me. “Out of curiosity, would you be willing to change your ways if these seats were an option?”

“They are not.”

She narrows her gaze. “Humor me, please. If benches were to become available, would you use them?”

“Yes.” I am not so opposed to changing our ways that I would punish those who would benefit greatly from an object that made their life easier.

Iris bends down and gives me a quick kiss. “Thank you, that’s all I needed to know. Now, no more arguing, please.”

“Yes, Momo.” Sorin ducks his head.

“Yes, sweeney.”

She grins and shakes her head and my hearts swell with emotion.

When she lowers herself to sit next to us, I discover I do not like Iris placing herself on the ground.

Her coverings are nice, but now they will be dirty.

Perhaps there is something to what Sorin wishes for.

That does not mean I suddenly have knowledge I did not previously possess or the time to gain it.

Not with all the other ways in which I need to take care of my people.

“It looks like it’s going to be a nice, warm day.” Iris stares up. “That’s one thing I love about Tavikh—well one of the things really—and it’s the fact I can actually see the beautiful sky.”

“You could not on Earth?” I am not sure what I would do if I were unable to look up and see the sun and the moons above.

“Not clearly. At least not where I lived. There was always so much smoke and fog in the air from the factories that it was constantly overcast and gloomy. The colors on Tavikh are bright and happy, whereas Earth was gray and dull and depressing.”

“What is gray?” Sorin asks. “This is not a color name Talek has taught me. I know the fiku trees are black and their leaves are purple. The nenuphar bush is a dark purple, but the flowers that bloom on it are called blue. The blooms on the trendafili bush are red. Bari is yellow. Gogo, I, and other Krijese are a mix of black and green while Tavikhi are purple with yellow hair.”

These are all the names of colors he has tried to teach me, but they do not stick. Except looking at Iris—who appears suitably impressed with Sorin’s knowledge—I find I would like to learn the names of her various colors.

“Wow, great job on remembering all those,” she praises him. “Gray is what you’d get if you mixed every color together, but it doesn’t make something pretty. It’s drab. Boring. It can even be a little depressing.”

“That does not sound like a place I would like to live,” Sorin announces with an exaggerated shudder. “Our sky is too beautiful and this gray color sounds awful.”

Iris huffs out a short amused sound. “There are shades of gray that are better than

others, especially if they have a purple hue, but you're right about Tavikh's sky. It's one of the most lovely things I have ever seen."

She is one of the most lovely things I have ever seen.

More people arrive to the fire and once everyone is present, we form our line to be served.

It is the best morning meal I have eaten, because it is done with my kit and mate at my side.

Iris and Sorin speak of their plans for the day, although they are more ideas of things for them to do than actual plans.

Once we have finished eating and cleaned up, we return to our tent so I can get my war axe and prepare to leave.

Iris helps me secure the sheath around my chest and shoulders. Although I have done this action countless times, I enjoy her assistance and the casual touches she gives me. She lays her hands on me when we have finished.

"You're going to be careful, right?"

"Aye."

She gives me a kiss and draws Sorin into her side. He leans into her and rubs his cheek up and down it like he does to my chest when he is feeling affectionate.

"I will return near the evening meal."

Iris nods and I must force my feet to move because I do not want to leave them. It is a

first for me. This need to remain with my mate. As much as I wish otherwise, I quickly exit our dwelling and lope into the forest before I talk myself into staying.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 11:24 am

Iris

Watching Kala leave is harder than I expect. I know I shouldn't worry, but I can't help it. In such a short time he's already come to mean so much to me. It's not quite love, but I care deeply.

"He will be well, Momo."

I glance down at Sorin and hug him tightly against me, once again enjoying hearing him call me that. "I know, sweetie."

Okay, no more moping. "How about you show me where all the supplies and medicine are stored?"

"We do not have much."

Kala warned me the tribe is only surviving so I'm not surprised by the response. "That's all right. We'll take inventory and make a list of things that would help."

Sorin and I walk outside and he leads me to a small tent not far from where the food stores tent sits.

He folds aside the door flap and I step inside the darkened interior.

My heart drops into my stomach at how right they both are.

There is hardly anything in here. A few wooden chests and that's about it.

Sorin comes in a few seconds later holding what resembles a lit candle which helps.

I open the lid of the first chest, which contains maybe a dozen folded furs and hides.

“Where are the dreri hides we skinned yesterday?”

“They were most likely given to the elders. While it is warm enough when the sun is out, it is still too cold once the moons rise for some of them. Gogo makes sure they get extra furs when he can.”

I make a mental note to check in with them and make sure they received the extras.

No one is going to go without blankets if I have anything to say about it.

We move to the next chest and inside it are clothes.

Pants, really, since that’s all the Krijese wear—even the few remaining females, which took me slightly off guard the first time.

Most of them appear new, but a few pieces look a bit tattered.

“What about these?”

Sorin glances over at the pair I hold up.

“After King Armik and the rest of the warlords attacked the Tavikhi and were killed, Gogo and I—along with a few other tribe brothers—returned to our old village and raided tents. We gathered as much stuff as we could carry and brought it back here. This is what remains.”

My god. I try to keep my expression neutral, but I’m not sure I succeed.

“Is there any medicine?”

Sorin shrugs, no doubt a gesture he picked up from the human women. Or perhaps Cecily and Carter. “We do not have much of that either. It is why Gogo had to take me to the Tavikhi village when I almost died even though he did not wish to. It is where I met Healer Sage. She saved my life.”

I gape at him. I knew Sage was his favorite, but I didn’t know why. “You almost died?”

What would this world be like without Sorin in it? I don’t want to imagine. He nods.

“Last cold season. She said I had a disease similar to what humans get. I do not remember what it is called though. It is a difficult word.”

“What were your symptoms?” Maybe that will narrow it down.

“I could not breathe, and there were crackling sounds in my chest. She made me drink some type of healing liquid to help my cough and she forced me to lean over a basin of boiling water with some herb that smelled bad. They placed a fur over my head to keep the heat within.”

Coughing and crackling chest sounds? “Did she call it pneumonia?”

Sorin perks up and bounces excitedly. “Yes, that is what I had. I was in their village for many turns before Gogo said we needed to return here.”

How terrifying that must have been for him and for Kala. He must have been desperate to take our son to the Tavikhi and ask for help. Will Sorin get that sick again this coming winter? My stomach aches thinking about it. Which means I need to learn all I can from Kyler.

“Let’s see what there is. Is it in here or stored elsewhere?” My old tent in the Tavikhi village housed all their herbs and medicines, which was a lot.

“What little we have is there.” Sorin points at another chest.

I open that one and the ache worsens. With the tiny bit of knowledge I learned from reading medical journals I managed to pilfer over the years, I can tell what’s in here isn’t sufficient.

I don’t even have to understand what the stuff does to know our supply needs to be replenished and stocked with a bigger variety of items.

“Why don’t you and I go to the Tavikhi village?” It couldn’t have been more than a thirty- or forty-minute walk if I remember correctly.

“You have not practiced your axe-throwing with Gogo, yet. Do you think we should wait until after?”

“We should be fine. How often have you two travelled back and forth between there without issue?”

Sorin tilts his head. “All the time.”

I shrug. “See?”

He hesitates still, which makes me hesitate as well. Should we wait until Kala gets back? Or at least another day or two? It’s not like anyone is going to get deathly ill between now and then. At least I hope not. Ashrif isn’t well, but he’s also not quite on death’s door yet.

“I’m new at being a mom, so I worry something is going to happen to you and I

won't be able to fix it."

Sorin wraps his arm around my waist and nuzzles his face against my belly. "You are the best momo a kit could have. Nothing will happen that you cannot take care of."

I laugh and hug him back. "You sure do have a lot of confidence in my skills."

He glances up, but doesn't release me. "A kit should always believe in his momo. She is the most important female in his life."

"Even more than his mate?"

The shiny flecks of silver in Sorin's eyes dim slightly. "Gogo does not think I will ever have a mate because there are no Krijese left after Gannen and me."

How dare Kala tell our son he'll never find a mate.

But then I think about the story he told me regarding the stolen human females who the Krijese forced themselves on and who all died.

In his mind, there are no options for Sorin.

What about a Tavikhi female though? There are a few female children I saw running around during my time there.

Then there's the new Tavikhi-human hybrids.

Could they possibly be mates to Sorin and Gannen?

I squat down to eye-level with him. "Your planet is changing. While I don't want to offer you false hope, I also don't want you to give it up completely.

Your gogo thought he would never have another mate after your momo, I suspect.

And look at him now. He has me, and so do you.

I guess what I'm saying is you never know what life will bring you so keep your mind and your heart open to all possibilities, okay? "

"Yes, Momo."

"Good." I kiss Sorin's forehead and draw him in for a big hug. "We'll wait another day or two before we go to the Tavikhi village. Once I've had a few axe-throwing lessons."

"I think that is a wise choice."

I snort and straighten. "Let's go check on the elders and see how they're doing."

He takes my hand and tugs me out of the storage tent. On the way, he douses the candle and drops it in a small cup-like vessel on the ground right outside the door.

"How are those things made?"

"Animal fat," Sorin replies.

My stomach turns a little. Last night I'd almost lost my dinner skinning and butchering the dreri, but I swallowed down the impulse. If I'm going to survive in this village, then I'm going to end up doing repulsive things like yanking the guts out of an alien deer. I'm nothing if not a survivor.

We approach the first tent. Seated on the ground outside are Moshi and another elder whose name I believe is Vora. Between the two of them they have a large tub of

water and a smattering of bones of various shapes and sizes.

“Greetings,” Sorin calls out.

The two males glance up and Moshi dips his head. “Greetings to you and your momo.”

“Sorin and I stopped by to say hello and see if there is anything we can do to assist you. Although truthfully, I also came by to see if you had any tips or tricks or advice for me that will help me to become a better tribe sister.” I’ve learned people like feeling useful, not useless.

“Birth new kits,” Vora says without any hesitation.

My face heats and I choke a little. “I’ll see what I can do.”

He nods and returns to his task—whatever it is. Moshi glances at him and his tusks twitch, but I don’t think in amusement. Not with the way he glares. He turns to me.

“Continue being a good mate to Kala and Momo to Sorin and keep peace in our village. That is the best thing we can ask of you.”

“Now that I can definitely do.” I study the way he shapes the bone which I find fascinating. “Are you making something specific?”

“A bone blade.”

“Like a knife?”

“Aye.”

“Would you teach Sorin and me?” I glance over at him. “Then again, he probably already knows how so just me?”

Sorin straightens. “I do know how, but it has been many moons since I have made one and it is always good to practice skills that have not been used in recent turns.”

“Perfect. Would you mind or would it be a bother?”

Moshi rattles his head. “I do not mind. Making weapons for hunting or defense is never a bother. It is an important skill for all Krijese to have.”

Technically, I’m not Krijese, but I’m not going to say that out loud.

Instead, I offer my thanks as the elder male passes Sorin and me a medium-sized bone and gives us instructions.

As with all new things that two-handed people can perform with more ease, I struggle at first. But with every challenge I’m presented, I do what I always do and that’s become stubborn.

I’m not one to give up easily and although it almost always takes me a lot longer to accomplish a task and I make more mistakes, I stick with it. The end results aren’t perfect and I have admitted defeat before, but no one can ever say I didn’t try my absolute best.

Time passes and we take a break for the afternoon meal, with Moshi assisting Ashrif out of their tent, but then return to our blade-making after we’re finished eating.

Before I realize it, Moshi stands. I glance up at him and discover the first moon has almost broken past the horizon.

Which means it is almost time for the evening meal and for Kala to return.

I'm nearly finished with my current blade anyway.

"Thank you for teaching me and for spending your day with us." It has been a great day actually. I love hearing the stories Moshi and Vora told of their lives. It gives me a greater insight into Kala and why he and the rest of the others crave peace.

"It is my honor, Iris. You are welcome at our tent any time."

"Do you mind if I take these to show Kala? I'll return them, I promise." I gesture toward the few blades I made that still need to be attached to their wooden handles.

"Your mate will be proud of your work."

"Thank you."

Sorin helps me gather the things up and we head for our tent to wait for Kala's arrival. Now that my mind isn't occupied with another task, the anticipation and impatience accelerates.

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Kala

My steps are rushed, but I am still cautious as always, as I make my way back to the village.

Back to Iris. It has been a surprisingly successful turn of hunting considering much of it was spent thinking of my mate.

It has also been a lonely one without the company of Sorin.

I did not realize how much I appreciated him at my side until he was absent.

Hung from the rope at my waist are several leburin.

Behind me is a sled that carries the weight of several dreri as well as three dhibani.

Our god must be watching out for me, because this is the largest number of kills I have returned with to the village.

Perhaps I will break out the vessel of special Tavikhi brew I had been gifted by one of their elders to celebrate.

At last the village appears within a break in the trees. The scent of the main fire had reached me a bit ago, but the scent is even stronger now and mixed with the odor of cooked meat. I had packed some dried dreri sticks to eat throughout the day, but the hunger pains grow the closer I approach.

I walk into the clearing and am finally spotted by one of the other warlords who calls out a guttural greeting.

I glance in the direction of where my tent lies and several beats later, Iris and Sorin appear.

My mate offers me the largest smile and runs toward me with our kit straight on her heels.

I release the rope I attached to pull the sled just as she jumps into my embrace.

She wraps her arms and legs around me and drops kisses all over my face.

I hold Iris tightly against me and my hearts soar with an emotion I cannot name. It is nothing I have ever felt before.

Neither of us releases the other, but she draws back to look at me. “Welcome home.”

“If this is the greeting I will receive when I return from hunting, perhaps I will leave more often.”

She twists her expression. “Very funny.”

“Greetings, Gogo,” Sorin says. “Your hunt looks very successful.”

I finally lower Iris to her feet, but do not let her get far from me. “We will have much to add to our food stores to prepare for cold season.”

“Speaking of cold season,” Iris says. “Sorin and I spent part of the day going through the storage tent. After the evening meal, I’d like to talk to you about a few things.”

“We will speak then.” I turn to our kit and unwrap the leburin from the rope at my waist. “Will you help me take these to the tent so we can clean and skin them?”

He reaches for them and hurries off. Iris walks beside me as I drag the sled there.

“Did you have a good turn?”

“We did, although Sorin and I missed you.”

Has anyone ever missed me before? “It was hard being away from you.”

In such a short time, Iris has come to mean much to me. Perhaps nearly as much as she has come to mean to our kit. Is that what this feeling that swells inside me is?

“Good.” She jerks her head in a single nod. “That means the next time you’re gone, you’ll hurry back. But safely, though. Don’t get careless in a rush to get to the village.”

“Being aware of our surroundings and potential dangers is in a Krijese’s blood. It has had to be for us to have survived this long.”

Iris bumps me with her elbow. “Let’s make sure you keep it that way.”

We arrive at the tent where Sorin has already deposited the leburin on the ground outside of it. Both he and my mate help remove my kills from the sled and place them with the smaller creatures.

Like the previous turn, we will gather after the evening meal and prepare them for drying and storing, especially as more warlords return and add their kills to the total numbers.

It would appear we all had a successful hunt.

Perhaps this coming cold season will be better than the last.

“Let me wash up and we will see about helping those who have prepared the evening meal.”

“We’ll meet you at the main fire.” Iris rises up and kisses my cheek.

I wish I could offer her the same sign of affection. Since I cannot—at least not in the human way—I must come up with my own way to show the care I have for her. I will think on it and perhaps when we are in our pallet this night I will practice some of them.

Not wanting to be separated from her any longer than necessary, I quickly head to the water source and rinse my upper body, arms, and face off.

On the next turn, I will bring Iris here with a cleansing bar so we can both wash thoroughly.

My cock hardens at the thought of assisting her.

The memory of the peaked tips of her chest mounds is vivid in my mind, as well as the way they felt beneath my fingers.

While I have not seen her fully unclothed, I caught unwanted glimpses of the stolen human females.

None of them aroused me though and not because they were human.

Seeing them being abused rid me of any desire I might have felt and only left me with

a heavy weight in my belly.

Yet, I cannot help but imagine what Iris will look like fully bare.

Will it bring back the images of those other females? I hope that is not the case.

I finish rinsing off any blood and dirt and make my way to the fire where Sorin and Iris wait.

Tending to it and preparing the meal are two of the three Krijese females, both elders that managed to survive the sickness that swept through our people.

My mate speaks with them and I am glad to see they are treating her well enough.

Of course, I would not tolerate anything less.

For a moment, I observe them as it appears one instructs Iris on the task she performs. A few more beats pass when my mate switches place with the female and takes over.

I approach the fire and they all glance up.

The two Krijese nod and the first attempts to return to the task she passed onto Iris as if she fears I will be angry for it, but she is rejected.

“Let me do this, please. I need to pitch in just like everyone else. Sit. Rest,” she instructs the Krijese female. “In fact, both of you take a break. Either Kala or Sorin and I will finish preparing the meal and serving it, won’t we?”

My mate raises one of the furry lines over her eye as she glances between our kit and me. I incline my head.

“I am happy to assist you.”

Iris turns her gaze to the two elders and smiles brightly. “See?”

The females hesitate, but at last they do as she says.

“Thank you, sivalla.” Adihma clasps her hands in front of her chest and they join a few other elders who have taken a seat near the fire.

Iris turns to me with a questioning glance. “What is sivalla?”

“It is a name given to those held in the highest regard. There is no direct translation, but it is nearest to meaning a gift from our god.”

Her eyes shimmer with wetness. She swallows and sniffs, then returns to her task.

Sorin glances at me with concern in his gaze, but I wave him off and join Iris at the fire.

Together, we finish preparing the meal and serve our people as they walk through the line.

Ortak and Gannen are the last to come through.

The older Krijese studies Iris for a moment before glancing down at his adopted kit.

I cannot read the expression on Ortak’s face, but there is something lurking in his gaze.

He has never had a mate before and I often wonder why he chose to raise Gannen, but I have never questioned him about his decision.

The kit is much quieter than Sorin, but they get along and Ortak treats him well.

“Thank you Sorin’s momo,” Gannen says softly after Iris adds a little extra to his platter.

Her face softens when she looks at him. “You are welcome, and please, call me Iris.”

The kit nods and continues moving on. Ortak inclines his head and sits beside his adopted kit not far from the fire.

Now that everyone has been served, we get our own food and take a seat as well.

There is little to no conversation while we eat other than from Sorin.

Although Iris does add in her own words here and there.

“Tell me more about this luani.”

“It is a ferocious beast that has teeth this long.” Our kit stretches his arms an exaggerated distance apart.

“Its claws can strike through a male with a single swipe and cut him into many pieces. They are the biggest beast you will ever see. Not even Gogo can bring one down on his own. Benham has seen several of them in his lifetime, including the one who gave him the scar across his face. Healer Sage’s mate was nearly killed by one as well.

Jodah has a scar that runs from beneath one shoulder to the opposite hip. ”

Iris appears appropriately terrified. “I hope I never come across one.”

Sorin shakes his head. “Benham says they are slowly becoming extinct and that soon one of these turns they will no longer exist.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing,” she says.

“I think it is a little sad to know that these once plentiful animals will disappear from Tavikh like the Krijese will. It is difficult to imagine that a turn will come and both of our species will be gone. The Tavikhi and perhaps the Njeri and the Trivari will continue on and stories of their ancestors will be told. Who will be told of our ancestors? We will be forgotten, as though we never existed.”

A heaviness lands in my chest at our kit’s words. He should not be thinking of the time when we are no longer. His is only a kit and should be sparring, playing, and laughing with other kits. Iris must believe the same, because she draws him into her side and holds him tightly.

“You’re right. It is sad to think of and I’m sorry for saying otherwise. Thank you for reminding me of that, but I also don’t want you to worry about things that may never happen.” She kisses the top of his head. “Remember what I said earlier about keeping your heart and mind open.”

Sorin glances up at her. “I will keep both my hearts and my mind open.”

Iris widens her eyes and glances between him and me. “You have two hearts?”

I nod. “All Krijese do.”

“Huh, interesting. I had no idea, but that’s kind of cool.”

“You may feel.” Sorin leans away, takes her platter and sets it on the ground, and takes her hand to place it on his chest.

She cants her head and I can tell she concentrates. I can also tell when she must feel both of his hearts beating because she laughs softly.

“Oh wow, that is so fascinating.” Iris lowers her hand. “I’m kind of jealous, actually, that you have two and I just have my one.”

The rough sound comes from Sorin’s throat, and my own hearts feel true peace.

Iris

Night's fallen, and the village is quiet.

Sorin took forever to wind down for the evening, but he's finally asleep in his bed while Kala and I sit together in ours with me between his outstretched legs and my back leaning against his front.

I fit perfectly within his embrace and he lightly rests his chin on the top of my head.

It's like we're two puzzle pieces that snap together.

"This is nice. Sitting here with you like this." I swivel my head slightly and tip it back to look up at Kala. "It's so peaceful with only the sounds of nature and the occasional crackle and pops of the fire."

"Often it feels too quiet. Like right before the chaos of a storm hits." He stares forward almost blankly like he's seeing something else.

Or maybe some time else. "It was never quiet in our former village unless we waited for punishment from King Armik. Then no one spoke for fear of drawing attention to themselves. There are turns when I lie in my pallet and my hearts race during the silence because I am waiting for death to come. It is always what our king decreed, oftentimes for nothing more than his enjoyment."

The ache in Kala's voice breaks my heart and I snuggle closer to him.

“I know I said it before, but I’m really glad your former king is dead.

Some might say that’s a terrible thing to say, but it’s the truth.

He was a terrible person and I suspect you all are better off without him.

The entire planet is better off without him. ”

“We were all raised to follow his lead. To answer only to him. For my entire life, I did just that. Until I could do it no longer. It was not the kind of life I wanted for my kit.”

“You did the right thing by leaving.” Kala had no other choice and anyone who doesn’t see that can’t understand.

“Most turns I believe I did. But there are times when I wonder if we would not have been better off with me killing him and becoming a different kind of leader to a much larger number of our people. At least I would not have to worry so much about so few starving to death or dying from a sickness I do not have the knowledge to heal.”

I turn in Kala’s arms and sit across his lap so I can meet his eyes. “ We are not going to let our people die. You have me now so you don’t have to do anything alone anymore.”

He stares at me for so long until finally, he strokes my face with the back of his finger.

“Many turns ago Sorin told me he was going to pray to our god to provide us with what we needed. In my head I knew it was fruitless, but I did not discourage him. I will forever be grateful that I did not, because I know now that he answered our kit’s prayers.

You , Iris of Earth, are what we needed. ”

No one has ever told me they needed me before.

Not a single person. My parents hadn't needed me.

The sisters at the orphanage certainly hadn't other than to clean and do laundry or any other menial task just like every other orphan who lived there.

But no one needed me, Iris . No one except this male and our son. They need me.

They need me to care for them. To give them all the affection and love they never received.

The love and affection I've bottled up inside me my entire life just waiting for the right person—or people—to bestow it upon.

Because I need them, too. I need to not be seen as different.

Or less than. I need someone to look at me and actually see me.

All of me, not only certain parts. Kala and Sorin do that.

I lean in and kiss the small divot right below his mouth slit and then move along his jaw up to his cheek. For a second, I wish we could truly kiss and not just have me brushing my lips over different parts of his face.

But I don't want that. Because then Kala wouldn't be Krijese. He'd be someone else and there isn't anyone else I'd rather have than him.

Without words, I move off his lap and gently nudge him to lying down.

He does so without protest. I lie down beside him and stroke his face, exploring every inch of it.

Familiarizing myself with it. Memorizing it.

I trace the hard bones that slant just slightly over his eyes that, even in the dimness of the tent, appear to shine with a faint hint of silver.

Still not as bright as Sorin's, but it's there.

Next, I skim the furrows just above his mouth slit and tusks.

They're rough and craggy like rocks or pebbles.

I move to the knobby protrusions on either side of his face where his large and sharp tusks grow from.

To my surprise, they're pliable and move independently.

Leisurely, I trace the slit that bisects the lower half of his face and the lines that veer off it and allow it to open.

"The first time I saw you, you scared me. You were so... alien ." I chuckle. "Which is funny, because I'm the one who came to your planet, so technically I'm the alien."

Kala's eyes move side to side over my face, but the movement is so small to barely be noticeable. He lets me continue my exploration.

"Now, though, I can't imagine what it would be like to go about my day without seeing you.

Without talking to you.” I shake my head.

“I’ve only known you for a short time and yet somehow it feels like I’ve always known you.

I can’t explain it. I’ve read about people meeting for the first time and it feeling like they’re old friends.

Like they’ve never not known each other.

The more time I spend with you, the more I feel that way, too. Does that make sense?”

“Aye,” Kala says gruffly. “It is the same with me. There does not seem like a time when you were not present. That is how entrenched you have become in my life.”

“Is this love? I mean, it feels like it, but I don’t really know. I’ve never loved anyone or been loved by anyone before. Can you be in love with someone you met not that long ago?”

The shiny silver in his eyes appears to grow slightly or maybe shine a little brighter. “I do not know what love is.”

“Do you not love Sorin?” I don’t really have to ask, because I know Kala does. He shows our son his love every single day.

“He is my kit. I care for him greatly. Far more than myself. There is nothing I would not do for him.”

I feel the same way about Sorin and there’s no doubt I love him.

What I feel for his father far surpasses any emotion I've experienced before.

“That is one description of love and the same kind I have for him. This...feeling between us is different though. It feels like so much more and yet not nearly enough. I don't know how to explain it, because it's beyond definition. ”

Kala threads his fingers through my hair, lightly scratching my scalp with his claws that sends a shiver coursing down my spine.

“I do not know if this beating of my hearts for you is love. What I do know is you have changed me in ways I never expected. You are the first thing I think of when I awaken and the last thing I think of when I sleep. Holding you in my arms brings me peace. The biggest thing is you have given me back the one thing I thought I had lost. Hope. When I look at you, I see a future. Not only for us, but for Sorin. For our people. I see kits. Yours and mine. Because I know they will make you happy, even though the thought of losing you fills me with unimaginable pain. It has become my greatest fear.”

I lay my hand on Kala's cheek. “You're not going to lose me.”

“You cannot make promises like that. I have seen too much death. Too much loss.”

“My whole life has been spent trying to find my place.” My voice grows hoarse.

“Not once have I ever felt like I belonged until I came here. I don't mean Tavikh or even this village.

I mean here , in this tent. In these furs.

With you at my side and our son nearby. This is where I was always meant to be.

I refuse to let anyone—not even your god—take me away from you, no matter what.
”

Kala gently draws me to him and gently rubs his chin across my forehead. “My battle scars have been worn with pride. They show my strength and determination. Yet all that strength is gone when it comes to you. You are the one who holds all the power.”

I shake my head. “Together we hold all the power. Together there is nothing we can’t do.”

“You make me want to believe that.”

“Then trust me. Please.”

Kala stares quietly into my eyes for so long I’m positive he’s going to deny us both.

The thought hurts, but I also know how fiercely he believes a true mating between us won’t work.

Before we left the Tavikhi village to come here, I discussed with Kyler and Sage the possibility of a human giving birth to a healthy Krijese baby as well as the potential dangers.

Neither could make any guarantees, but when in life are there?

If he doesn’t dare risk me, I’ll understand, though.

It won’t change the way I feel about him.

At last, he jerks his head in a slow, single nod. “I trust you, sweeney.”

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Kala

There has been little I fear, other than losing Sorin. Nothing could be worse than that. However, the thought of losing Iris is just as devastating. I do not know how I could go on breathing without her. My hearts would stop beating all together. Yet, I cannot deny her.

I know it is not only kits she wishes for.

It is much deeper than that. It is a true mating.

It is a coming together of two souls. Three hearts.

It is expressing our innermost emotions.

The ones we have buried because it was easier.

Less painful. I want a true mating with Iris, because she is my mate.

I knew that the moment she tumbled into my arms that turn and stared up at me with fear in her eyes.

With that single touch, I was changed and she had been the one to do it.

This is more than love.

“I, Kala of the Krijese, claim you, Iris of Earth, as my true mate.”

Tears fill her eyes. “I, Iris of Earth, claim you, Kala of the Krijese, as my true mate.”

“You must teach me how to pleasure you. I do not know the places to touch other than you enjoyed what I did with your chest mounds.”

Iris’s lips curl slightly and she takes my hand. “They’re called breasts.”

“Breasts.” It does not sound the same as when she says it, but I like this word. I like it better when she places my hand beneath her shirt and lays it over one of these breasts.

Despite the under covering she once again wears, the weight is perfect within my palm and the hardened tip presses sharply into its center. I gently pinch it. “Does this have a different name or is it also called a breast?”

Iris draws in a breath and shudders. “That’s a nipple.”

Nipple. “Does it serve any other purpose besides pleasure?”

“When a human female is pregnant, our breasts fill with milk that provides nourishment to our babies. They suckle from us by latching onto the nipple.”

I do not wish to recall the bad turns when the stolen females withered and died, but I do not have any memories of them providing this nourishment to their kits.

In fact, once they gave birth, King Armik separated the momos from their kits.

Could that be why they were small and weak and did not survive?

It is because they were not eating properly?

Their deaths could have been prevented.

A soft hand strokes my chest and I focus back on Iris.

“Are you all right?” she asks.

“We did not know chest mounds—breasts—provided nourishment for kits.”

She moves her hand and brushes a stray flock off my brow. “How could you? Don’t blame yourself for what happened in the past. It’s not your fault.”

“What if you are unable to provide this...milk for our kit because it is too much Krijese?” Will it too suffer?

“That’s not going to happen.”

I remove my hand from beneath her covering. “We—I—cannot go into this blindly or not fully accepting the possibility that it could happen. There are no guarantees, Iris, and you cannot just make a decree and it will come true.”

She sighs. “You’re right. If for some reason, I can’t produce milk, or if our baby can’t drink it, then we’ll figure out another solution. The Tavikhi-human hybrids are perfectly capable of accepting milk from their mothers. If we need to figure out an alternative, we will. Together.”

“What if we are unable to ever have a kit?” I want her prepared for all scenarios.

Iris strokes my chest. “We still have Sorin. I’m not mating with you just so you’ll give me a child. I have one of those already. I want to make love with you because you’re my husband—my mate—and I want us to have a true mating.”

She says all these things and I also think she believes them. For now. I can only hope that if the time comes she still feels the same way.

“Hey, look at me, please.”

I shift my gaze to hers.

“I’m just as scared and worried as you, but I believe I’m on Tavikh for a reason. That I met you for a reason. It’s because we were meant to heal each other. To bring each other exactly what it is we need.”

That is what Sorin said he prayed for. “I believe you are my true mate. Which means I must also believe that you were not brought here only to be taken from me.”

“Exactly.”

“You are not an easy female to say no to.”

“I know, and I’m grateful for the trust you’re putting in me.” Iris caresses my face. “In us. Now, where were we?”

There is a slight hesitation in my movements before I return my hand to beneath her covering and palm her breast. “We were here.”

“Ah, yes. I remember now.”

Since the feel of her chest is familiar to me, I spend time molding her flesh and teasing her hardened nipples.

She says they fill with this milk that nourishes kits and I try to imagine what they will look like swollen and perhaps leaking.

What does this liquid look like? Taste like?

Perhaps, if our god is as merciful as she says hers is, I will one turn find out.

I find myself doing something I have not done in these years Iris speaks of. I say a single prayer to our god for him to keep my mate and any kits we might have safe. It is all I can do.

“Show me what brings you pleasure.”

“Take off your pants.”

I do as she says. Talek has mentioned to my kit that humans are uncomfortable being unclothed in front of others.

Krijese do not have such worrisome thoughts.

Once I have removed my leg coverings, I lie down.

She does not take her eyes from me the whole time.

The increasing scent of her arousal hardens my cock painfully, but I must be patient.

Iris tugs her chest covering up and over her head and then releases her breasts from their second covering.

Her beaded nipples stand proudly from the center and the color of them reminds me of the blossom of the trendafili bush, but a paler shade.

She bends and removes her leg coverings, but pauses at the second covering.

Do all humans wear two coverings over portions of their body?

If so, what purpose do they serve? Why is one covering not enough?

“No one has seen me naked before,” Iris admits. “I know I look different than a Krijese female.”

I sit up and stroke her cheek like she often does mine. “You look like you are supposed to. Is that not what you told Sorin? However you look is perfect, because you look like Iris.”

She chuckles softly. “I did say that, didn’t I?”

“My mate is smart.”

Iris’s smile grows. “After tonight I really will be your mate, won’t I?”

“Aye.”

“I’m glad.”

“As am I.”

There is no more hesitation before she drags down the length of her legs the small, thin second covering.

With its removal, her scent is untethered.

It fills the tent with its sweet, muskiness fragrance and seed leaks from my cock.

The knot at its base also swells, but I will it away.

Iris is small and I do not wish to hurt her.

I stare at her face and she watches me in return. She swallows, and her throat bobs with it as she lowers herself to lie at my side.

“Touch me.” She guides her own hand down to between her thighs where a patch of hair a shade darker than that on her head grows. “Here. On this spot.”

I shift my gaze to where she has placed her fingers and then look at my own hand and the claws that decorate it. It is not possible for me to touch her the way she wishes with them. It is too dangerous.

“Kala?” Iris says my name in confusion.

Because I am powerless to her pleas, I part my mouth slit and bite off several of my hand claws all the way to the tip of my finger.

It will render me weaker if I am in a battle without them, but the need to feel this part of my mate is great.

Now, with fingers nearly as blunt as hers, I place mine where she has instructed.

Beneath my flesh is a hard nub similar to her nipples.

“What is this called?” I recall how she touched this place when we pleased ourselves together and she made a circular motion. I do the same and Iris releases a whimper. At first I think it is a sound of pain, but she clutches my wrist and holds me there as she arches into my touch.

“A clit.”

I let her guide me and I listen to the sounds she makes just as I did when I caressed her breasts.

She makes similar ones and I recognize those as the same when she felt the most pleasure.

I experiment with my touches on her clit and find the ones she loves the best. Then I repeat each one in different patterns so she does not know which comes next.

“Like this?”

Iris nods her head and her breaths are ragged. “Yes. Like that.”

I grind my pelvis into the furs beneath us, trying to ease the ache in my throbbing cock.

It does nothing but increase my pleasure.

My mate’s release must come before mine though.

Especially as her cunt grows more fragrant with her needy scent and the slick fluid that will ease my way spills from it.

Iris will need much more of this wetness if she is going to take me.

Time passes as I learn exactly how to pleasure my mate and what provides her the most enjoyment. What makes her breath catch. What causes little reaction. I commit them all to memory, including the speed, pressure, and direction in which to touch her.

Because my own need grows, I reach down and squeeze my cock to keep my release abated. Iris is lost in desire and she thrashes. Moans of pleasure fall from her lips and pride swells within me that I am the one to create the throaty sounds.

Without touching my mouth slit to her or bringing my mouth claws close enough to scratch her, I stretch out my tongue and curl it around her beaded nipple.

She grips the furs within her fist and cries out hoarsely.

Iris arches into my touch and I change the way I touch her clit.

Like my cock, her swollen nub has grown harder and then, her body tenses and a shudder rushes through her.

Iris calls out my name and I nearly spend. Beads of water glisten on her brow and the rest of her skin shimmers with a layer of the wetness. My hand is soaked and I revel in the fluid that coats it. She releases a happy sigh and a satisfied smile appears on her lips.

Drowsy eyes open and it takes several beats for her to focus on me. At last she does. Her pale cheeks darken, but she does not look away.

“That was beautiful.”

“Yes, you are.”

She strokes my face. “I hope we’re not done though.”

I shake my head. “Not unless you wish to be.”

“I do not wish to be.”

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 11:24 am

Iris

No orgasm has ever been as powerful as the one Kala just gave me.

My heart pinched with a minor pain when he bit off his claws.

Sorin has told me how important they are to Krijese because they make powerful weapons.

Although they no longer battle each other, I am sure it must have been difficult to remove them.

I do not wish for Kala to regret anything that happens between us.

I've avoided looking at his cock—other than the quick peek I took when he first removed his pants—but knowing we're not finished I let my gaze drift down to it.

I hadn't misjudged its size the last time I saw it.

Only up this close it's even more intimidating.

But it also makes my core throb with need and want.

Without thinking I reach down to touch it. Kala sucks in a breath and freezes. I jerk my gaze up. "Did I do something wrong?"

He shakes his head sharply and only once. "No. Your touch is perfect."

Already he is not always easy to understand, and his words are difficult to make out in their harsh, guttural gravelly sound, but I know what he says.

My cheeks grow hot with the praise, but a womanly pride fills me up that I'm able to please my man.

That I can make him teeter on the edge of control.

He says my touch makes him powerless, but for me, the opposite is true.

Gaining confidence knowing he likes what I did, I wrap my hand around his length and slowly stroke up and down like he had done to himself the other night. My fingers don't touch each other and a small tremor ripples through my pussy.

"Am I doing this right?"

That rough sound of amusement he makes rumbles out of him. "Also perfect."

Considering I've never done this before, I'm not sure that's true, but I take the compliment and continue doing my best to learn what pleases Kala the way he studied which of his touches did the same for me.

I stroke his full length and wonder at the bulge at the base of his cock, above the two sacs.

Is that supposed to go inside me, too? Swallowing down my nerves, I keep moving my hand in an awkward motion.

Kala grips my hand within his. "Tighter. Faster. Like this."

He clamps down and I worry I'm holding and stroking him too tightly, but his head

falls back and a sound of pure ecstasy leaves him.

Since it's clear he's enjoying what I'm doing, I continue, but change the pace and pressure in which I stroke him while I try to find the combination that makes him lose control.

It isn't long before I find the rhythm that brings the most reactions from him.

Guttural sounds rumble out of him and the vibrations travel straight to my clit, increasing my own arousal.

Together, we soar toward the clifftop. The tightening pressure within me mounts, but I push it away, because I want Kala to come first.

With only a few more strokes, he goes rigid and his cock jerks.

Ropes of seed erupt from the tip to splash onto his stomach and cover my hand.

The sight of it triggers my release and I let myself go.

My body trembles and shockwaves ripple through my core.

The air, otherwise warm, is cool over my damp, sweat-slicked flesh.

I drop kisses over Kala's face, careful to avoid his tusks.

He wraps his arms around me and pulls me tightly into him.

For several minutes, neither of us speak, merely bask in the afterglow of what surely is love.

I glance down and am shocked to discover he's still hard and the swollen base of his cock pulsates. I lift my head to meet his gaze.

"What is this?" I reach for him, but stop just before I touch the thickened segment.

"It is my knot. Once I am inside you, it locks us together until it is ready to release us."

I swallow, because I suspected as much, and I'm already not sure how Kala's going to fit. He strokes my cheek with his now clawless finger.

"We will go slow."

My hand goes over his. "Thank you."

"Are you ready to become mates?"

"Yes."

Kala rolls us so he covers my body partially with his, but he doesn't enter me.

Instead, he plays with my breasts again, using all the knowledge he's gained in such a short time to ramp up my pleasure.

It doesn't take long before I'm panting and wetness pools beneath me.

Every time he plucks or pinches my nipples, there's an echoing ping of pleasure between my thighs.

He drags his fingers away from my breasts and traces a path down my belly to my core.

I arch up to meet him, needy for the pleasure only he can give me.

A cry of desire falls from my lips when he makes contact with my clit.

As though Kala's always known exactly how to tease and tempt me, he does so with precision until I'm right on the edge of another orgasm.

Before I know it, I'm falling and crying out his name.

I don't have time to recover before he's between my thighs. There's a stretching sensation and burning. Tears prick my eyes and I stare into the swirling, dancing depths of his to give myself something else to focus on.

"I am sorry for the hurt I am causing."

"It's okay." I stroke his face.

Kala pauses only briefly before inching farther inside me. He stops moving and I measure my breaths. I'm full in ways I never expected. Feeling him inside me is strange and yet oh so right at the same time. Like we were always meant to be one.

"Please," I beg wanting us to take this last step in making us mates.

He hesitates, but then surges forward until he's fully buried inside me except for his knot. I cry out and squeeze my eyes shut, a few tears escaping against my will. Kala tries to draw himself away, but I wrap my legs around him and lock my ankles at his lower back.

"No. Stay."

He freezes and gives me time to adjust, all while murmuring sounds in a language

that isn't translating.

Slowly the burning and aching eases, but the sensation of being full doesn't.

I run my hand and forearm over his shoulders and there's so much tension in him.

I glance at his face and it's visible there too.

"I think you can move now. But go slow, please."

"For you, anything," Kala says through a tight jaw.

He shifts and I wait for the sharp, stabbing pain again, but it's dull.

I can tell how careful he's being as he slowly withdraws.

Not far enough to slip out of me, but close.

He thrusts forward and pulls back, setting up a calm and gentle rocking motion with his hips that drives him deeper with each thrust. The pleasure I felt before is just out of reach and I don't know how to recapture it.

"Touch my clit. Please."

Kala does so immediately, not once pausing his thrusting motion.

The dual sensations are just what I need, because I can feel the tension building again.

It's like a slow burning flame that needs careful tending or the fire will be snuffed out.

My mate must sense the same thing, because he pulls out all the tricks.

Soon, the maelstrom of sensations swirl like a gathering dust storm.

Behind them is still a burning ache, but it's overpowered by the tsunami that grows within me, soon reaching a pinnacle so high I'm afraid of how it will feel to fall.

Yet, I know Kala will be there to catch me.

"You are taking me so well, sweeney."

More wetness spills from me at the praise. He rubs my clit perfectly and I relax enough that he sinks a little deeper and I stretch more around the still thickest part of him. I want everything he has to give me, even if it hurts.

"Give it to me." I tighten my leg grip around him and try to force him farther inside me.

"Stop, Iris, you will hurt yourself."

I rattle my head. "I don't care. I need you, Kala. Please."

He fights against his instincts. It's in the way the muscles in his neck, shoulders, and arms bulge.

I don't give an inch though. Finally, in a single, powerful move, he jerks his hips and embeds the swollen base of his cock inside me, stretching my flesh around him.

Warmth fills me and he roars out his climax.

Tears spill out the corners of my eyes, but beyond the pain is the most beautiful

feeling ever.

The feeling of being whole. No one else could complete me like Kala.

He doesn't move, but holds himself perfectly still as his entire body covers and surrounds mine.

Kala's breath is hot against the side of my face. I turn and kiss the knobby protrusion of skin where his tusks grow from. He lifts his head and stares down at me. The blurred vision of him through my tears is the most perfect sight.

"We are truly mates now," I whisper harshly.

"True mates."

I don't know how long we lie there connected, but through the smoke-hole in the roof of the tent the second moon appears at last. Only then does Kala soften within me.

Carefully he withdraws, but still I wince with the pain of it.

I know the first time hurts, and I suspect it will again even the second time, but it's worth it to be this close to him.

He sniffs the air. "You bleed."

There's a twinge of panic in his voice and I clutch his arm. "I'm okay. It's to be expected."

Regardless of my reassurances, he scrambles to light what he calls a fire stick and rushes over to examine me. "I knew I should not have."

“Kala, stop. I’m fine, I swear. It’s common for women to bleed during their first time no matter how much we try and prepare ourselves. I’m not going to die from losing my virginity, I promise.”

“May I at least tend to you?”

“I’d like that.”

He wets one of the cloths we used to clean each other before we began and comes back over to gently wash away the blood and his essence that is slowly spilling out of me.

I suck in a breath and flinch when he hits an especially tender spot and the tiny speck of silver that’s been present in his eyes since he entered me dims.

Once he’s thoroughly cleaned me he tosses the blood-tinged water outside and returns to the furs to pull me into his arms.

“I am sorry, but we can never do that again,” he announces.

Tonight is our wedding night and I don’t want to argue so I let it go for now. We’ll have the rest of our lives for me to change his mind. Instead, I snuggle closer to him and rest my forearm on his chest. My heart is overflowing with emotion.

“When I left Earth, I didn’t know what to expect when I got to Tavikh.

But this place is more than I could have ever hoped for.

” I lift my head and wait until our eyes meet.

“Kala of the Krijese, you are more than I could have ever hoped for. Thank you for

giving me a son and for being the best mate and father. You make my life complete.”

“Iris of Earth, I thought that I was claiming you, but in truth you have claimed every single part of me including both of my hearts. They are forever yours.”

Kala leans down and presses his mouth slit against my lips in his best version of a kiss. I sigh with the simple pleasure of it and lay my head on the crook of his shoulder. Before long, my eyes grow heavy and I drift off to sleep finally knowing what it feels like to love and be loved.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 11:24 am

Kala

My world has changed since I first held Iris in my arms many moons ago.

I stare out over our village from in front of my tent and take in all the differences nearly an entire sun cycle has brought.

Scattered around the main fire are wooden seats my sneaky mate commissioned from the Tavikhi in exchange for what she called “hours of babysitting.”

She and Sorin would visit their village while I was out hunting and, while there, not only would she apprentice with Kyler and Sage, she would gather all the Tavikhi-human halflings and watch over them for their gogos and momos so the pairs could go on human “dates”.

Iris and I have gone on many of these dates ourselves since becoming mates. Most of them end with us mating, despite my vow that first time it would never happen again. My sweeney is stubborn and irresistible.

“Gogo.” Sorin comes racing to me and skids to a breathless halt. “It is time.”

Panic surges and I take off running toward the water source where he and Iris went so he could bathe. She is seated on one of the wooden benches I had moved there when she grew larger with our kit. Beneath her is a pool of water, and the traditional Tavikhi lower body covering is soaked.

However, she graces me with my favorite kind of smile at my approach despite the

beads of wetness that line her brow and trickle down her temples. Pain is etched on her face, but still she radiates happiness.

“Breathe, honey. It’s going to be awhile, yet.”

I cannot breathe. She reaches her hand out, and I take it.

“Everything is going to be fine, remember?” Iris says.

Just because I remember does not mean I believe it is true.

The ever-present fear grows, despite every reassurance over the last nearly nine moon cycles by Kyler and Sage that my mate—along with our kit—are doing well.

All I can do is nod in agreement with her, because I cannot make myself form the words.

“We must go.” It is the only thing I manage.

“I’m ready.”

She agreed to go to the Tavikhi village to give birth since we do not have any healer besides her. Although Moshi is learning a few things about healing from Iris, he is not skilled in birthing kits, especially if something might happen.

I scoop my mate in my arms and head toward the path that will lead us to down the hill to the Tavikhi village. Sorin follows on my heels. She wraps her arms around my neck and glances over my shoulder at him.

“Before the day’s over you’re going to have a brother or sister.”

Our kit’s excitement has grown with each passing turn. Like Iris, he doesn’t carry the

worries that burden my shoulders and he should not. They are mine to carry for both of us. That is what a gogo does.

He rushes to catch up and appears at my side. “I will be the best big brother ever. I will teach them to throw my war axe and how to skin a dreri and leburin. I will watch over them and make sure they always have enough to eat even if that means giving them some of mine.”

Surprisingly, I do not think that will be necessary.

Over the last sun cycle, our kills have grown with each hunt.

We even made it through the cold season with plenty of food still left in the stores.

Even more wonderful, Ashrif survived and while he is still weak, I have noticed that he has gained some of his strength back.

I do not know what the cause of our good fortune is, but Sorin is certain it is from the prayer he made to our god. Perhaps it is.

We make it in good time down the winding descent and, like always, I pause at the opening to scent for danger. Once I am certain there is none, we step out into the bari field.

“Run ahead and let the Tavikhi scout know we are coming and will be there soon.”

Sorin does as I say and rushes through the bari that is no longer quite as tall compared to him.

Over the cold season, our kit experienced a what his momo called a growth spurt.

His leg coverings became too short and tight for him and he had to borrow several

pairs from the chest within the storage tent.

Instead of only his head visible, half of his chest is as well.

It is hard to imagine my kit growing so.

“You can slow down a little, you know.” Iris chuckles softly and then sucks in a sharp breath. Her hold on me tightens and her body goes rigid.

“It is obvious I cannot, because you are in pain.”

A few beats pass and she relaxes. “It’s normal for contractions to hurt. Nothing unusual is happening. They come and go, and they’re still far enough apart that I’m not going to give birth before we reach the Tavikhi village.”

“I cannot help my fear and worry.”

Iris sighs and strokes my head. “I know you can’t, and I’m sorry if you don’t think I’m taking either of them seriously enough.

If it makes you feel any better, I’m scared too.

This is my first baby and yes, it’s nerve-wracking.

I’m trying to be so positive is because we both can’t freak out.

I wish I could rid us both of our fears. ”

I nuzzle her cheek with mine, taking care not to graze her with my mouth claw. “I would carry your fears as well as my own.”

“You know I love you more than anything, don’t you?”

“As I do you.” The first time my sweeney said the words, I had stopped breathing. I had never thought to hear them from anyone, but from Iris they were worth everything.

We finally make it across the length of the bari field and into the grove of trees where Sorin and the Tavikhi scout wait.

“I have signaled ahead that you are nearby,” Katem says and fists his chest. “Congratulations on the arrival of your kit.”

“Thank you.” Iris smiles at him before she winces in pain.

Sorin fists his own chest since I cannot with my mate in my arms, and we take off again in the direction of the Tavikhi village where the calls of mellenje lead our path. At last there is a break in the trees and before us is the front entrance where two guards straighten to attention.

“Greetings, Kala, Iris, and your kit. Blessings on the upcoming birth. I will pray to Deeka for a healthy kit.” One fists his chest and gestures for us to pass through.

“You have our thanks.” I nod, although his words strike more fear in my hearts.

We do not get far into the village when Iris pats me. “I can walk from here. Sage said it’ll do me good to move around. It helps with situating the baby farther down in the birth canal.”

I hesitate before carefully setting her on her feet.

I do not go far, but rather, remain close at her side in case she needs me.

Sorin brackets her other side. Between the two of us, we will make sure she safely reaches the healer’s tent.

Tavikhi and humans observe us as we make our way through the village. Voices carry on the air of our arrival.

Soon, Zander and London approach.

“You honor us with the birth of your kit within our village borders,” the shefir announces. “This night we will celebrate around the fire the newest member of your tribe.”

“Thank you, Shefir.” Iris fists her chest.

Sorin and I do the same.

“Sage is ready for you.” London walks with us while Zander departs, perhaps to announce our arrival.

“I’m more than ready for her.” My mate laughs and the sweet sound is a soothing balm.

At last, we reach the healer’s tent. Just as London moves to part the flap, Healer Sage steps out.

“How are you feeling?”

“Like I’m about to give birth.”

The Shefira and the healer both grin broadly.

“That’s a good thing,” Healer Sage says. “I see your water broke. How far apart are your contractions?”

“Six or seven minutes. Maybe more. Maybe less. I don’t really know.”

“Understandable. Come on in and we’ll get you settled. I suspect we might be in for a long night.”

“We’ll be available if you need anything at all. Just ask for it,” London tells us.

“Thank you, Shefira.” I dip my head.

“Yes, thank you, London,” Iris echoes.

Healer Sage guides us into the tent and I stand aside while she helps my mate up onto a raised platform. The healer turns toward us and her gaze lands on Sorin. She smiles widely.

“Come here, and give me a hug.”

He complies instantly and wraps his arms around her. She strokes his floks and tightens her embrace before releasing him.

“Talek, Cecily, and Carter are down in the training arena. I told them I’d send you to meet with them when you got here.

” She makes a sound when he tries to say something.

“No arguing, please. We’ll come and get you after your brother or sister arrives, but until then, you can’t be in here. I’m sorry.”

Sorin huffs his disappointment, but bobs his head. “Yes, Healer Sage.”

“Thank you.”

He rushes over and carefully hugs Iris. “I love you, Momo.”

“I love you, too, sweetie.”

My hug comes next. “I love you as well, Gogo.”

“My hearts beat for you.”

Sorin releases me and casts a final glance at Iris before he runs out of the tent. Healer Sage turns back to us.

“Let’s do this.”

The first moon is high in the sky, and still the kit has not come. Iris is soaking wet as she leans against me, and I wipe away the water that spills down her brow with a cloth. She is unclothed beneath the fur that covers the upper half of her body.

Fear has become a permanent resident within my body and soul. I have tried to hide it, but I do not believe I have succeeded. Healer Sage remains calm, but I still sense the worry that she too is unsuccessful at keeping at bay.

“You’re doing great, Iris. Just a little bit longer.”

“That’s what you said two hours ago,” my mate cries out and then releases another scream that curdles the blood in my veins. It sounds far too much like the screams of the stolen females while they gave birth.

“This time, I really mean it.”

Iris actually chuckles. “You said that two hours ago, too.”

Healer Sage lifts her head and grins back at my mate. “This time I really, really mean it. I can see the head, and on the next contraction, I need you to push.”

My mate nods, and the grip she has on my hand tightens.

“Push, Iris.”

She does as instructed. There’s a loud grunting sound and heavy breathing. It ends on another scream.

“Again. Push.”

Healer Sage stares intently and then a flash of relief crosses her face.

It is followed by two screams; a familiar one I have been hearing half of this turn and a new, far more shrill one.

Iris cries and sags heavily against me, her breaths coming fast. I check her over swiftly, and the pain that has filled her eyes appears to be gone.

Her gaze is focused in the direction of her feet.

I turn that way as well, just as another shrill cry fills the air. Healer Sage wraps a small figure within a fur, and with a large smile, brings it to us. She places the bundle within Iris’s outstretched arms, and my mate draws it in against her chest.

“Congratulations, mom and dad. It’s a girl.”

Stunned, I look down at the tiny thing my mate holds and my eyes meet a pair that is the exact color of her momo’s.

My gaze travels and I take in every single detail from the light greenish-black of her skin—two colors I have managed to remember—to the dark floks that stick up in every direction from the top of her head.

I move on to the small nose that protrudes and to the mouth slit that resembles not a Krijese's, but rather a human's.

"She's gorgeous." Iris sobs and touches each of her ten fingers. "Look at her, Kala. Isn't she beautiful?"

"She is perfect. Just like her momo."

My mate tips her head back, and I caress her cheek. "I love you with every beat of my hearts, sweeney."

"I love you, too."

We turn back to our kit and I gently brush the side of her face. "My hearts beat for you as well."

There is a soft throat clearing. Iris and I both glance up. I had forgotten Healer Sage's presence.

"Would you like me to go find Sorin, now?"

"Yes, please," Iris says. "He'll want to meet his sister."

"I'll be back in a few minutes with him." She exits the tent, but my attention is back on my mate and kit.

Iris strokes her floks. "Can you believe she's finally here?"

"It has felt like a lifetime since you first told me you carried her."

"Have you thought any more on the name we talked about?"

“Are you sure that is what you wish to call her?” I had been surprised when Iris said she wanted a traditional Krijese name for our kit and not a human one.

“Only if you like it.”

“It is a strong name for such a small female.”

“She’ll grow into it, I’m sure,” Iris states firmly.

“Then, yes, I think it will be a good name for her.”

The door flap swings open and Sorin comes running in. “It is a female?”

Iris waves him in and he rushes closer. “Say hello to your sister, Jiasha.”

He stands at his momo’s side and peers down at the tiny kit who returns his stare.

Slowly he reaches out and wraps his much larger hand around hers and gives it a gentle shake.

“Hello, Jiasha. I am Sorin, your big brother. This is Iris and Kala. They are our momo and gogo. Welcome to our world. I cannot wait to show it to you.”

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed Iris and Kala’s story! We haven’t seen the last of the Krijese.