



Life Sentence (Cassie Raven)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Camden mortuary technician Cassie Raven returns to solve another ingenious forensic mystery. Perfect for fans of Tess Gerritsen, Patricia Cornwell and Kathy Reichs.

Families can be murder . . .

Mortuary technician Cassie Raven was raised as an orphan, which might explain her affinity with the dead. But she's just made a devastating discovery: her father is alive, but served jail time for killing her mother.

He swears he didn't do it and Cassie wants to believe him. Desperate to find the truth, she seeks help from Phyllida Flyte, the uptight Camden detective who intrigues Cassie as much as she infuriates her.

As the two women close in on the truth they will encounter true evil, and someone prepared to kill again.

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Naturally, the restraints were the first thing I fully noticed.

The pinching around my wrists and ankles. The steady weight across my chest. And the stern clasps around my skull. I squirmed and pressed against them to no avail. My eyes slowly opened as everything brightened to a searing light. It was then I realized I was lying on an ice-cold, flat surface— a table?

The fear rose in me as I thrashed harder. I opened my mouth to call for help, but all my parched throat produced was a hoarse honking sound. A second later, as if called by my fruitless screaming, large blobs appeared in my vision. Their movements were jerky and unnatural as they hovered above me.

What are they? I desperately needed to know what I was facing. My initial impression was that they were humanoid, but as they moved in to block the light, my eyes finally focused enough to understand this was not the case. My blood went cold and my mouth fell open in abject, silent horror. My very soul seemed to scare from my body.

Praying mantises.

They were fucking giant praying mantises. Despite still being slightly bleary-eyed, there was no mistaking the rounded prisms of the mantises' eyes on either side of their triangular heads, protected behind their unyielding, plated exoskeletons. They all wore dingy white tunics, giving the vibe of a creepy nurse cosplay. At the ends of their multi-jointed arms were uncomfortably long dual-fingered appendages. The

serrated edges of their fingers each came to a blunted point.

One twitched forward and peered closer to me. My fear made me whoosh out a breath, still terrifyingly silenced and unable to scream. I was living in a nightmare as the mantis seemed to observe me, cocking its head to the side before looking up to its partner and opening its mandibles. I flinched back, thinking for a moment it was going to chomp right into me. But instead, it began to...talk? Well, I assumed that's what the sounds were. All I heard was the eerie clacking of the mandibles against each other, like the sound of tiny sticks being hit together in rapid, erratic rhythms overlaid with strange throat noises seeming to come from a ball on its esophagus.

Its partner answered and all I wanted was to be able to cover my ears to block out the horrible-sounding conversation. After exchanging several back-and-forth clacks, the second creature reached out its clawed two-fingered hand toward me. I pushed back against my restraints again, trying desperately and failing miserably to avoid it.

The touch of the creature sent a chill through my bones so deep the table suddenly felt warm. It put its longest claw finger to the middle of my temple ET-style. Then, just as quickly, it pulled back but remained looming over me like a dark cloud.

Suddenly, I heard rattling next to me that sounded like a crab shell hitting a metal cracker. I strained my eyes to the very corners trying frantically to see what the hell was going on just out of my peripheral; my efforts were for nothing. I couldn't turn my head even a centimeter, which meant I only saw the aliens' heads as I felt pressure at my neck, before something sharp and piercing punctured my skin. A needle, I thought, just as it injected me with god knows what. I could feel the foreign substance coursing through my veins, sending waves of agony rippling through my body.

Oh god, the pain. It was like nothing I'd ever felt before. I wanted to scream, to beg for mercy, but no sound escaped my lips. Please. Please. Please. I chanted in my head

to any deity who might wish to have mercy on me. I was trapped in a nightmare, helpless and alone, at the mercy of otherworldly beings.

The first monster's hand suddenly came into view holding a scary clasp contraption. It was a weird blend between a hand mixer and a pair of salad tongs. The thing was fucking macabre in appearance and I immediately felt myself growing desperate again. As it moved closer and closer to my left eye, I practically vibrated the table trying to shake out of my restraints and my lips parted in another futile attempt to scream.

Two rough but flexible fingers reached for my lids, prying my eyes wide open. Another round of clacking as it voiced what sounded almost like a harsh laugh, and then it brought the contraption closer to its mark, and I—

—jolt violently, waking up all at once with my heart pounding in my chest. For a brief moment, just a second, I believe that I am in my bed, in my house, having wine-drunk nightmares in safety. But, then the real-life cold seeps into every place the chill of my dream has left unattended. My eyes snap open and my throat closes as the dream merges into my reality.

My eyes grow wider and my mouth drier the more I take in. This is not my fucking house. I am not in my bed. What is going on? I scramble to my feet and do a three-sixty. The ceiling barely clears my head, a feat since I'm a whopping five foot, four inches.

The walls and floors are one seamless piece of hard metal coming to meet at a small door with an even smaller opening slit. There's one raised hole in the metal in the corner, something that looks kind of like a toilet, and two benches bolted to the floor against opposite walls.

Where the fuck am I? My eyes desperately continue to roam the room—if you can

even call it that—as my throat begins to cut off my own oxygen in pure panic. Consciously forcing myself to breathe, I smooth my hands over my hair nervously, and then freeze.

Rubbing at my hair, I realize that it's not braided the way it was when I went to sleep. I'd spent three hundred bucks getting goddess box braids, so why the hell am I feeling my hair pulled back into one single braided ponytail at the base of my neck? Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh. My. God.

My body trembles as I fight to stave off the panic attack. Whatever the hell is going on here, I do know that I am not safe. Looking down I realize I'm wearing something between nurse's scrubs and a pajama set. The outfit is bright yellow with short sleeves and matching pants.

So, not at all the oversized Tupac sweatshirt I remember putting on before going to bed.

I need to get out of here. Stumbling toward the door of the metal room, I scream, "Hey! Anybody!"

I almost immediately hear the sound of something sliding against metal on the other side. A lock. My throat bobs as I swallow hard and rush to the corner of the room. Curling in on myself, I wait for whoever did this to come in.

I'm expecting a man, honestly. It's not a large leap to make the assumption I've been kidnapped. Probably drugged in my own home and then taken here in a stereotypical white, windowless van. I wince, tears springing into my eyes as I grip at the garments wrapped around me. Who knows what else happened while I was out.

I'm expecting to have some kind of Black Phone moment with my captor, but then the door slides open, and I see them. Three black, spindly creatures walk into the

room, ducking under the ceiling. Their exoskeletons glisten in the harsh artificial light, and their large, compound eyes glint with an eerie intelligence. The praying mantises from my dream.

This is so much worse than your average kidnapping.

My mind and body seize up as I prepare for the worst and it takes me several long moments to realize they don't even bother looking at me. Instead, they're all looking down at what they're carrying. I drag my eyes from their faces to follow their gazes, and I realize an unconscious woman lies in each of their multi-jointed arms.

They haphazardly lay the women down on the floor just a couple of feet from me. When they get a step too close, I flinch away, pressing myself even more into the corner, trying to be as small as possible. But, they still pay no attention to me as they all straighten, having offloaded their burdens. Each one turns and moves with jerky precision towards the door.

One stops at the exit, turning to face me.

My body shudders as my eyes nearly bulge out of my head in the face of the creature's prism-shaped oculars. It stares at me before slowly tilting its head to the side as if analyzing. To my horror, it opens its manacles wide and makes the same clicking sound I remember from my dream. The weird laugh-gurgle. Mercifully, it turns away and leaves. I hear the slide of the lock and then a scurry of legs against the floor. And then silence.

Feeling like a deer in headlights, my eyes shift to the girls on the floor. I see each one's chest give a small rise and fall, and I feel a grain of relief that they're all alive. But it hits me then. I may not know exactly where I am, but I do know one thing with complete certainty. I've been abducted.

By aliens.

They'll probably foreclose on my house within the year.

For some reason, it's the thing my mind continues to circle back to after the hours I've been stuck in this caged room. At least it feels like hours; there isn't exactly a clock in here. But, what about my house, though?

After spending my entire life giving everything to other people, whether my family or romantic relationships or friendships, my house was the first thing I ever did for me. And to have bought a house at twenty-five? I am— was so proud of that little place.

No one else liked it. It was a fixer-upper, old, and had a lingering mothball smell from the elderly woman I bought it from—but it was mine, I bought it just for my enjoyment and I loved it.

So my brain keeps circling back to thinking about what happened to it. Who would have finally gone to my house and figured out I was missing? I could guess it would be someone from my job conducting a wellness check when I no-call, no-showed multiple times in a row. It's not like Perfectly Reliable Sedona Branco to up and disappear. I'd been teaching at that school since I graduated college. In three years, I'd only missed two days, both of which I had a doctor's note to excuse.

Sometimes, my mind flits over the thought of what my mom said when she found out. We'd been no-contact for almost five years. What a way to break that streak. "Hey, I know you haven't seen her in years and didn't even know where she was located, but your daughter appears to have been abducted. No biggie."

I clutch my hand to my heart, trying to squeeze hard enough to push away the pain

creeping into my chest from my thoughts. I'm quickly realizing that thinking about my life on Earth is a no-go. Who I was and what I had before this moment just seems frivolous now. I'm no idiot; I know that I won't make it back home and the girl that I once was is light years away. Literally. Now, I have to figure out how Space Sedona survives. Besides, stewing on it can make you hysterical.

"Please be a dream. Please be a dream. Please..." The sudden, repeated plea breaks out, and harsh sniffles quickly follow before a broken sob echoes off the metal walls.

Hysterical like that.

The other girls had finally woken up and we were all coping...differently. There's the town crier, an absolutely gorgeous brown-skinned girl with wide eyes and round cheeks. She's the one repeating the litany of pleas. Then, there's the stony silent one who looks to be the oldest of us here, maybe in her thirties, with long locs and sharp faerie-like features. And the last one is the curvy pixie-looking woman with shorn curls and tanned skin. She's been staring calmly at her hands the whole time. Of all of us, she seems the least surprised or bothered to have ended up here.

For my part, I've been curled in the ball I'd been in since the aliens left, trying my best to process that I am never getting home and that my life as I knew it is over.

"Where are we?" The question comes out of nowhere and completely derails my existential thoughts. I look up at the speaker, the older girl, in surprise. She's looking directly at me, so I know the question is meant for me. She was the first of the three to wake up, so she knows that I woke up before everyone else.

"I don't really know." I hesitate, wondering if they'll think I'm crazy with what I say next. "I think we were kidnapped by aliens."

I expect everyone to scoff at me and call me a liar or insane. But instead, they each

look around us and it's as if I can see the belief settle over them as they take in our surroundings. The crying one actually looks...relieved?

"Aliens did this?" she asks, her tears slowing.

"Yeah," my voice is hoarse and I clear my throat, "these praying mantis alien things."

"You were awake the whole time?" Pixie Girl asks me.

"Not for everything. I woke up here just like you guys, but I was alone. Then they brought you all in right after I woke up."

"Do you think they can understand us?" Cryer questions. "Should we try to tell them there's been a mistake?"

Giving a shrug, I say, "I don't know if they can speak to us. They make clicking noises when they talk."

"Besides, I don't think they kidnapped us by mistake." It's Locs Girl who says this, giving Cryer a raised eyebrow.

"Oh, right." Her words are forlorn but for now, the tears seem to be gone.

"If I had to guess," Pixie tells Cryer, "I'd imagine that they can't hear or really understand us. They probably only sense vibrations." We all look at her and there's silence followed by her sheepish addition, "I am—was an entomologist back home."

"Wow, well, we should come up with a plan, you guys." Locs Girl moves to sit near me and the other two girls shift creating a circle of the four of us.

"Is it even worth trying?" The entomologist picks at her nails as she speaks.

“Everything feels pretty hopeless right about now,” Cryer adds in a forlorn voice.

“Yeah, also those things were scary as heck.” I shudder thinking about them. It would be too much to hope that I never see them again.

“I’m not giving up. Have you guys thought about why we would be abducted by aliens?” She pins a glare on each of us. “I have. It’s all I can think about right now, and none of the ideas I’ve come up with are good, so I refuse to just accept this is my fate.”

I think about what she said and realize that I never got to the ‘why’ part because I was stuck on ‘why me.’ Back on Earth, I loved sci-fi in all of its forms, so it doesn’t take long for my brain to draw up reasons why I’d be kidnapped by aliens. Those range from images of green people dissecting me alive to a flash of me at the feet of some horrific monster in a Princess Leia slave costume.

“Okay, fine, I’m in,” I reply, getting on board.

“I don’t know if I want to take on alien bug monsters with a bunch of complete strangers,” Cryer says, looking at us almost apologetically. “No offense, of course.”

Locs Girl makes a humming sound and then says, “What’s your name?”

She snuffles and replies, “Um, Amari. Amari Bennett.”

“Cool, I’m Renata George.” She looks expectantly at the curvy one, the entomologist.

“I’m Sabrina Tanaka.” Finally, everybody looks at me.

“Sedona Branco.”

“Great,” Renata gives us all a wry grin, “we all know each other now, so let’s talk about a plan.”

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The first step in Renata's "plan" is just recon to gather information to form an actual plan. The opportunity for this presents itself rather quickly. Definitely a lot quicker than I was prepared for.

My foot catches on a divot in the floor and I stumble over my feet, slowing down for a brief moment. A gun shoves harshly into my back as a gurgled click sounds behind me. Scrambling, I rush forward to catch up with the back of Sabrina's head.

Just after we'd decided that we needed to scope things out, mantis guards had burst into the room and grabbed us, and that landed us here. Now, we're all walking through a fucking alien spaceship, just four strangers, casually chained together by the waist.

The pathway to wherever is thin, meant to accommodate the skinny bug frames, so we're led single-file down a never-ending tunnel. There are two aliens on either end of our line and we're all sandwiched in the middle of them. I'm at the back, walking so close to one that I can feel the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end from its proximity.

Eventually, we get to a sliding door and enter what looks like a futuristic prison shower. The sterile room is, like most of what I've seen so far, made of smooth seamless metal. Multiple shower heads are spaced evenly, protruding from the ceiling and already spraying water. Harsh glaring lights cast stark shadows and the entire scene looks horrifying.

Are they going to make us undress? The idea of being naked in front of these things is enough to make me want to break down. But, instead of waiting or demanding we undress, they shove all of us fully clothed under the harsh cold spray. I can't help but let out a squeal and squirm as we all freeze under the torrential pour. The water smells strange as well, with a hint of chemical sourness to it. After a few minutes, they finally turn off the tap and pull us back from the shower heads.

We're shuffled over to a slightly elevated platform. When we're all standing on top of it, one of the five guards smacks a red button on the wall off to the side, and hot air bursts from above and below us. It's a few degrees over comfortable, but thankfully, it only takes a few moments before it's over and we are no longer soaked. We're still uncomfortably damp, but slightly warmer now, I guess.

A mantis dude clicks at me roughly and I can't remember if he was the lead guard or the caboose. They all look so similar it's hard to tell. Regardless, he roughly grabs me by the arm and leads me toward the door. Guess I get to be the line leader this time around.

We trickle into the hallway, single-file once again. Since I'm at the front, I can strain to see the turns we are making over the guard's shoulder, but this is not the recon we had hoped for. Trying to escape while on this ship is starting to feel ridiculous. Every few seconds we turn and then turn again. There's no way to keep track of how far we've gone or where we're headed.

The particularly futuristic part of the ship that we just entered makes the section we were previously in look cheaply made. It's covered in hexagonal tiles and matching metal frames along the walls which light up when we walk past them.

After several moments, I'm finally able to notice that the geometric patterns have started to disappear. They've been replaced by sturdy metal slabs instead, and soon I see what must be our destination up ahead, a larger set of sliding, double doors.

Instinctively, I feel my heart jump in my throat, its beats echoing in my ears. The double doors squeak open automatically as our line approaches. When we enter, my hope, as little as it was, sinks even further.

Several other aliens in uniforms come into view in various states of activity. Some are loading boxes, crates, and metal contraptions into an open compartment in the wall. A mantis on a small machine is pushing a train of large shipping crates through another doorway. Others appear to be adding fuel and otherwise tinkering with the parts of the ship itself. This must be some sort of alien loading dock.

A second later, I realize what I thought was a wall with an open compartment is actually not the butt of another spaceship. Its rounded and curved sleek exterior does not match the rough, unpolished metal of the actual walls of the mother ship's loading dock. Moreover, I can see an extension of black rubber as it connects the loading dock to the ship in an airtight seal. It reminds me of a fancier version of the black awnings that connect the doors of airplanes to terminals.

As large cargo containers are meticulously maneuvered onto the docked ship and into storage compartments, I can't help but lose hope completely. I think we're being prepped for delivery. A bug guard pushes me forward, towards the open ship door. The moment I step onto the other spaceship, a sense of foreboding creeps in, like an icy chill crawling down my spine.

The metallic corridors stretch out before me, bathed in an uncomfortably bright light that casts harsh shadows against the walls. Looking around, I realize the light is coming from the line of windows on the left side. The windows to the right afford us an eerie view of the empty, black expanse of space, while the ones to the left are illuminated by the harsh light of a beautifully bright purple planet.

We are floating in space. Part of me already knew. Of course, they'd have snatched us and zipped off. But the sight of a bright purple planet that is most certainly not in

our solar system is enough to make me heave on my empty stomach.

Wherever the hell we are, I don't know if this little ship could even make the trek back to Earth before we all aged to death.

"Fuck." The whispered word comes from Sabrina and I know she's seen outside.

The stale air is tinged with a metallic tang that lingers on my tongue with every breath. When we continue walking forward, I hear similar reactions from the other girls as they both pass the windows, too. The further we walk down the corridor, the sparser the windows become, telling me we must be nearing the center of the ship. I wonder briefly how big this new ship is. It's more confined than the main ship, but how much smaller? How many guards and workers do they need to keep it going? Hopefully, fewer than the other ship.

We finally approach a large arched door. The bug guard moves forward and aligns its eye with a scanner next to the door. A single holographic light courses over its face and it does its vibrating clicking thing before I feel a vibrational pattern under my feet. I wonder if that's the ship's way of speaking to these dudes.

The arched door slides to the left with a hiss and my captor pulls me forward. We're all herded into an open space. At the center of the room stands a massive console, its surface covered in an array of buttons and switches, and adorned with blinking lights and intricate displays. If my sci-fi knowledge is anything to go on, this must be the control space of the ship.

The seats and large console in the middle of the room bring me back to my space romance obsession days. The room is spacious compared to the thin hallways. With sleek metallic panels lining the walls, it's clear that whatever money these dudes make is more than enough. I guess human trafficking is lucrative even when the traffickers and buyers aren't human themselves.

We're all led to the wall furthest from the door. The insects escorting us drag each of us to a side of the ship where a long thin metal strip wraps across the wall. An alien grabs my wrists suddenly and I resist the urge to jerk away. I had learned earlier that they get mad if you resist, and it only earns you a harsh jab with the muzzle of their gun. Instead, I repress a shudder as its creepy finger-claw brushes my bare skin. It pulls my arms up by my wrists and makes the cuffs meet the magnetic metal strip.

Our guards and the loaders around us communicate with more clicking noises. Everything is a sudden bustle of movement, and watching them stiffly jerk around is disconcerting. I've never actually had to look at any of these dudes for this long. I look away, deciding to look at the others instead. The one good thing about this setup is that we are now lined along the wall and, with some stretching, we can all see each other. I peer at the control panel sharing a wall with our restraints just a few feet away. One of the other guards taps something in and I feel the hold on my wrists lock. I give a small test pull. Sure enough, I can't move an inch. I look over and see the other girls being placed in the same compromising position I'm in.

This is going to be problematic. With all four of us locked in, the two aliens that brought us in, plus six more that are milling around the room checking things and tapping buttons, we are put at a major disadvantage. I exchange a look with Renata, both of us silently asking each other, 'Well, what the fuck do we do now?' It takes several moments, but eventually, every one of the mantises leaves the room.

"So, what now?" Amari's the one to ask the big question out loud as soon as the room is cleared.

Sabrina takes us all by surprise by loudly declaring, "Let's hijack the effing ship!"

"That's your idea?" I inquire incredulously.

She jumps to add to her suggestion, "There's only four of us, but it's a smaller ship,

and likely most of the dudes we saw are just there to prep stuff, so there'll be a smaller number of insect dudes, too. It's our best bet."

"Our time does seem to be running out," Renata acquiesces as she thinks.

"It could work, if there's just a few of the insect dudes and us," Amari adds in, her voice surprisingly steady.

"If we can get their guns, it'll be even better..." I trail off pointedly.

Sabrina re-emphasizes, "So let's hijack the mother-effing ship."

"We have two problems we need to fix. One, we need to know how many aliens are going to be on this ship. Two, we need a way to get freed." Renata looks at each of us, as we all think about how to approach this.

Amari agrees with a nod of her head before continuing, "When we were brought to this ship, almost all of the other aliens besides our guards stayed behind, so I don't think many extra ones will be on board. We just need to be worried about the handful that remain."

"I think three of them were tech dudes, not soldiers," Sabrina adds helpfully. "They were dressed differently and only touched the wires and consoles while they were moving about."

"Maybe they're like Earth tech dudes and we don't need to be concerned about them getting physical," I joke, which garners a few half smiles.

"That would be nice. It would be fun for them to be scared of us for once," Amari adds, and Renata makes a noise of agreement in the back of her throat.

“How are we going to figure out the solution to our second problem?”

“I got that one,” Amari volunteers. We all hesitate, so she speaks up in her own defense. “Trust me, you guys, I can get them to take my cuffs off. I know I’m not emotionally solid right now, but I can handle this.”

“Okay, Amari’s got it,” Sabrina speaks up in a tone that sounds like a mom daring someone to protest.

Nodding hesitantly, I try my best to put my faith in Amari. “Alright, if you’re sure. But, for now, nobody will do anything until they get the ship en route.”

“Yes,” Renata concurs, “the last thing we need is more bugs coming to save the ones on the ship.”

“Deal. When we take off and get a bit away, I’ll do it. I’ll make it happen, I promise.” The girl sounds far more confident than she has this entire time, and I hope that is a good sign.

We’re all counting on her. If she fails, most likely we’re all dead or as good as dead because who the hell knows where we’re being delivered to.

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“I can’t take this anymore!” I jump at the sudden exclamation. Peering around Sabrina and Renata who are both staring at the source of commotion as well. “Let me OUT OF HERE!! I want OUT!”

Amari screams and thrashes, a feat that is incredibly difficult considering her wrists are completely immobilized. It takes a second for the remaining four bug things to take notice. We’d ended up with one of the tech dude and three soldiers. Not terrible odds, but not great considering they have three guns to our none. When she lets out a banshee-level wail, though, they certainly must feel the vibrations of that, and they all turn their bulbous yellow eyes on her.

Her hysteria rises as the bugs, caught off guard by her sudden outburst, rush towards her, attempting to subdue her. They try prodding her with their guns and clacking roughly at her, but her wails just intensify, and I have to wonder if some of it is real.

“I said let me OUT! I can’t do this! I want to go home! I want to go HOME!”

Finally realizing none of their attempts to calm her are working, one of them walks to the wall and presses a button. Amari’s portion of the strip lights red and her arms fall. She braces herself on her knees, her cuffs still holding her hindered, but not enough to stop her from springing forward. Knocking the smallest unarmed mantis to the side, she makes just enough room in their huddle to wiggle her small body through the space and to the control panel. She slams her hand into it, in the same space they had just hit. With a hiss, all of our cuffed wrists drop.

With the handcuffs still intact, my range of motion is not great, but it's better than being stuck upright to a wall. Wasting no time, Renata jumps into action and grabs the gun from one of the mantises. Before I can blink, she's shot one right in the chest.

"Not my first time." She gives me a cold smile and heads over to help Amari handle the tech guy.

I don't bother waiting to see what happens next. Instead, I rush into the fray, jumping onto the back of one of the mantises as it lifts its gun to shoot. It startles and begins swinging its body and clawing at me to get off. I hang on for dear life, clutching its body to mine like a baby sloth while simultaneously pushing my thumbs into its large yellow eyes. The feeling is disgusting as my thumbs crunch and squish through the eye tissue. I push down a wretch as it lets out a pained, gargled sound. Looking up, I see exactly who I need.

"Sabrina!" I grab her attention, and she reads my mind.

With the guard blind and disoriented, Sabrina yanks the gun from its hand and shoots it twice. First in the foot, and when I drop off his back and out of the way, she aims and headshots him. Goopy, purple blood spurts over my face, and I blink blankly at her for a moment.

"Sabrina!" Renata screams in warning, and both of our heads snap up as we see the final guard raising its gun to aim right at her. Renata takes off running towards it, her gun apparently lost in the scuffle with the other two. It all seems to happen in slow motion. The shot is fired before Sabrina or I can react, but Amari is close enough to shove the guard to the side just in time. The bullet goes astray, barely missing Sabrina's shoulder.

With the aggression of a woman in a terrifying situation, Renata bum-rushes the final mantis. They crash to the floor and its gun goes scattering across the room. She grabs

the mantis by the head and slams it back over and over. With sickening smacks and a horrifying squelch, its brains squirt out like the squished bug it is, and its eyes finally go dark.

I let out a breath as I look around at the collateral damage. Every mantis in the room is dark in the eyes, or missing a head altogether in the case of one. I give a shiver at the thought and repress that particular memory. Wiping the goop from my face, I look around at the girls.

“Oh my god, you guys, we actually did it.” One by one that realization dawns on each of them and we all share a triumphant smile.

“Now to get these cuffs off,” Sabrina adds, looking between us and the cuffs on her wrists.

“I have an idea!” Amari walks over to one of the dead mantises. Lifting its arm with a grimace of disgust, she maneuvers until she aligns its finger with the center of her handcuffs. A second later, a circle in the middle glows blue before the cuffs fall to the ground with a hiss.

“Oh, they’re finger-printed! Good catch, Amari.” I mean the compliment genuinely. Between her incredible performance to kick off the plan and this, she’s starting to make up for the hours of never-ending crying. Soon after, we are all free and standing around facing each other.

“Okay,” I announce, giving everyone a small smile, “let’s look at the control console and see what we can do.”

We all walk to the large tech island in the middle of the floor. As we circle it, we pause, staring hard.

Sabrina's the first to speak, "Um, has it—"

"—been shot? Yup." Renata looks at the thing in distress.

As we stand there, catching our breath, a sinking feeling settles in my stomach. We've escaped our captors, but now we're adrift in space, with no hope of rescue. And as the ship hurtles further into the unknown, I can't help but wonder if we've traded one form of captivity for another.

"Okay, well, everybody stay calm," I instruct, pulling my eyes from the smoking hole of what might have been our last hope. "We need to figure out if the ship is moving first."

Renata leans over the control panel, looking at the buttons that are still intact and the parts of the screen not inked over with black. She pauses for a second, staring at the gibberish on the screens below us. Each symbol on the screen looks like various combinations of lines, circles, and dots with no true meaning.

"And we need to find a way to read it." Renata pushes away from the panel with that addition and begins walking around the room, looking for something to help us.

"True, it's not like it'll just up and talk to us in English," Sabrina adds sarcastically.

Her words strike a chord and a thought hits me. I cock my head for a second before I open my mouth to speak, looking up toward the ceiling.

"Computer, do you speak English?"

"ALTERNATIVE LANGUAGE DETECTED: HUMAN VERNACULAR ENGLISH. WOULD YOU LIKE TO CONTINUE IN THE DETECTED LANGUAGE?"

“Yes!” I exclaim, pumping my fist. The other girls glance around with wide eyes.

“Okay, or it will do just that,” Sabrina breathes out in awe.

“CEASING XCLIXAN, ENGAGING ENGLISH SYSTEM UPDATE. WAIT.” It continues calling out ‘wait’ over and over with small beeps in between the words.

“How did you....” Renata peers at me in shock, talking over the computer.

“I like sci-fi, and I had a hypothesis, so I tested it.” With a shrug, I continue, “Let’s see if we can voice activate our navigation.”

“Amazing!” Sabrina squeals, clapping her hands before she and Amari hug tightly in celebration. “We’re going home.”

“Maybe. It’s a long shot,” I contest. I don’t want anyone to get their hopes up because of me.

“SYSTEMS OPERATING IN ENGLISH.”

“Computer, run diagnostic,” I announce loudly.

“DIAGNOSTICS ENGAGING. MANUAL STEERING SYSTEMS—DOWN. NAVIGATION SYSTEMS—ENGAGED. SECURITY SYSTEMS—ENGAGED. OXYGEN CONSUMPTION—HIGH. LIFE SUPPORT—80% EFFECTIVE. COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS—ENGAGED. PROPULSION THRUSTERS—FUNCTIONABLE.”

“What does any of that mean?” Amari’s eyebrows pinch before she looks at me.

“We can’t steer the ship manually, but there’s a small chance we might be able to

change the autopilot's destination via the computer."

"Okay, see if it works," Renata encourages.

"Computer, where are we headed?"

"CURRENTLY NAVIGATING TO SYSTEM 2167, PLANET NUMBER 21, COMMONLY KNOWN AS HESCTONA."

"Computer, navigate to Earth."

"365 EARTHS LOCATED. SPECIFY NOW."

"Fuck," I curse. "Navigate to the Earth with human civilization."

"EARTH 231 IS A RESTRICTED ZONE PER INTERGALACTIC CODE NUMBER 2946. PROVIDE SYSTEM OVERRIDE CODE NOW."

"Okay, well that's not happening." I rub my face with my hands. "What now?"

"What's it restricted for?" Sabrina asks curiously. "I mean, they came to get us from there, so how can it be so restricted?"

"Hmm, good point." I lift my eyes back to the ceiling and begin talking again, "Computer, what is Intergalactic Code 2946?"

"DELIVERING INFORMATION TEXT NOW." A second later a holographic image screen is projected in front of us in English. It's a bit pixelated and some places flash in and out from the damage to the panel, but I lean forward to read:

Intergalactic Code 2946: Colloquially known as the "Non-Intervention Directive," it

mandates the non-interference in the developmental trajectories of sentient life forms inhabiting designated planets. Under Code 2946, advanced civilizations are prohibited from directly intervening in the technological or societal evolution of lesser-developed sentient species. By allowing civilizations to progress naturally, uninfluenced by external forces, Code 2946 seeks to preserve the integrity of each species' unique cultural and technological heritage. Violations of Code 2946 carry severe penalties, including galactic exile and death .

Renata's brow furrows in concentration as she reads before she pulls away and sighs. "Maybe there's a backup control panel somewhere on the ship. We just have to find it."

I nod, "Good point. Computer, where is the backup control panel for the ship's steering?"

"BACKUP SYSTEMS NOT DETECTED. CONTROL PANEL COMPROMISED. MANUAL STEERING DISABLED. COORDINATES DESTINED FOR SYSTEM 2176..."

"Well, fuck." There is no other control panel. No backup anything. So, it's just us and the vast expanse of space, and a destination none of us want to arrive at.

"Let's split up and search the ship." Renata is moving as she speaks, never one to stop for too long. "There has to be something."

"Maybe even an escape pod." The thought fills me with hope again as soon as it slips from my mouth. "Sometimes ships like this have emergency crafts in the shows and books I like. Maybe this one does too?"

"Well, let's get a move on," Amari butts in following after the rest of us. "We have to do something before it's too late."

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure that computer told us we are hurtling towards our delivery point with no stop. Gotta hustle ladies,” Sabrina says as she exits the control room.

With that, I walk out behind everyone else. The first few feet of our walk are single-file, but at some point, the ship begins to branch. We stop at a fork and turn to each other.

“We should all be able to move around fairly easily. There’s no way this ship is as big as the last one,” I begin. “But if anybody gets lost, just ask the computers for directions.”

“Everyone, be smart and keep an eye out for additional guards or techies,” Renata instructs.

“Got it. Let’s do this ladies.” Sabrina gives us all a determined smile before walking away with Amari. Renata and I separate without any further words. I head straight and she veers to the right.

The walk through the ship is kind of eerie. I find myself wishing I’d thought to bring one of the mantis’ guns just in case we had an extra interloper on the ship. The thought of that has me checking over my shoulders and turning corners extra carefully. I pass by what appears to be a crew’s kitchen. When I stop in though, I grimace at the sight of small larvae and refrigerator containers of what appear to be purple ants—this kitchen is definitely not stocked for humans. Another issue that we will now have to contend with. This self-rescue mission is getting more and more complicated.

As I turn a corner, I finally find something interesting. It’s a pocket door, very different from the control room sliding door. Without hesitation, I reach for the smooth metal handle. The door flings open easily, revealing a room bathed in an ethereal blue light.

I step through the entryway and come up short when I see two rows of shipping crates lined across the outer edges of the room. Curiosity gets the best of me and I make my way down the line, trying to see if any of the units are open. None are until I finally get to the last one—the only one with an orange light instead of blue over the top of the door.

Carefully, I push the large screen next to the opening of the unit. When it opens, my breath catches. The inside of the unit is covered in high-tech equipment, tubes, and monitoring screens. But, as I walk the short length of the crate—close to the size of a small classroom—I catch my breath when I get a closer look at what I first thought were some kind of weird storage containers. There are eight of them, four opened. But the other four are what make me clutch my heart.

There are women in each of them, all seemingly asleep.

Oh my god, they're stasis pods. I remember seeing things like this in movies and always thinking the science to support them had to be shoddy, even for science fiction. But there they are—four women suspended in time, in unrelenting slumber. I stand in front of each pod and I watch every chest give a soft rise and fall, so I know, thankfully, they are all living.

When I inspect closer, I realize that all eight pods are numbered fifty-two through sixty. My blood chills as I determine that the other matching crates must hold additional women just like this. But the four empty pods make me queasy as I realize that there is only one logical answer for who those were for.

I stumble out of the crate, out of the room, back into the hallway, and begin walking up and down the corridors, calling out to the others. Before too long, I've gathered everyone in the control room, at which point I lay it out for them.

“So, there's eight in our crate, and our pods—I'm assuming the four empty ones are

for us—are labeled up to sixty. I think the closed shipping crates are more pods with more people.” I nervously chew at my lip, looking between the other four women.

“What do we do with them?” Amari asks, looking at each of us wide-eyed. “I mean, do we wake them or let them sleep?”

“Well, I don’t know how we would get to the pods in the other shipping crates because I have no idea how to even go about opening one of those things.”

“What does that matter?” Sabrina looks at us incredulously. “There is no way we can leave them asleep. It’s life or death, and they deserve to know what’s happened to them. We have to at least try to get them open”

“We can barely handle four women on this ship. What the fuck are we going to do with sixty?” Renata counters.

“Also, we could do something wrong in waking them up. Is it like a sleep-walking thing where you shouldn’t wake them quickly?” Amari bites at her thumbnail nervously.

“Besides,” call me selfish but I really don’t want to wake all of those girls, “what do we do, just open the pods and go, ‘Hey, you’ve been kidnapped by aliens, we broke the ship, and now we’re all hurtling towards almost-certain alien slavery?’”

“Also, we don’t know for sure that there are human women in all of the pods,” Renata points out. “They could have other aliens or animals. There could be anything in those pods.”

Sabrina gives us each a glare. “So, you’d want them to just die never knowing what happened? Regardless of what they are, they’re probably still sentient. If things go wrong, they should know what it is and have the chance to face it.”

“Let’s just vote,” I interject, “before this gets heated.”

Everyone else voices their agreement, and I’m just about to open my mouth to give my vote, when the ship lurches violently, throwing us off balance. We stumble and tumble around the control room. My arms flail as I grab for nearby handrails, alarms blaring through the chamber. My heart nearly beats out of my chest as I listen to the computer’s loud ass warning.

“WARNING! ASTEROID IMPACT DETECTED! NAVIGATION SYSTEMS COMPROMISED! COURSE REDIRECTED! EMERGENCY SYSTEMS ACTIVATED!”

“Computer,” I yell out over the alarms, “Where are we headed now?”

“NAVIGATION SYSTEMS COMPROMISED! COURSE REDIRECTED! SEARCHING FOR LOCATION COORDINATES!”

Another obstacle to overcome, and no easy solutions in sight.

“So, we can’t be completely screwed. Let’s think this through.” Part of me is getting sick of Renata’s eternal determination. Another part of me is grateful for it since it’s helping keep us all from hysteria.

Out of nowhere, the ship's computer announces, “LOCATION DETERMINED. NOW ENTERING...SYSTEM NUMBER 2189 UNDER INTERGALACTIC CODE NUMBER 2946 —EMERGENCY OVERRIDE ENGAGED.”

We all share a look before rushing out of the control room and down the hallway until we reach a row of windows. Parking in front of one, I press my face against the glass like everyone else. Every breath in the room hitches at what’s before us.

An expanse of swirling planets, dotted with a myriad of moons and bathed in the light of two—no, three blazing suns. The whole thing seems to be filled with asteroids. I bet it was one of them that strayed and hit us, ensuring we'd end our lives in this planetary system.

The ship quakes again beneath my feet, sending shockwaves of fear rippling through my body. With each impact, the alarms blare mercilessly louder and the computer announcements get increasingly worse.

“WARNING! WARNING! WARNING! CONTROL SYSTEM DOWN! AUTOPILOT DISABLED! MANUAL CONTROL DISABLED! OXYGEN STORES DEPLETED! WARNING! WARNING! WARNING!”

My heart races as my mind frantically searches for a solution to our dire predicament. When the ship shakes violently with yet another impact, I know we only have one option left. At least the only one I can see.

“I’m getting in my pod.” I don’t stop to argue, and I don’t stop to see if the others follow me.

When I finally reach the shipping crate room and stop at my pod, I notice that all of them have followed me. Renata is the last to enter and closes the shipping crate from the inside. We give each other one last look of support, and then we step into our pods. The moment I close my pod door over me, it begins to fill with gas. Darkness claims me quickly, but through the muffled sounds of alarms and warnings I make out the computer’s words:

“IMPACT CRITICAL! REPAIR NEEDED! EMERGENCY LANDING PROCEDURES BEGINNING NOW!”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:54 am

- kuvier -

When I awake to find the Great Mother's eyes brightening the sky, I believe it will be very much a typical day. The bright season is well underway, which means Atiqarii is full of endless light and never-ending cold. However, it also means that the clan's hunters are at their most busy, as we use the long days to prepare for the dark times to come.

Going about my morning as normal, I do not worry that my mother is not in our shared hut. She had already told me that she would be up early, tanning hides and making more leathers for the new babe born to Aptuu and Esa last dark season. My mother spends much of her time catering to a clan that will never fully accept her. And yet, where may I judge? Do I not do the same when I bring home choice meats and offer them to others with the intention of finding an ounce of appreciation in their eyes?

Speaking of, I am wasting the hours to hunt. I stoke the fire for my mother once more, bringing it lower so it may continue to bring some warmth to our home. With reluctance, and nothing left to prepare and procrastinate over, it is time for the task I wished to avoid for as long as possible.

I must see my atan.

I am out of my hut and steering my body toward him far sooner than I would like. I am not surprised to see that few are awake at this time. With only one eye blinking in the sky, there is much left of the dawn. Many are still asleep, but I know that the atan will not be.

As I near his hut, the air thickens with the scent of the smoke that rises from the central fire pit. A few mated females are gathered around the large flame, roasting an uunaht head. They look up as I pass, but do not greet me. I ignore them as they do me, focusing instead on the task at hand.

Approaching the entrance of the atan's intricately decorated hut, I can hear the low murmur of voices inside—Junq is not alone. This is less than ideal. Junq is difficult when he is alone, but even worse with company because the male has the habit of performing when in front of crowds. Somehow, I always end up the laughingstock of every performance.

I force myself to remain composed, despite the urge to turn around. If I want the assistance I seek and the permission I need, I will need Junq, which means playing the dutiful hunter.

I use a finger to knock the bone chimes hanging next to the covered hut opening. Junq's voice calls out for my entry and I do as I am told. When I step inside, I see that Kuvit and a couple of elders are present. The flickering fire casts long shadows on the walls, making the space feel even more oppressive.

"Kuvier, what a surprise," Junq greets with a distinct lack of hospitality. I clap my fist over my chest and give a short bow.

"My atan, elders," I incline my head at each of the elders present before skimming over the last form in the room. "Kuvit."

"Clansman," Kuvit greets back, giving me the slightest nod of his head, his face schooled into an indifferent look that looks so much like my own, just lighter in color.

"Why do you seek your atan?" Tiqii asks with reproach. Of all the clansfolk, Tiqii's

hatred of me is the most fierce. She was mated to the late Atan Kuuv, whose infidelity conceived me, so I cannot say I blame her.

“Atan Junq,” I choose to address him directly, “I seek your permission to investigate strange tracks I found during my last hunt. They are unlike any animal tracks I have seen before, and I believe they warrant further exploration.”

Viquum speaks up, his tone wary. “We are on the brink of the dark season, Kuvier. Every hunter’s focus is needed to ensure we are prepared.”

“I understand, Elder,” I reply, maintaining a respectful tone. “But if these tracks belong to a new predator, it could pose a threat to the tribe. It is better to understand what we are dealing with than to be caught unawares, especially in the dark.”

“A new animal?” Tiqii scoffs loudly. “You likely saw a mangled track. An aktar for instance. We rarely see those.”

“I am sure of what I saw.” Breathe, Kuvier. Restrain yourself .

“I agree with Tiqii, it is probably a scrambled track we have already seen.” Junq waves his hand at me, dismissing my statement. “There are no new animals. The Great Mother would have made such a gift clear.”

I anticipated this. Why would they believe that I, a lowly, disregarded hunter, would see a gift from the Great Mother?

“No, my atan,” I quickly contest. “I have seen many tracks in my thirty-three dark seasons. You know that I am amongst the best of the hunters. I would not confuse such a track.”

“Even the greatest of hunters make mistakes.” He stares at me, his jaw set resolutely.

I have made a mistake. I should not have expected to get approval. Atan Junq has never liked me. Like most of the clan, he simply tolerates me, as is required per the clan laws. I should have known that when faced with the chance to assist me, he would not. Typically, any suggestion I bring up is met with healthy skepticism. New tracks for a new animal none have seen? Cause for extreme skepticism.

It is better to ask forgiveness than permission, and I should have investigated on my own.

Repressing a sigh as I stare at the stubborn set of his mouth, my eyes skim over the room. Viquum looks bored while Tiqii looks triumphant. Kuvit looks...curious.

“I do not see the harm.” I am shocked that Kuvit speaks up. “Of course, the atan knows best, but if there are new tracks, or even if there is an aktar nearby, it may be good to hunt it before the dark season.”

Kuvit’s input gives Junq pause, and I work to calm my expressions as I take joy in the look of disdain on his mother’s face. Junq considers for a long while, so long I begin plotting an escape out of the communal home to follow the tracks without permission. Just as I resign myself to this plan, just as I am thinking of which hunter I might convince to go with me, Junq speaks up again.

“Very well, but I will allow no hunter to accompany you on this foolish journey.” He gives me a smug grin. “You may follow the tracks. Alone. Pack well. It may be many blinks until you return.”

“My thanks,” I grit out before I give one final bow.

As I turn to leave, I catch Kuvit's eye. For a brief moment, I see something flicker in his golden gaze before it vanishes, replaced by his usual cool mask. It is strange at times to look at him, so similar to me yet my polar opposite; the half-brother that has

everything I never had.

I frown deeply as I exit through the covered hole in the hut, blocked by animal skin. My mind whirls and I bat at the anger building within me. Of course, Junq would task me with completing this alone. Anything he can do to make me fail he will.

What a great uncle I have. Knowing how he—and truly the whole clan—feels about me, it is no surprise. It has been many sleeps of the Great Mother since the last Atan passed on and yet the clan still holds resentment towards his bastard son, born of infidelity that rocked our community. Though it is not nearly as bad as it was when I was growing up and Atan Kuuv was still alive, there is still a general uneasiness about being around me. As if I was the one to choose to betray my mate.

I bring my thoughts back to the present as I head through the snow back to my hut. I do not know what this journey could bring, so I stuff everything I need into a large pack, throwing it over my shoulder. With my tools' sling tied across my chest, my scythe strapped to my hip, and my bone spear in hand, I am ready as quickly as possible.

Finally exiting my hut, I tie the animal skin flap to the maftii bone base. As I walk, I note that the second eye has risen and much of the clan has begun moving about. Most do not speak to me, nor do I to them as I begin my walk through the clans commune of huts.

Before I can leave for my solo hunt, I make my way to the tanning hut to speak with my mother. The familiar scent of curing hides and the rhythmic sounds of scraping greet me as I enter. My mother, Vierqa, is hard at work, her hands skillfully beating a large hide. She looks up as I approach and her face lights up with a smile.

“How did it go?” she asks immediately, shaking off the goop on her hands.

“Junq has given me permission,” I grimace as I continue, “to go without another hunter.”

Her smile falters, and disappointment clouds her features. “With the dark season approaching, it’s dangerous to send you off like this.”

“What did you believe would happen?” I scoff and shake my head. “Junq is as stubborn as an old uunaht.”

She gives me a stern look, her eyes flashing with the fire of her convictions. “You must not speak poorly of your atan, Kuvier. Loyalty to our clan is paramount.”

My mother has always held strong ties to the clan, even as they have treated us with disdain and derision. I know it stems from how she was treated before my father ruined her. I’m sure if I had memories of good times with this clan, I might too still hold some semblance of loyalty.

“As you wish.” I give her an acquiescing nod. “I must set out if I want to be back before the dark season’s storms begin.”

She smiles still, though sadness twinges it. “You have a good heart, Kuvier. Go with the Great Mother’s blessing, and be safe. I will pray for your swift return.”

I clasp her by the shoulders and squeeze before letting go and heading for the exit. “I will return as soon as I can.”

I am so lost in my thoughts as I walk through the commune, heading towards the Blood Mountains, that it is almost too late to hop out of the way when I hear the sound of laughter and squealing. A second later, a kit comes running towards me. I sidestep him, recognizing Etuuk. Kejul follows after and nearly barrels me down, as I am too distracted by Etuuk to have noticed Kejul at first.

“Sorry, Kuvier!” He calls over his shoulder but does not stop. I do not respond and hold my smile back. I have a soft spot for the kits of the clan, especially the ones like those two who have lost both parents during the cave-in. While I do not spend much time with any of the kits—I am always out on the hunt—I do bring back treats and carve toys for them. As much as I love seeing them in joy, it is always a stark reminder of what I will never have.

We have lost so many of our tribes, and there are no Lieq people left besides us. I am aware, as many hunters are, that some of us will die without mates or kits. With the afflictions that have wrought our clan and stolen many lives, and the absence of true bonded pairs in the last several generations, there are few females left to choose as a mate. And without bonded pairs, there are fewer successful births, and fewer still females born.

Furthermore, without the Great Mother telling us who our best fit is, it is up to the females to choose their mates. None would choose the clan outcast; why would they? I cannot blame them. I would provide a great many things, but any associated with me would also be shunned. What kind of life is that?

Besides the females that are already mated, the ones that passed in the cave-in, and my mother, there are three unmated females left alive in our tribe—they are all but kits now. I cannot imagine any of them as full-grown females, let alone as potential mates. Pah, the thought is disgusting. No, I will live my life alone, and I will die alone, joining the ancestors with my soul untethered.

I have known this for most of my life, and I have come to accept it.

As I walk, the Great Mother’s eyes awaken until three blink in the heavens, casting long shadows as I make my way through the familiar terrain. With jagged rocks, dense thickets, and ice covering every inch, the terrain is not forgiving. Already I must start thinking about where I will camp tonight. While the tracks I saw lead

toward the Fire Waters, I will not camp there. The warmth and toothy fish are enough to attract prey and predators alike. I will not want to be caught there when there is but one eye left in the sky.

I move steadily, my eyes sharp and my senses alert. As I crest a small ridge, I pause, scanning the horizon. The sky is a clear, fierce blue, but I notice a strange dark spot. As I stare, the spot grows larger, orange and red flames slowly licking over the outside until my eyes widen.

The large ball of fire streaks across the sky above me like a great glowing beast soaring through the heavens. I look up, my heart pounding like the drums we use for clan meetings. The fire trail splits the sky, leaving a path of light that fades slowly behind the great ball. My eyes water from staring, but I cannot look away. It disappears behind the Blood Mountains, headed straight for the ground.

I continue looking at the place where it had disappeared for several heartbeats before I begin moving again. Veering from my original path, the strange tracks completely forgotten now, I replot my course for the valley behind the Blood Mountains. That is where I believe the fireball would land, should it have crashed to the ground.

I know that I am making a grave decision. My atan will not be happy with me investigating. This is very clearly a gift from the Great Mother; it is not for me, an outcast hunter, to chase. But, there is a calling in my soul that tells me that whatever I have seen was meant for me. I will not ignore the Great Mother.

Besides, it is better to ask forgiveness than permission.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:54 am

- sedona -

The first thing that seeps into my awareness is how fucking bright it is.

Groaning, I go to raise my hand to cover my face— why did I forget to close the blinds again— but, my hand hits against something hard, cold, and decidedly metal.

My eyes flutter open and it takes a long second for me to realize that the bright as hell light is filtering through a small cracked glass window in front of me. I rack my brain trying to find a memory to grab onto. Raising my arms, keeping them close to my body, I go to bang on the wall in front of me, but meet no resistance as it cracks open. That is what triggers a crash of remembrance.

Oh my god, I wrecked an alien spaceship. Not only that, I put myself in a stasis pod. Who knows how long I've been asleep? Who knows where I am? Who knows if anyone else even made it? Suppressing the panic, I push against the door and the metal groans in protest.

It finally swings open and immediately crisp, frigid air rushes in to greet me. I take in a stinging breath and everything I smell is tinged with the acrid scent of burnt metal and ozone. Here's hoping that I can actually breathe this air safely.

I stumble out of the confines of the pod, my limbs heavy with exhaustion, and take in the state of the shipping crate. With the door gone and the roof ripped halfway off, I can't imagine how I actually survived this. If I had to guess, this crate and the pod are the extra protection that kept me alive, but the crate definitely looks worse for wear.

Deciding to focus on my most pressing issue, the first step for me has to be figuring out what to do about the other girls. I'm relieved to see that all seven other pods survived. From the outside, everything looks fine, but, just to be sure, I move to the pod closest to me. When I reach the metal cocoon, I smooth away the frost on the glass and sigh with relief. It's the sleeping face of Amari and she looks very much alive. Well, at least two of us made it. Time to check on the others.

I examine the other pods, one by one. By the time I finish checking, I'm shaking from the cold but feeling relief that the girls I arrived with are okay, as well as the four girls in the other pods in our crate. I feel even better when I note that all of their pod lights glow a comforting green. I glance back at my pod and see that it is the only one shining red.

After checking each pod and seeing that everyone appears to have miraculously made it safe and sound, I can breathe a bit easier. No one else is in immediate danger of waking up, which means I'm only responsible for myself, but it also means I'm left to make the big decisions by myself.

Suddenly, I get a sinking feeling as I think about the other fifty-two pods in the other crates. What are the odds that any of the rest of them would survive? I hope they're okay, or at the very least, as macabre as it sounds, I hope they died peacefully.

Pushing away the darker thoughts, I decide to focus on just the things immediately in front of me. All I feel like I can handle right now is what comes first and what comes next. Anything third or higher will have to wait its turn.

So, the first step? Figure out where I am. With that in mind, I make my way out of the protection of the leftover roof of the crate and through the open doorway. When I get outside, cold air like nothing I've ever felt whips at me as I stand trembling in my yellow scrub shorts. It's fucking cold. I think about going back in the pod, but the glass is cracked. I'm smart enough to know that means my pod is shot. It's up to me

now to figure out what the hell to do about everything.

I try to make more sense of my surroundings, but it's all so fucking bright. Everywhere I look is covered in shining white snow. The only thing marring the whitescape are large rocks and the wrecked collage of pieces that were once a ship. Despite this, for a second, it all looks Earth-y and I feel a flicker of hope. But, when I look up, there are three suns in the sky, and my heart sinks back down. I scan around me and anxiety grips my chest. There are mountains, but they're red. Where the hell am I?

Moving further away from the shipping crate, my feet crunch over the snow. I try my best to ignore the fact that the rubber-soled slippers on my feet are not enough coverage for this weather. What little coverage my shoes provide is not meant for this kind of environment. Hopefully, I end this experience alive and with all of my toes.

With a sigh and another shake, I clutch myself tightly and rack my brain, fighting through the haze to remember the things I know about surviving in the wilderness. Considering most of my knowledge comes from stranded-island erotica and Discovery Planet reality shows, I feel like I might be a little screwed. But, one thing I do remember for sure is that the rules of survival start with the four essentials: Shelter, Fire, Water, and Food.

I'm focusing on shelter and fire first. I know that it'll have to get dark eventually, and if it's this cold now, then it'll be a death sentence later, so both of those will be a necessity. Looking at the pieces around me, I get to work.

A while later, I'm dragging heavy pipes across the ground towards our crate. A pipe in each hand, I lean them against the open doorway. I'd attempted to find the actual door, but that's clearly long gone. Still, I figure I can make a lean-to cover across the door, and with most of the ceiling left over, I will have created some protection from the snow. After going back for a few more poles and finding some wire cords to wrap

around and bind things, I know it's time to find something to cover everything up.

Or just something to cover me because I can no longer feel my extremities, and I'm hoping that the blue tinting my fingers is just my imagination. With that in mind, I embark again to ruffle through the wreckage for something else useful.

The 'something' ends up being a weird-looking box. I turn the completely smooth metal cube over in my hands, looking for a tab or seam somewhere to indicate where it opens, but the entire thing is smooth and shiny. I soon figure out that tossing it on the ground also does nothing.

With a frustrated sigh, I pick the thing up and run a finger down a corner, hoping to feel an indent. Instead, the thing clicks and springs open, the contents falling to the ground. I drop to my knees in the snow, snatching up the materials that fell out.

The box turns out to be exactly what I need, an emergency kit. With two thin blankets, a flashlight, and bandages, it's a start for supplies. I tuck the flashlight in the waistband of my paper-thin panties and look at the other things on the ground. There's what appears to be some kind of ointment and a package of dried grasshopper-like bugs that I remember seeing on the ship. I grimace. Times are tough, but not that tough. Yet. I set the grasshopper things back in the box carefully. It might get that bad. Who knows? I do the same with the ointment since I don't know exactly what it's for.

Overall happy with my finds, I throw one of the blankets around my shoulders and start building up my shelter. When I'm done, I have several poles tied haphazardly by cords to metal bars on the outside of the crate with one of the blankets draped over everything. It...covers things. It also shakes and makes clanking sounds every time the wind blows.

I try not to feel dejected as I stare at the lopsided structure, but it's hard not to. This

will barely protect me from the elements. Plus, I can't help but think about what kind of crazy predators would appear on an alien planet with red mountains and three damn suns. What will this monstrosity do against real monsters? I shiver, but this time it isn't from the cold. I glance back at the shipping container and remind myself that the others are relying on me, so if this is what I have, I need to make do.

Quickly double-wrapping myself in my blanket, I go back to the wreckage, now a tad warmer. The blanket is surprisingly heat-insulating, probably made of some kind of special alien material. But what it can't save me from is the cold on my face. After all of the searching and building, my skin is already chapped, my lips peeling, and my feet are suffering. But wins have to be appreciated when we get them, and the majority of me is warm, so that will do for now.

My mind turns towards finding anything I can use to make a fire, but I pull up short when I pass what looks like a peculiar-looking gun. Cautiously, I pick it up and inspect it. It's all black and small, with blue lines zig-zagging along the edges. The muzzle of the gun is slightly flared at the end, which makes me wonder how big the bullets have to be.

I hold it out in front of me, point it away from myself and the shipping crate, and consider shooting it. It doesn't look like the ray guns the mantis guys had, but who knows what this gun could do. It might be a good idea to have something to protect me in case I meet any natives. I pause and frown. That is if the aliens on this planet aren't kind. They could all be perfectly nice. But, then a scary thought filters into my brain.

Is there anyone else on this planet at all?

With that thought surging me forward, I hold the gun slightly upward and pull the trigger.

- kuvier -

The journey forward is a difficult one, and I am tiring under the weight of the rations I packed to sustain me for many hands of days. However, I refuse to stop moving or slow down. If I saw that which crashed through the sky, someone else may have as well. I cannot be late getting there.

I cannot.

As I think this, it is as if the Great Mother wishes to communicate to me alone. She sends me a sign, the clearest that could be, high enough in the sky for me to see, but I know it is low enough that it can not be seen from the village. The message is unmistakably just for my eyes.

Up ahead, over the crest of the mountain where the valley lies, there comes a loud pop, followed by an extraordinarily bright light, like the glowing blue of foso rocks, that bursts across the sky. It shows what appears to be a simple lined icon that points straight down. I get the message from this simple illustration. It tells me where to go. It tells me I am on the right path.

It tells me that what I will discover must be meant for me and me alone.

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- sedona -

It's a flare gun.

So much for protection. I toss the thing to the side with disgust and jump away squealing when that triggers it and it starts sparking off. When it stops and seems relatively safe, I creep back over and pick it up carefully. It must have had only one flair loaded, but I wonder if the residual sparks could be used to start a fire.

For the next several minutes I scavenge and scrounge, looking for something flammable enough to be used as a kindling. And I come up with absolutely nothing. Not a random manual, or piece of clothing besides the ones on my body, or even a fucking roll of toilet paper. Everything in my vicinity is metal, glass, stone, and snow.

I look up above me and see that the second sun is creeping slowly lower. Soon there'll only be one sun left and I know that complete darkness will have to come quickly after that, and I don't want to be outside when it does.

Feeling absolutely defeated, I sulk back over to the shipping container and slip through the blanket door. The temperature difference is minute, but what is very different is the lack of wind and excessive snow. A few flakes steadily creep in at the very front due to the hole in the ceiling, but in the back closest to the pods, it's clear of snow. I suspect that's where I'll sleep tonight.

I collapse onto the ground against my pod, tears pricking in my eyes. I immediately wipe them away. As cold as it is, they'll probably freeze on my face. Sniffling, I curl my arms around myself and pull the blanket taut around my body, ensuring every

possible inch of me's covered. Then, I settle against the pod and wait for night.

Don't ask how I managed to fall asleep, but when I wake up the next morning, it's incredibly bright again. I sit up from my fetal position on the floor and clutch my blanket tight to me. While I was asleep, a mini hill of snow formed where the crate's ceiling is missing. It takes some maneuvering and stamping down to get over it, but when I cautiously exit my pseudo-shelter, I notice that there are two suns in the sky again. I'd fallen asleep before sunset yesterday for sure because there was still one sun hanging on for dear life and casting a minor light when I finally closed my eyes.

I grimace as I look at the blanket of white around me. The snow only got thicker through the night, and the air only got colder. Even with my blanket, I'm shivering against the wind. I can't help but look out at the horizon hoping to see someone. I don't at first, but there's a big ass stone not too far from us that could be blocking my view, so I walk a few feet and move around it. Still nothing but white and red.

I set off the flare hours ago, and it was a pretty obvious sign to come to this spot because aliens can't do anything half-assed. The flare gun had shot off a small metal ball, and when it was about a hundred feet away from me, the thing shot straight up and exploded into a blue holographic image of an arrow pointing directly down at us.

But, unfortunately, or fortunately I guess, depending on who the aliens could be, no one has shown up.

The thought of waking the other girls flits across my mind, but I quickly push it aside. I can't, in good conscience, subject them to the same uncertain fate that awaits me. Either we are too far from civilization to be rescued, or there is the very great possibility this planet is uninhabited by any sentient, intelligent life forms. I look at all of the snow around me and frown. For all I know, I could be stuck in the middle of

another planet's ice age. Civilization might be thousands of years in the future. I remember seeing in a cartoon show once that a dude in a stasis pod slept in it for a thousand years. Maybe the other girls can sleep through the evolution of this world and they'll eventually be saved by some reformed utopian alien race. It's a long shot for them, but what isn't hard to imagine is the fact that I'm probably going to die out here.

Before I have a chance to scold myself for my negative thoughts, I catch sight of movement in my peripheral. My gaze snaps to the right, following the movement to see a silhouette approaching in the distance. The figure is definitely walking upright—I notice that immediately. My heart soars to my throat in hope and fear, but as the figure gets closer, it drops right back down to my stomach.

What had first looked like a man wearing head gear, turns out to be a large, lumpy figure with a distinctly inhuman shape and gait. Who—or what—ever it is, is moving fast, already only two football field's length away from me and getting rapidly closer. It's hard to distinguish much through the glare of the suns off the snow.

“Stop!” I scream out desperately. Its footsteps falter far enough away that I still can't see exactly what or who it is. But it doesn't stop for long and when it moves again, I am horrified because it is running this time.

I shriek and take several steps back when it draws near enough that I catch full sight of what exactly was sticking out of its head.

Horns.

As it comes closer, I can actually make out its two sets of horns; thick curled ones like a ram's on the side and then thinner ones at the crown of its head. I briefly give thanks that it's not a bug. I would hate to have to deal with that again, but this creature is scary enough on its own. It looks like a demon. Or a goatman. A demon

goatman. Wasn't the devil a goat? I don't know. I do know I am terrified.

Fuck.

My brain flips into the fight part of 'fight or flight' and I scramble looking for a weapon. My options are limited so I lean down to pick up several rocks. Without waiting, I lob a few at the swiftly approaching creature. I miss the first throw, but the second one boinks off its chest. That gets its attention. It stops maybe fifteen feet away and extends its arm in the air.

"Oy! Ja faskel pvieti!" Fuck. Of course it wouldn't speak English. It's a goat thingy for god sakes.

Now the question is, do I engage? I scoff at myself. Do I really have an option?

"Hello? Do you come in peace?" I realize how stupid a question that is, considering I was the one throwing rocks. But in my defense, this thing is huge and the rocks definitely didn't hurt. Even from this distance, I can tell it's over six feet, possibly headed towards seven, and either the bulk is muscle or several layers of fur skins and leather. I'm betting on muscles though.

"Noveq loo cam din as Atiqarii?" It calls from afar, its voice loud and echoing off the valley walls.

Shaking my head, I answer back, "I don't understand what you are saying!"

Instead of speaking more, the thing scares me by taking a few more steps forward, bringing it within ten feet of me.

"Hey! No! Stop!" The goat-demon doesn't heed me, so I lob a rock. I miss. It keeps moving forward, so I toss another. Hit. It moves anyway, so I throw again. Hit. Move.

Throw. Miss. Move. Throw. Hit.

Soon, I'm out of rocks and there's a goat-demon standing less than five feet from me. My gaze takes in the scope of him and my breath catches in my throat as I really get a good look. I was right about him being tall, but he is closer to seven feet than six, I think. He's imposing and wild looking, with weapons shoved into the pockets of some kind of utility belt slung across his body and a large pack on his back. He has leather pants with fur and leather wrappings around his feet. His torso is covered with a half-cloak draped across one shoulder. Everything he has is fur or rough leather.

Despite the fact that he is covered in various sewn items, I realize that a good bit of the hair and fur I see is his own. He appears to have short fur on most of his body, but thicker tufts around his head and face. Despite the clothing, I can tell that he's full of muscle, from the broad curve of his shoulders to the vast expanse of his chest. It's his face that gives me pause.

Now, with it close enough for me to fully take in its features, I can't help but note the intelligence in his eyes. And the friendly, albeit toothy and fangy, grin he wears, his hands raised in what appears to be a greeting. A strange mixture of animal and humanoid, he's got an elongated face with deep set eyes and a flat slotted nose. His lips are plump and brown like much of his face. There are patches of white as well, around the base of his nose and lips and along his brow bone, giving him the impression of eyebrows. His golden eyes peer right through me, and I feel disgusted with myself when I feel a flutter of excitement at the pit of my stomach, but I can't help it. Somehow, the weird hodgepodge of features comes together to create a very handsome...creature? I don't know what to call him. 'Man' doesn't feel quite right.

"This is scary," I murmur to myself, my eyes still on Tall, Dark and Handsome.

And my brain, while slightly distracted by how strangely hot the goat dude is, does circle back to his clothes and tools. They all appear to be handmade from bone and

stone and leather. That does not bode well for our chances to get help getting back to Earth. I have a sinking feeling that this is the closest to civilization this planet has gotten.

My brain flashes back to the ship falling apart and I remember that the robot voice had said something about emergency overriding that intergalactic code that kept us from being able to force navigation to Earth. This place is definitely underdeveloped enough to fall under the protections of that code. If that's the case, that means we are probably stuck here. If our captors stole us illegally, no one knows to look for us. No one would come looking here because of the same code, and probably because of all those asteroids that forced us on this planet in the first place. All of that boils down to one thing in my head—Tall, Dark and Handsome just became my only hope at survival.

Which means, I think with an internal sigh, being nice and no more throwing stones.

Cautiously, I bend to place my rocks on the ground. My eyes stay on TDH making sure he doesn't move. TDH watches me intently, cocking his head to the side, his horns tilting and creating a strangely cute image. Sucking in a breath to draw in my courage, I slowly move forward, until I am right in front of him. The whole time I move, he stays still.

"Hi, no hurt me?" I implore, fingers crossed that he at least can understand that. When I stop talking, though, he doesn't give any indication that he understood me. In fact, it's like he didn't hear me at all. Instead, his pupils are blown wide, the gold a thin line around deep black as he wiggles his nose and leans forward. Is he trying to smell me?

A rumble falls from him and he makes a move to come closer suddenly. With a squeak, I startle and jump backwards. He gives an irritated huff and takes a giant step, bringing him directly in front me. I make a distressed sound as my eyes travel up

until they finally meet his. His frame looming over me is intense, but I find myself swimming in the intensity of his gaze.

He reaches out and uses his thumb and pointer finger to grip one of the loose coils of my hair that had fallen from my braided pony. Leaning down until he's nearly eye level and lifting the lock of hair to his nose, he inhales deeply and his eyes fall closed. When he opens them again, the look on his face nearly steals my breath.

He gazes at me as if I planted a fourth sun in the sky.

TDH speaks to me in a bunch of gibberish that I couldn't make sense of if I tried. I pick up the word 'khesi' over and over and I can tell he's fucking ecstatic about something, but that's hardly helpful. I grumble and open my mouth to tell him I don't understand, when without warning, he grabs me, hauling me up and against him.

On instinct, I wrap my legs around his waist and my hands clutch at his shoulders, and just like that, I've somehow found myself clutched to him like a koala. Any protest I would have had dies on my lips though when I am enveloped in sheer warmth. I can't help the tiny moan that slips out of my mouth as I lean into the heat.

TDH pulls away slightly and stares at me in sheer fascination. Realizing the sounds I'm making, I pipe up, "Don't get any ideas, buddy, you're just warm."

You are also hot in a way that has nothing to do with temperature, I think, but I'll keep that particular thought to myself.

TDH rumbles more words in his language as he nuzzles my neck. The words mean fuck all to me, but the snuggling is awkward enough that I start to wiggle and slap at him.

"Down! Put me down!"

I don't honestly expect him to listen and put me down, but he actually does. I know it's not because of my words, but it seems body language is somewhat universal, or rather intergalactic. And that gives me an idea.

"Okay, so goat demon dudes are friendly," I talk aloud to myself, considering he can't understand me anyway. TDH watches my lips closely as I talk. "Maybe too friendly, though," I amend, feeling like I'm under a microscope.

Regardless, he has been nice so far. He did overstep with the whole koala hug, but he also put me down when I asked. And I liked how warm he was.

I snort derisively at myself. I'm feeling like after being kidnapped by bug aliens my bar for civil treatment is on the floor. But, I'm also in a really weird situation, so obviously, I'll have to bend the normal rules sometimes. I try to reason with myself, and it does make me feel a bit better. Though not more confident in my decision.

Regardless, it's time to put all of my eggs into the goat dude's baskets.

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- kuvier -

I have found my heart's beat.

I did not know until today that I had lost it, but truly did my heart ever even move before I saw her? My mate. My bonded pair. The other half of my spirit.

She is fierce—even now she stands staring me down with ferocity, despite the fact that I terrify her. I can scent her fear, and yet she stands firm. It fills my heart with pride and I fight back the grin that aches to spread my lips as I do not wish to frighten her more. I am no fool. I look at her and I can see that we are not the same. Her teeth are blunted, even the ones that come down to a point look as if they would cause only minimal damage. In comparison, my wide smile with large, double canines would likely frighten her.

My mate squares her shoulders, pushing her dark braided mane over one shoulder. Then, she opens her pretty little mouth to say, “Mi naym eez Sehtohnah.”

“You make such pretty sounds. I wish they held meaning to me,” I comment, tilting my head to follow the dark coils around the edge of her face with my eyes. We have not seen curly hair in generations, not since the Tuvti tribe died off in the Great Death many generations ago.

“Mi naym eez Sehtohnah.” She says it again, this time her eyes are wide, shaped like a fafa nut, and conveying hopefulness.

But I just give her a toothless smile. I do not know what her words mean, but I do

enjoy looking at her.

She makes a groaning sound and scrubs her hands over her face before locking eyes with me. She thumps her chest and repeats the last word of her sentence over and over, thumping herself each time. Sehtohnah. Understanding strikes me.

“Your name,” I breathe in awe, looking at her with excitement. “My female tells me her name.”

“Sehtohnah,” she says again.

“Hello, Sehtohnah.” She shakes her head and repeats her name again, stressing each sound. I have said it wrong. I give it another try, and then another and another. “Sedona?” She gives a nod finally, and I am happy. I tap my own chest, “Kuvier.”

“Coo-vair,” she repeats. I chuckle at her effort to make the swallowed growl that my name ends with.

“Kuvier,” I say again, stressing each sound carefully.

“Cuh-veer,” she repeats, getting it much better, though still missing some of the sounds that resonate in the chest. Regardless, I give her a bright close-mouthed smile and my heart warms at hearing my name on my mate’s lips.

But, it wanes just as quickly when I happen to look down and take in what she is wearing. I look her up and down, frowning, for I have been a terrible male. She wears an unnaturally yellow tunic and short pants with small covers that poorly protect her feet. Every article of clothing she wears looks as if half of it is missing. No wonder she is shaking like a leaf under the shawl draping off her shoulders. And yet, I did not notice because I was too distracted by her sweet face and the sugary sounds that dripped from her tongue.

Tsking at myself, I drop my pack and pull the cloak off my back, holding it out expectantly. Held up against her, I can tell instantly that the cloak would swallow her form. She will need to loop it properly, or the weight will certainly pull it off her shoulders. Still, she does not move, instead staring in confusion, so I use one hand to grab her at the waist. She squeals in surprise, but I simply pull her closer to me by the hips, getting her close enough to feel my body heat. It is hard to do so, but I let her go when she is close enough. I wish to grip at her softness, but right now she is skittish. I do not need to scare her off before I have even known her.

I throw the cape around her shoulders, and knot and loop it at the front, allowing it to stay upright. Sedona looks down, grasping at the cape and wrapping it tightly around her. She gives me a bright smile, and I feel vindicated. She looks very cute like this, draped in my clothes with her arms clutched inside.

But then she goes and tries to step away. I scowl and gently tug her to a stop. Her foot coverings—if I can even call them that—are not suitable for the ever-increasing inches of snow on the ground. I would give her mine, but I am looking at her feet and I do not know that what I have to offer would be suitable for her. I am wearing only traditional hunter's wraps. They provide me with enough coverage from the ground that I am comfortable, but my toes are still loose to allow grip and momentum. But, even wrapped in the stiff materials of her foot coverings, I can tell that Sedona does not have feet that mimic me. If I had to guess based on the way she is a furless, soft thing, she would need much thicker coverings than what I have on. I will have to make something for her.

I wonder how to communicate to her that I wish to inspect her feet.

Sedona pulls at me distracting me from my thoughts, trying to move away again, but I will not let her. It is much too cold and she cannot walk like that. How she still has her toes after being practically barefoot in this weather, I do not know, but she will not risk them with me here. I shake my head at her and gesture to her feet, the snow,

and back again.

She looks down and realization brightens her eyes. She bites at her lip thoughtfully and my eyes zone in on the motion. It is strange to think, but I should like to lick her lips. I should like to nuzzle at them with my own and nibble at the plump flesh. I have never seen any of the mated pairs do this, but I have never seen a female with such beautiful lips either.

And I have never seen a bonded pair before. Suppose we simply show more affection? I cannot imagine a world where I would not want to touch and paw at her. Already the bond draws me in, tying me closer and closer to her, like a rope tied from my soul to hers, pulled taut and dragging me into her.

Does she feel the same? Does she feel the drive to be with me the way I do her?

Sedona pulls me from my thoughts again when she makes a swirling motion with her finger that tells me to spin. Though I am confused as to why, I spin in a full rotation before coming back to face her. My female giggles and the sound is like a bone flute song in my ear. She makes the motion again, but this time, when I am facing away from her in my spin, I feel small hands on my back stopping me from turning fully around.

She tugs gently at my pants, and at first, I think she wants me to take them off and I grow momentarily excited. Although I would prefer to take her in the warmth of a hut, maybe she does feel the bond and is feeling impatient. But then she pushes slightly down on my waist, and I understand that she just wishes for me to crouch, so I do.

A second later, a small body is pressed against my back, soft arms gripping at my neck. She wraps her legs around my waist and I try my best to ignore the thought that her cunt is pressed to my back. I can feel the hot warmth of it, even through the

additional coverage she has there.

I drag my thoughts away from this as it is not the time. My hands hook under her thighs instinctively and I stand with her gripped firmly to me. I feel a small hand tug at my left forehorn, leading my head in that direction. I get it immediately. She wishes to lead me.

“Carry on, female. Let us go and find what you desire me to see.” I begin walking.

With only a few long strides, we are around a large rock, and into view comes strange shiny stone fragments and a large mass further ahead. She tugs at my horns, titling me towards the large form that, as we get closer, I realize is made of the same black and gray stone from the pieces around us. It looks to be a cave, but it is isolated from the mountain and is shaped angularly in an unnatural way that makes me a bit uncomfortable.

Cautiously, I slow my steps. “What is this?”

She does not answer me, instead my female makes a sound of encouragement and tips my head forward. I do not move and her small finger begins insistently pointing next to my face towards the opening of the cave. I hesitate, but she starts scrambling to get down, so I move forward as asked.

As I approach, I see a lopsided covering over the front of the cave. She pushes me forward and I move inside against my better judgment. The inside of the peculiar stone cave is a sight that nearly makes me choke in astonishment. Hanging from the ceiling are long curling ropes with frayed edges, some in colors I have not seen before. The floors and walls are all made of the same smooth gray rock and half of the ceiling is missing.

But, what pulls me up short are the large eggs leaning against all three walls of the

stone cave. At least, I think they are eggs. They are smoothed and polished to perfect ovoids, and the shiny gray surface is made of a material I have never seen before.

Sedona encourages me forward, and I realize that the shape of them is not the most astounding thing by a long shot. No, what truly takes my breath away is that in seven pods there are other females just like Sedona. Well, not just like. My Sedona has a beautiful coloring and hair that is unique, but they are all clearly of the same people.

I see that there is an eighth egg that is open. I stare in awe. This must be where my Sedona hatched from. My mind spins. She fell from the sky, I saw it.

Is she a child of the Great Mother? Is this what the people of the heavens look like? If so, have I truly been so blessed and gifted as to mate a Great Child? I vow in this moment that I will protect my Sedona with everything that is in me. I will never give the Great Mother cause to regret gifting me with something so precious.

My heart aches with the need to ensure her safety and comfort. I must set to work immediately. I set Sedona on her feet and gesture for her to sit. She does not understand at first, but I pull off my waist wrap and spread it on the ground, then continue gesturing. After this, she understands what I intend and she does as told, sitting with her legs folded under her.

I am down to just my pants and my foot coverings, but I can stand the cold for some period of time before it becomes dangerous. The only lieq who really need to be covered at all times are the kits as even with their fur, they have not learned to regulate their body temperature. Regardless, I would suffer any amount of cold for my mate's comfort.

Speaking of, I look around the strange cave. I will make this place comfortable for her, and it will be so before the second eye leaves its partner in the sky. Leaving my mate in the safety of her sky cave, I jog back for my pack. The provisions I need are

in there. When I make my way back, Sedona still sits where I left her and I feel a fierce sense of satisfaction that she did as I asked.

My first task must be ensuring that she is well-fed and watered. I have provided her warmth with my furs, for now at least. I will work to make coverings of her own eventually, but for now, I need to focus on the immediate needs.

I come to a stop in front of Sedona and drop to my knees before her. Fishing through my pack, I finally find my wrap of dried meat and mala. I shift to a sitting position and break off a piece of oftii meat. I wrap the meat in a torn piece of mala and pass it to her.

She tries to resist saying, “No hung-ree,” over and over. But, I give her a warning growl. I do not mean to, but it slips out before I can catch it. Her eyes widen at the sound, but I am relieved that I do not scent any additional fear.

She hesitantly takes the food from me and gives it a sniff. She looks at me for reassurance before she takes a bite. Her mouth moves so fascinatingly as she chews and I momentarily lose myself in movement. When she swallows, I watch her throat bob and feel my cock stiffen.

The bond connection is strong. The elders did not lie, it is as if everything she does is meant to draw me in. Though, I have to believe I would be drawn to her without the bond. She’s absolutely enchanting.

Once I am content with the amount Sedona has eaten, I leave her with the small water skin I leave strapped to my body. My body heat prevents it from freezing in the Atiqarii weather. With the water skin in her hands and the thought of heat in mind, I set about with my most important task. I need to fix whatever covering my mate managed to throw together. I am very proud of the work she did to survive, but I am here now.

I will make things right for her.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:54 am

- sedona -

Kuvier is...something.

I don't know exactly what yet, but he's something. So far, he's proven to be generous; he's given me the literal clothes off his back. He's been protective, refusing to let me walk in the snow with my terrible footwear. He's fed me, given me water, and now he's fixing the mess of a shelter I constructed.

But, he's also proven to be very interested in me. I'm no virgin, so I can tell what the looks he throws my way mean and I've caught a tent in his pants more than once. At the same time, he's done absolutely nothing inappropriate. Everything he has done, besides the koala hug, has felt like it was done for my well-being.

Now, granted, he has found every reason to give me light touches. Brushes of the hand when he passes things to me, patting my head as he passes, trailing his fingers up my arms when he sits near me. But, again, nothing too concerning.

A little crush when it comes with a lot of help is something I can honestly handle. It's not like it's a feat to be fawned over. I've done absolutely nothing since he came. That's not from my lack of trying, but every time I'd try to indicate with mimes and words that I wanted to help, he would tell me no in that gravelly voice of his.

That was a word he picked up quickly, along with 'hungry.' I'd said both when he'd first offered me food because I'd been worried about it agreeing with me.

"No hungry."

I'd repeated it several times, but his growl of displeasure had been enough to encourage me to eat. It had also done some unexpected things to my insides, but I was choosing to pretend that didn't happen.

I've picked up a few words of my own. I now know that the dried meat is "off-tee," and the flatbread he gave me with it is called "mala." Both of them turned out to be surprisingly good. The meat is strange—dried, chewy, with a taste that's hard to describe—but it is oddly tender. The spices are a little stronger than I am used to, and the flavor profile is woodsy and gamey, somewhere between the taste of deer and bison. The bread has a slightly sweet and nutty taste. Overall, it was rather yummy.

One bad thing about having nothing to do is that it gives me the time to think about the others. I can't help but second-guess if I'm making the right choice. Now that I am not freezing, starving, and alone, I start to wonder if it's right to leave the others in their pods.

But at the same time, how much help can Kuvier provide? Yes, he can help us survive on this planet, but I know everyone is going to be looking to find a way off of this planet. Between the Stone Age tools and the trashed ship tech, I don't see that happening. Plus, Kuvier is one person, how could I expect him to provide for eight women alone?

Plus, I have a feeling that once they wake up, coming to terms with the fact that this is where we've ended up won't be easy and I don't think it's a reversible decision either. I highly doubt the remaining tech in the pods and crate can sustain someone going back under stasis safely. So, I'd be essentially making a life altering decision for all of them. It's a lot to consider, and it's overwhelming to think about for one person.

I heave a sigh and try to push my thoughts away. Instead, I turn my eyes to Kuvier. He's moving about with purpose, efficient and deliberate, sinewy muscles flexing

under the strain of his work. In the time since he had me sit down, he's already made improvements to everything. He pulled down whatever contraption I'd built over the door. The awning he's put up instead hangs over the doorway of the crate, flapping lightly in the wind. It's the perfect cover for the large fire pit he's working to build out of natural stones he'd found on one of his many short trips outside.

He disappears for just a few minutes at a time, as if he doesn't want to leave me alone for long. He always comes back with something new in his hand, and always makes a stop with me to see if I need anything. He'll ask me, "Hungry? Water? Cold?" The words he'd focused the hardest on learning. Well, other than my name.

I watch Kuvier closely, noting how his strong, clawed hands move deftly to arrange the kindling within the circle of stones. He uses a reed-like straw that's bright red in color as kindling, and I can't help but wonder if whatever plant those come from is why so many things are red around here. When he finally lights the fire, a warm glow fills the space, casting comforting shadows on the crate's walls.

As another sun sets, we're officially down to the last one, and I feel a twinge of anxiety. This is only my second night on this planet. The first was uneventful, but there's another person to contend with now. I wonder how Kuvier will act under the guise of darkness. Will he try anything?

But, after a quiet dinner, Kuvier surprises me. He moves around me, a bundle of furs in his hand. He takes his time setting up a comfortable space close to the pods. He gestures for me, and I realize that he wants me to lie down. I also note that he's only built a space for one. He gives me an encouraging smile, so I stand and move over to the bedding space. Lying down on it, I'm amazed to feel it's actually rather padded and soft. He takes the cloak and blanket from me. Once I lay back, he drapes them both over me and I am instantly warm and cozy.

With another tender look, he asks, "Hungry?"

I shake my head and say, for good measure, “No, I’m not hungry, I’m not thirsty for water, and I’m not cold. I’m warm.” I wiggle in my space to show him I’m content. Satisfied, he gives a grunt and then he moves to sit by the fire, his back to me, clearly intending to keep watch.

I lie there, wrapped in the furs he’s provided, feeling their warmth seep into my bones. They have an earthy smell that is distinctly him. It’s an odd mix of what smells like rosemary and pine, and it’s weirdly comforting. Kuvier’s figure is a silhouette against the fire and the dim setting light, the broad slope of his back a reassuring sight. He seems to take his self-appointed role as protector very seriously.

Despite the strangeness of our situation, there’s something about Kuvier that makes me feel secure. I shouldn’t feel as safe as I do, not after everything that’s happened, but his presence has a calming effect. It’s like an unspoken assurance that things will be okay. Maybe it’s the way he looks at me with those deep, expressive eyes, or the gentle touch of his hands when he helps me with simple tasks. Whatever it is, it’s enough to let me close my eyes and drift off to sleep.

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- kuvier-

It does not take Sedona long to fall asleep. Within moments of leaving her to lie down, I hear her heart rate slow and her breathing even. I knew that she may feel worried about the sleeping arrangements; I noticed the surreptitious glances she would throw at the sky and me.

But, I have had every intention of sitting watch from the moment I smelled her scent and felt the mate bond fall into place. With the night falling and our closeness to the Blood Mountains, I worry over a stray zuhvit. So, I plan to sit and watch until the first eye has a companion.

As I sit, I cannot help but glance back at Sedona often. My eyes are continuously drawn back to her sleeping form as if not of my own volition. I feel this constant need to have eyes on her, to know where she is, and to see for myself that she is whole and safe. It is why I could hardly bring myself to be away from her for more than a few moments.

My mind drags me down as I think about what this will mean for my atan and village. With eight new females, this is still not enough for the number of single males. There will be hysteria when they learn that mate bonds have returned, not to mention that the females do not seem to experience the mate bonds. The elders describe the bond, when it's felt between two people, as undeniable. It required satisfaction immediately and both parties were happy to satisfy it.

Sedona seems to respond to me instinctually, but it is not with the intensity that mirrors what I feel for her. Instead, it presents as a natural ease around me, and a

subtle desire to touch me. I do not know if she realizes she does it, but every chance she has she touches me. She's asked several times to be carried about to see outside or see the awning. Every time she finds herself on my back, she ends up stroking at the base of my horns or in the middle of my forehead where I know I am soft. There is only one softer place, but I do not imagine she will stroke that any time soon.

Regardless, her actions prove she feels the bond, but not the same, and that creates a problem. I cannot possibly bring her back to the clan before we have completed the bond and I have claimed her. It is too risky otherwise. I cannot chance someone trying to usurp my claim.

I frown and glance back at her again.

No, I will not take her back until I have marked her. When she has taken me as her own and bears my mark with pride, I will bring her and the other females, if they have hatched, back in triumph. Perhaps this will be the thing that finally atones for the sins of my father.

I spend the rest of my time keeping watch thinking about how I must go about winning the heart of my mate. The Great Mother has gifted me her soul in bonding me to her. But only my Sedona can grant me her heart and her body.

When the second sun begins to rise in the sky, I gather additional snow in my water pouch and hang it over the fire so it will be ready for Sedona when she awakens. And then, I lay down and finally allow myself to sleep.

It feels like no time at all before I am waking to the sounds of stirring outside of the crate. I blink my eyes open and sit up when I see Sedona is standing just outside, wrapped in my furs, and looking at the sky with a hand shielding her eyes.

"Sedona," I call, getting to my feet. She looks at me and then points to the sky a

string of words falling out of her mouth. Curious, I move to stand next to her and cock my head curiously.

She says her words again, saying the word 'dahk' over and over. I give her a dejected look and shake my head indicating I do not understand. She huffs and then looks from the sky to me again. Finally she crooks her finger at me and I lean down closer. She points up, directly at the Mother's eyes and then looks at me intensely before covering my eyes with her hands. She does this a few times and for a second I am still lacking understanding, but then I get it.

She wanders about the dark season. I shake my head, "The dark season is coming, my mate, but not for several more hands of days yet."

She looks at me with surprise and looks at the sky again. She looks back at me and says something that sounds like, "Fuhken aylee-in plahnits." Then, she walks around me and back in the sky cave. I follow at her heels as she mutters to herself still. She says something else, rubbing at her braided mane, a frown painting her face.

"I do not understand," I state, folding myself at the fire.

Though large, the sky cave is not tall enough to allow me to stand to full height comfortably. My body is still stiff from the hard stone of her cave and I stretch out my limbs as I watch her. Her eyes flitter between my face and my abdomen, and an emotion I cannot quite pick out flashes over her.

She clears her throat, averting her eyes and the tips of her ears turn a deep, ruddy color. When she looks back at me, her eyes are firmly fixed to my face. She repeats her words, pointing to her mane. It is only when she makes a combing motion that I understand her meaning. She wishes to comb her mane. I frown as I realize that is something I cannot give her. My grooming kit made of carved bone is in my hut with my mother. As I had packed to go, I had thought to myself, what is the point of taking

it on a hunt? Such foolery.

I open my mouth to tell her as such when a thought occurs to me. My body grows warm at my own thoughts, but I question if she will allow me to do what I wish. I suppose there is only one way to find out. Grabbing the pouch of now warmed water from its tripod over the fire, I toss an additional vifer into the flames, to ensure that Sedona remains warm. Then, I fold my body back to the ground and tuck my legs inward, crossing them underneath me, turn to her, and expectantly pat the ground in front of me.

I can visibly see her weighing her options and I wait with bated breath, hoping beyond hope that she will let me care for her in this way. It feels like a celebration when she hesitantly moves towards me, sitting herself in front of my crossed legs with her back to me. My face breaks with my smile and I am glad she faces away from me and cannot see my giddiness.

Sedona's mane is coarsely curled in her braid and stops at her shoulder blades. It is beautiful, a darker brown than the mane of any Lieq I have known. At the base of her head and at bottom of her braid are long black strips of...leather? I gently pull the bottom one off and realize with astoundment that it is stretchy and feels nothing like any fur or leather I have seen before. It is also not a strip, but rather a circle. I slide the second one off of her thick braid.

I set both ties aside, fascinated but unwilling to wait any longer to touch her mane. My clawed fingers work at carefully unraveling her braid, and as I do her natural scent floods the air around me. It takes a great deal of effort not to bury my face in her mane just to smell her. Something tells me that my Sedona would scurry away if I did that, so instead, I focus on the task in front of me.

Working her hair out of the braid is fairly easy, but detangling the individual coils with my claws requires water and a gentle touch. Yet, I do it with care and soon her

hair is damp and hanging around her shoulders. When I have finished detangling, I tell her so and she crawls away from me, taking a seat to the side of me.

“Thank you,” she mumbles sheepishly, avoiding my gaze. I barely hear her words.

She is more beautiful than anything I have seen in my thirty-three seasons. With her mane a halo of curls around her, a slight red tint to her cheeks, and the fire flickering shadows across her features, I feel that I am looking upon something magic. She puts her hands to her head and begins running her fingers through her mane. My hands inadvertently reach out and stroke at the curls closest to her face.

I hear her breath hitch and her eyes find my eyes. Neither of us moves for a long moment, my hand still embedded in the coils on her head. Too soon, Sedona is the one to break the spell, giving a little cough and pointing at the ties beside me. I blink away my distraction and give it to her.

She sets them next to her and for the next while, she splits and braids at her hair. My eyes never leave her as I watch her fingers flit, tucking and twirling until she has several smaller braids against her scalp. She doesn't braid all the way down, her hands smoothing over the braids and gathering the loose curls into a ponytail at the base of her neck. She ties it off and then does one more larger braid with the leftover curly tail. And when she finally finishes, I miss the unruly wildness of her hair, but she looks gorgeous with it tamed and braided down.

Braids are sacred to my people and Lieq females only braid their manes for celebrations, such as mating feasts and birth celebrations. During those times, they braid in bone beads dyed and colored with the vibrant, resilient plants that grow along the mountains. Lieq braids are far more intricate during these times, and yet, I have never seen a Lieq female look as ethereal as my Sedona does in this moment.

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- sedona -

Kuvier is nowhere to be seen. The fire isn't something that stays alive on its own in this cold though, so when I see it still blazing, I know he didn't leave too long ago. I stretch and pull myself up from the makeshift bed.

It's been a couple of days now since he saved me, and I've gotten oddly comfortable with him. Too comfortable, maybe. But there's something else, too. A weird, almost homey feeling when I think of Kuvier. I tell myself it's just a crush, a result of him being the only thing standing between me and certain death. Like some kind of Stockholm Syndrome, except he didn't do the kidnapping, but whatever.

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. Focus, Sedona. You need to figure out where Kuvier went. My stomach grumbles, and I realize I'm starving. Maybe he went to get food. We'd seemed low on the dried jerky he'd brought.

I wrap his cloak tightly around me. It's lost the scent of him, and I have to pretend that doesn't make me sad. I walk out from under the awning and peep into the endless snowscape. The air is crisp and cold as my eyes scan my surroundings. The sky is lit up—something I've learned does not change on this planet that apparently never experiences dark. With the suns reflecting against the snow, it's hard to see much of anything, but I definitely don't see a Kuvier-shaped form, so I head back in to sit by the fire.

I sit for maybe a few minutes before boredom gets the better of me. A brilliant thought crosses my mind. This would be the perfect time to wash up and feel more presentable. If there is one thing my mother ingrained in me as a child, it's that if you

look good, you'll feel good. Right now, I really don't look good.

I spot the water pouch Kuvier left and decide to heat some up to pseudo-bathe. It takes some time, but soon enough, I have enough water for a bird bath and a relatively clean strip pulled off of my shirt to use as a washcloth. There's no soap, but this will have to do.

Tossing a few extra red reeds into the fire, I strip down to my raggedy bra and underwear, cringing as I realize that I don't recognize these clothes, definitely something those mantis aliens gave me. I try not to think about how they must've seen me naked to dress me in these, and instead I focus on the task at hand, dipping the pseudo washcloth into the lukewarm water.

I'm bent over, shivering only slightly, trying to use sheer force of will to exfoliate my ashy legs, when I hear a rustle and a sharp intake of breath behind me. Kuvier. Shit.

Snapping upright, I turn slightly, about to say something casual like, "Hey, I'm just finishing up," but the words die in my throat when I see his face.

He's standing there, his eyes fixed on me with an intensity that sends a shiver down my spine. I freeze, suddenly hyper-aware of how exposed I am in just my bra and underwear. I curse silently at myself for not being more careful, and for not noticing his approach sooner.

For a moment, neither of us move. Part of me itches to cover myself. But a different, brazen part of me wins out, and I bask under his observation. His gaze flickers from my face, down my body and back up again, and I see something primal and hungry in his eyes. My cheeks flush with embarrassment, and something else—fear? Desire? I'm not sure.

Before I can say anything, he turns abruptly and stalks away, his shoulders tense and

stiff. I let out a shaky breath, feeling a mix of relief and disappointment. What was that?

I quickly finish washing up and scramble to get dressed. Once clothed, I wrap the furs back around me, my heart still racing. I wait for only a few minutes to see if he will come back, but then decide to go see if he's out there somewhere.

I take a deep breath and step outside cautiously, scanning the rocky terrain for any sign of Kuvier. Moving further into the outside, I finally spot him slightly behind me. There he is, sitting against the crate in the snow, focused on skinning some small creature that looks like a bizarre cross between a meerkat and a gopher. My cheeks burn with embarrassment as I approach him, trying to muster up the courage to speak.

"Hey, Kuvier," I say tentatively, trying to keep my voice casual. "Go back? Inside? It's cold out here." I know it's a mix of words he knows and ones he might not, but he gets the gist. His expression is unreadable for a moment as he stands without a word or a look at me and leads the way back into the warmth of our makeshift shelter.

Once inside, I fidget nervously, not sure how to address what just happened. I haven't taught him apologies yet, so I don't think he'd understand mine. But, it feels so weird, this tension between us. I don't like it.

Kuvier cuts off my thinking, when he suddenly invades my space, his warmth infiltrating every exposed sliver of skin. I have to tip my head almost fully back to look at him, but his eyes lock onto mine with an intensity that sends a jolt through me. He takes another step closer until we are flush, chest to chest, and my breath is shaky in my lungs.

Slowly, almost reverently, he raises a clawed hand and runs it lightly along the curve of my jawline, down the slope of my neck, tracing the lines of my body with a feather-light touch. Every nerve in my body lights up at his touch, a tingling sensation

spreading through me like wildfire. His nostrils flare slightly and a growl rumbles through his chest as his lids fall closed. His hands shift to grip me, one cupping my throat and one digging into my waist. His eyes are still closed and I stare up at him, wondering if he'll kiss. Wondering if I want him to. And then, too soon, he steps back, breaking the charged moment between us.

As he moves away, I can't shake the thought I absolutely wanted him to.

- kuvier -

My female is determined to break my resolve.

She is determined to see me weak at the knees and begging for her to let me take her. This is the only thing I can think of to explain her actions earlier this day. What else would have encouraged her to strip down to the tiniest scraps of clothing I have ever seen and douse herself in water under the flickering light of a fire? What else could possibly convince her to allow me to walk up to the sight of her pert ass in the air, bent at the waist with her slit clothed by the most see-through, useless covering I have ever seen? I can still see the faint glow of the fire reflecting off her cocoa brown skin as she rubbed the yellow cloth over herself. Bare, vulnerable, and so delectably tempting.

I am not above begging.

I glance over at Sedona discreetly, my gaze lingering on her silhouette. She is huddled in her furs, her face turned away from me. Not for the first time, I wish I could close the distance between us. We had slipped into a sort of comfortable routine, and it seems that our exchange this morning has broken that delicate peace. I reluctantly look away.

Focusing on the task at hand, I carefully use my knife to push around the bits of chopped meat on the flat stone. The *xiixii* I hunted and skinned earlier cooks slowly. It is the first fresh meat I have gotten us. I realized last night that with two people eating, I would run out of my rations sooner than I would like. I had set off to lay traps near our sky cave early this morning. The *xiixii* had just happened to stumble

across my path.

Unlucky for it, but quite lucky for us.

Against my better judgment, my eyes swing around and find Sedona again. This time, she is staring at me, her eyes cautious but curious. Her gaze snaps away from me and I miss her attention immediately.

Great Mother, give me strength.

I will have to work hard to regain the ease she had developed with me. It will be hard to pretend as though the sight of her undressed is not burned into my mind's eyes. It will be harder to pretend that everything in me had not needed to be held back from crossing that distance this morning, pushing that thin strip of cloth to the side, and sinking myself in her tight warmth.

With how thin that strip was, I know that I could rend them away with a single claw. My hands grip at my knees tightly. One twist of my thumb and she'd have been naked to me completely. I cannot help but wonder how her most sensitive places would look bared to my eyes.

I have not taken a female of my own, though I've had opportunities. Despite craving that physical touch, I never could convince myself to take the females that had offered themselves in my youth. I had no desire to be a dirty sin sought in secret, but never claimed under the eyes of others. I was not foolish and I knew that not one of them would ever become my mate. I was simply meant to be a body, a taboo experience to be forgotten after finding their true matches.

Despite this however, my clan is not shy about matings. I have often heard the sounds in passing and have walked upon new couples copulating in supply huts. If not for the snow, there would be no concerns for modesty and most would forgo clothing

altogether. But, I have a feeling that my Sedona's customs are different. She wears many layers and I know from how thin some are that it cannot be just about staying warm.

She will be the first female that I will take, and if I ever wish to bring that into reality, I have to obey her boundaries. So, I ignore my baser instincts. Especially the ones that scream at me to caress her, to lick and suck her until she writhes and screams for me. I have to do my best not to imagine rutting her and filling her with my kits. To do this, to maintain my composure, I must stay in my own space until the bond stops pushing so hard, even if it pains me.

I am jolted out of my thoughts by sounds of distress from Sedona. I look away from my cooking towards her and she is pacing in front of the large eggs.

They do not all glow green as they had before. Now, one glows a bright yellow, and it appears that this is the egg that causes my mate unease. I rise from my spot and head over to her.

She turns at my approach and gives me a distraught look. Then, she begins talking to herself again, a habit I am finding my female does often. I understand nothing, but do hear this strange word "pod" over and over again. I wonder what is this pod that she speaks of. Though I do not know, whatever it is she desires I will do it. She paces back and forth for a moment, and I happily watch my mate speak and gesture with herself. Coming to a decision, I suppose, Sedona turns back to me and begins talking at me, making wide slow gestures.

"Wun uv dee pee-pill layk mee en dee pods iz waken up."

I shake my head at her, "I do not understand your words, sweet female."

She throws her hands up in frustration before she says something that sounds like

‘fuk eet.’ She presses her face against the top of the reflective surface before she jerks back when the egg makes a sound. I startle and mutter a curse followed swiftly by a prayer. But, my mate is fixated so intently on the egg that I hesitate to intervene. Suddenly, the flashing yellow light turns red.

Running her hands over her hair nervously, she looks back at me and then to the egg again. She sighs deeply before she reaches out to the egg, her fingers skimming over the sides of the thing. There is a click and then it makes a loud hissing sound.

I spring into action, pulling Sedona away from the hissing, smoking thing. I grip her to my chest and move several feet back. But my mate’s eyes are trained steadily on the strange egg. A moment later, I nearly choke on my spit as the door swings open and another female hatches from the egg.

“Wat dee fuk iz dat?”

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- sedona -

“What the fuck is that?” Renata scrambles back, pressing herself against the far side of the pod, her eyes trained fearfully on Kuvier. Her voice trembles, and I can see the panic setting in.

So, Renata’s wake up is going well.

“Renata, it’s okay,” I say quickly, stepping out of Kuvier’s arms and between them. “This is Kuvier. He’s... he’s not going to hurt us.” I can’t think of exactly what he is. A friend? Our rescuer? I don’t know, but based on the looks he gives me, I feel like his answer would be less PG than mine.

Kuvier stays still, his imposing figure casting a long shadow in the dim light. His goat-lion features, with those intense eyes and powerful build, would be intimidating to anyone waking up in a strange place. But I know he means well. He’s been nothing but protective since the crash.

Renata’s eyes dart between Kuvier and me. “Are you sure? How do you know we can trust him?”

“I know it’s a lot to take in,” I soothe, trying to keep my voice calm and reassuring. “But he saved me from freezing to death, and he’s helped me to survive while I’ve been trying to figure out what to do next.”

She takes a deep breath, her eyes still locked on Kuvier. Slowly, she nods, though the tension in her body doesn’t fully ease. “Alright, if you trust him, I’ll try to trust him,

too.”

“We need the help, you have no idea.” My words just vomit out between us. “We crashed. I don’t know where we are, just that we are in a valley, and it’s damn cold. You and I need to figure out what the fuck to do, and there’s no way we can do it without him.”

Renata stares at me for a long moment before she climbs out of the pod, still wary but no longer outright fearful. Kuvier steps back, giving her space.

“Okay,” she finally croaks, as she awkwardly side steps around Kuvier and closer to the exit. “I missed most of that. Give me the skinny.”

I gesture as I talk. “Ship. Crash. Planet. Frozen. Wake others?”

Her ebony face breaks into a wry smile. “Thanks, perfect, and hell no. My vote is the same as it was before. If we are all going to die, might as well let them die peacefully.”

“Okay, but we might not all die.” I crook a thumb at Kuvier and say, “He’s been pretty good about doing things that will keep me alive.”

“Yeah, but how do we know it’s for a good reason?” It’s a good point, one I’d thought of myself already. While most of Kuvier’s actions have been nice, he does have a hunger in his eyes that I don’t think equates to him wanting to eat me. Not literally anyway. But, despite knowing that all of his intentions aren’t platonic, something makes me confident that they are all good.

“Fair, but what choice do we have otherwise? You haven’t seen outside yet.” I wave my hand in a ‘go ahead’ motion, encouraging her to check out our situation for herself. Cautiously, she walks out of the storage unit and passes the makeshift shelter

and fire pit Kuvier put together.

Renata's eyes widen as she takes in our surroundings, the cold, harsh landscape of the frozen tundra that stretches out before us. "What in the..."

She looks back at me with vulnerable eyes, her gaze darting between Kuvier and me as she realizes that we may actually be all out of other options. Either we trust him, or we...die.

"After the crash, I woke up first. Everything was in pieces, and it was clear we were stranded." I swallow thickly. "I don't know where the main pieces of the ship crashed, but I scavenged in the debris around here and found nearly nothing. There was no way to make fire and there were no plants as far as I could see."

Renata pauses, processing the information. "And Kuvier? How did he come into the picture?"

"Well, I found a flare gun while scavenging and shot it off. That's when Kuvier found me," I explain. "At first, I was terrified, but he didn't attack or anything. He's been helping me."

Renata glances at Kuvier, who's watching us with those intense, unreadable eyes. "How have you been able to communicate with him?"

I shrug my shoulders. "It hasn't been easy. He doesn't speak our language. We've been miming things to each other and learning a few words here and there."

Renata raises an eyebrow. "Yeah, that sounds like a conversation full of clarity."

"It's not the best, but he's helpful. We've managed to get by so far."

She sighs, looking back at Kuvier with a mix of curiosity and apprehension. “Alright. If he’s willing to help, then we’ll make it work. We don’t have much of a choice, do we?”

“No,” I say, feeling dejected, “we don’t.”

We walk back under the awning of the shelter and have a seat near the fire. Kuvier hangs back, close to me but clearly trying to give Renata some space. I can’t help but give him a small smile, one that he returns. I notice that he’s started keeping his mouth closed when he smiles again. I almost wish he wouldn’t; I’ve grown to like his feral smile and the glimpse I get of those double canines.

I settle, holding my hands out to the fire and she does the same. I look at Renata and realize that while I’m covered in fur, she is still freezing in her yellow outfit. Both blankets have been monopolized for the awning.

“Shit, you’ve got to be freezing. Do you want to see if he has another cloak?” She hesitates for a moment. “It’s super warm.” That decides it and she gives a quick nod of her head.

Looking over at Kuvier, I frown on purpose. He perks up, as if immediately looking for a way to make me happy again. After a few gestures to my cloak and her, I say, “She’s cold.” He understands what I’m asking, but gives a shake of his head. He doesn’t have any more.

I make a move to take my cloak off, but freeze when I hear a growl come from him. One hand already over my head, I peak out between the layers and see him shake his head. I make a move to keep going and he growls again, flashing his teeth in warning this time. Funnily enough, I’m not scared at all. In fact, I’m the very opposite of scared. Part of me wants to play, just to see what happens if I keep going, but when I glance at Renata she looks terrified. So, instead, I choose to be a good leader.

With an easy, albeit faked laugh, I pull the cloak back down. “Well, I guess he’s determined I will have to keep it.”

“That’s fine,” she squeaks. “No need to make him upset.”

“Don’t stress. I promise he’s not actually angry.” I give her a comforting pat and don’t bother explaining how I know. He’s growled at me a few times now, always when I try to do something that will put me in harm’s way or make me uncomfortable. But, those growls were more stern than these playful warnings, and part of me wishes that Renata hadn’t woken up after all. I want the privacy to keep exploring Kuvier’s more playful side.

“Actually, duh, you can have the furs I used to sleep.” I get them for her, despite the fact that Kuvier’s lips turn down at the sight of me deconstructing my sleeping area, but soon she’s draped in multiple large scraps of fur.

I look back at Kuvier as I sit back down and see him looking between Renata and I with a pondering frown. He makes eye contact with me and his gaze softens for a moment before he goes right back to looking concerned. Not for the first time, and probably not for the last, I wish we spoke the same language.

Renata's eyes narrow thoughtfully as she takes in our surroundings, avidly avoiding looking at Kuvier. “So, what's the plan, Sedona? What do we do now?”

“Honestly, I don't know yet. It's been hard to think beyond the present moment. But...I have to tell you truthfully, I worry there might be no way home.”

“Why?”

I gesture to Kuvier, indicating his rugged appearance and primitive attire. “Look at him. He looks like he’s from the Stone Age. If his people are all like him, they most

likely will not have the technology we need to get back to Earth.”

A sinking expression appears on her face as realization dawns on her. “I see what you’re saying.”

I glance at the other stasis pods, each one containing one of our sleeping companions. “What about the others? Are you sure we shouldn’t wake them? You know Sabrina will be pissed.”

Renata considers this for a moment, then shakes her head. “Not yet. We need to get a handle on things first. It wouldn’t be fair to wake them up to this mess. Sabrina will be mad as hell when she wakes up, but it’s better than waking her up now when we don’t have a plan and we’d all just be scrambling around.”

“Okay, so we focus on the big things. We need to get some better clothing for you.”

Renata looks around, her gaze sharp and assessing. “We should also try to learn more about Kuvier and his people. If he has any kind of community, they might have resources or knowledge that can help us. And, we need to suss out if they are all as...friendly as he is.”

“Good point,” I agree.

“Alright, can we start with the food part of this whole thing because I am starving?”

“Kuvier has that covered. Just ask him.” I try to gently encourage communication between the two, hoping that maybe it will show Renata she doesn’t have to be concerned about him.

Renata looks toward Kuvier hesitantly before she starts gesturing, trying to communicate with him. She gestures to herself, then to her mouth, mimicking eating.

Kuvier's attention, however, remains fixed on me. His eyes are flicking back to me constantly and missing most of the message she's trying to convey. When she finishes, he stares at her for a moment before he looks at me expectantly, as if I decide if he helps or not.

"He knows the words for food and hungry," I inform her, holding back a laugh at her exaggerated movements.

"Are you hungry?" Kuvier immediately asks, looking at me and me only.

Renata raises an eyebrow. "Looks like you've got an alien dude wrapped around your finger already, Sedona."

I roll my eyes, a small smile tugging at my lips. "Haha, very funny. It's not like that." But part of me can't help but hope that it is. My brain flashes back to the need in his eyes earlier when he saw me bathing.

"You ask him, then. See if he cooperates."

"We're hungry," I say, pointing between me and Renata.

Kuvier's eyes light up with understanding. "Sedona is hungry."

"Yes! Sedona," I gesture to me, then to Renata, "Renata. Both of us are hungry."

He spares Renata one quick glance and then looks back at me. "Sedona is hungry." Man, this dude has a one track mind. It's like Renata exists only as an extension of me.

He points at the fire where he'd started cooking and gives me a signal to wait. As he moves about, preparing our food, I give Sedona some drinking water. When Kuvier is

done fixing our food for us, it looks like a backwoods taco and he hands it right to me. I immediately hand it to Renata. Kuvier flashes his teeth at this before he makes another mala taco and thrusts it at me, giving me a pointed look.

“Sedona eat. Now.” I repress a giggle at his stern tone, but take a bite to appease him. I actually am pretty hungry.

I look at Renata who is still staring at her portion cautiously. “Don’t worry about it sitting well. I ate a ton already and I’m fine.”

She relaxes a bit, clearly having been worried about that. Then she bites hers with her front teeth, very gingerly, and I almost laugh out loud. But, after the first bite seems to go down well for her, her next bite is much bigger.

“I don’t know if I’m just hungry, but this is weirdly good.”

“Agreed. The meat is yummy. It’s called ‘xiixii’ and the flatbread is ‘mala.’”

“I like that a little less.” Renata declares this after she takes a bite of the flatbread separately. “It tastes like a sweet croissant but has the texture of ground corn. It’s a weird combo.”

I nod in agreement at her assessment, but I kind of like it anyway. I look at Kuvier and give him a soft smile and he preens under my gaze. Slowly he steps forward. Renata makes a small sound of distress, but doesn’t move, and I’m not focused on her anyway.

My entire attention is on Kuvier as he settles right next to me. He reaches around me and gently takes the food from both of my hands. He pulls off a piece and wraps the mala around the bite of meat. I expect him to pass it to me, but instead he holds it expectantly in front of my lips. I hesitate for a second before taking a bite.

“Well,” Renata clears her throat and I lean sheepishly away from Kuvier, “you guys have certainly gotten to know each other.”

My ears go hot but I choose not to answer, chewing slower to give me an excuse for my silence. I can’t help the pool of heat that gathers in the pit of my stomach. Kuvier’s nostrils flare, and the look he gives me is so heated it makes me nervous.

I look away shyly and carefully smooth down my cornrowed ponytail, only to be reminded of the way he had gently detangled it for me with his claws days ago. The soft scratches and tugs felt amazing, both relaxing and somehow sensual. Despite the fact that I managed to tame it, with help, I still wish that the bug aliens hadn’t taken out my protective style. Not only was that expensive as hell and took literally forever, but it also would have been nice not to worry about my hair at all for like two months. Plus, I looked hot.

My eyes flicker to Kuvier of their own volition. Not that I have anyone to look hot for while stranded on an alien planet. Right? The look on his face makes me gulp and feel even less certain of that statement.

A loud crash sounds from outside, making us humans gasp and jump. Lightning flashes across the sky and I turn my gaze right back to Kuvier, looking to him to see if I should be worried. A flicker of concern passes over his face, and I immediately feel the worry set in for me as well.

He starts looking around the ship crate we’re in, before he gets up and walks around us and the fire to step partially outside. His eyes scan the remnants of our crash and the valley we’ve found ourselves in. I can tell by the tension in his shoulders that he is not happy with his appraisal of our situation.

Several minutes later, Kuvier sets to work, his hands moving deftly as he reinforces the shelter, making it sturdier, slightly wider, and more weather-resistant. He gathers

more supplies from his pack, and soon, our small fire crackles to life, blazing larger than before, the warmth becoming almost oppressive for me underneath the already hot cloak.

Renata and I exchange glances, both of us silently wondering at his nesting. Once the fire is going strong, he takes out all of the items in his pack, sitting criss-cross just two feet from me. After a moment of sorting the items in his pack, he ends up with two small piles, one pile of food, and one pile of the red-colored reeds that I recognize as what he has been tossing in the fire. His organizing apparently done, Kuvier stands and deftly pulls a long curved scythe from somewhere in his utility belt. Renata scrambles away as he approaches us, but I oddly have no worries for my safety as this hulking, nearly seven foot alien holds the weapon, handle first, out to me. I carefully take the thing from him, and he says some words I don't understand in his language.

I shake my head, telling him that I don't understand. He sighs and then Kuvier tries to convey something to me. He points to the fire, then to himself, and then gestures outward into the distance, making sounds and saying one or two words in his language. I furrow my brow, struggling to grasp his meaning. He repeats the gestures, a hint of frustration in his eyes. Despite my best efforts, I can't quite piece together what he's trying to say.

Finally, Kuvier lets out a small huff and steps closer. He wraps me in a hug, his warmth and strength enveloping me. It takes me by surprise, but I hug him back instinctually, wrapping my arms around his wide middle, feeling a strange but welcome sense of safety in his embrace. Then, he pulls away, and without another word, Kuvier disappears into the cold, harsh landscape, leaving Renata and me staring after him in shock.

Renata nudges me gently. "Well, he was something else, wasn't he? You think he'll be back?"

I answer slowly, still feeling the warmth of his hug. “I think so. He left behind all of his rations, and furs, and those kindling reeds. He also seems determined to help us. I just wish I knew what he was trying to say.” And I’m hoping beyond measure that I’m right and he’ll come back.

“Me too,” Renata says, settling back down by the fire. “But for now, let’s take advantage of what he’s given us. We need to get through tonight.”

I sit beside her, setting the weapon down next to me. The fire’s warmth soothes my frayed nerves. As the flames dance and flicker, I can’t help but wonder where Kuvier has gone and what he plans to do next. Despite the uncertainty, I’m weirdly not as stressed about this whole thing as I should be. We might be stranded on an alien planet, but with Kuvier, we have a fighting chance.

And that’s more than I could have hoped for just a few days ago.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:54 am

- kuvier -

It did not take long after my female's distrustful companion hatched from her egg for me to realize that the females will need more than what I brought to ration on this trip. I had packed anticipating being gone no more than four blinks of the Mother's second eye. With three people—and possibly more, as I have the belief that more females will hatch soon—those rations will be gone in the blink of my eye. With three bright spots still lingering in the sky, and the crackling light of a fresh storm approaching, I know that time is of the essence.

So, despite the fact that the idea of leaving my sweet mate makes me physically wish to crawl out of my own hide, I must make haste to a nearby cache to secure the necessary supplies for us to weather this storm. I have no real concern for the other female, but I know she matters to Sedona, so I will ensure she is also cared for to please my mate.

I maintain a brisk pace, my muscles tensed and ready. The cave is many, many hands of paces away and only the last eye will likely be left in the sky by the time I reach it. All the while, I must also do my best to avoid any potential predators that may lurk in the shadows.

As I jog, my mind wanders to Sedona and I am hit in the chest with the fierce adoration I feel for her. Part of me had not believed the elders when they regaled us with stories of mate bonds and connections from ages old. It has been many generations since one of us experienced a mated pair, and to think the Great Mother has broken this bad luck with me. And what a great job she has done.

Sedona is everything I could have asked for and more. She is strong and resilient—she survived a night alone without any fire or food, a feat that in this weather is particularly admirable. Moreover, she is fiercely caring, offering her companion the clothes off her back and more food without thought or hesitation. I admire her spirit, her determination to survive against all odds. She is unlike anyone I have ever met, and I am more and more grateful every day that fate brought us together.

But now, as I race toward the distant mountains, I cannot shake the unease that gnaws at my insides. I do not like the idea of leaving Sedona alone, vulnerable to whatever dangers may lurk in the darkness. Yet, I have done all I can to ensure her safety—I have built a roaring fire to stave off predators and left her with food and protection. Plus, she has the company of the other female, whose name I did not bother to remember.

I feel that if it should come down to it, the other will be able to step in and defend my female. Where my mate is fierce in spirit, the other seems strong in body. Sedona is all soft curves, whereas the other one was built and muscular, like a much smaller, female-version of our warriors.

Many generations ago, there were tales of tribes made of vicious females. Like the others, they have since died off in the Great Snow, but I have to believe my Sedona's comrade would have fit in well with them. Though she reeked of fear, her movements were swift and assured, as if she would put up a valiant fight should I do the wrong thing. I feel confident that between my mate's fierce will and the other girl's strength, they will be fine. Still, my pace never lessens, and I push through the ache in my muscles.

It takes much time, many bounds up and down the curved natural paths of the mountain, but I finally arrive at the hunters' cave. My senses immediately alert me to the presence of another. The faint scent of smoke and the subtle rustle of movement

tell me that I am not alone. I curse to myself, Of course it is being used. Stupid male. Frowning and irritated as I should have anticipated this, I pause in my tracks. Four of our hunters, including myself, are out. That means that any one of the other three—bossy Peviik, surly Ruuq, or childish Enikk—could be in that cave. None of them would be my first choice.

Each of them would present their own set of challenges. Peviik would likely demand we return to the chief. He has always been a rule follower, even growing up together as kits. Ruuq would likely glare more than help, or he would return to the tribe alone, and then everyone would know something unusual had happened. And Enikk...despite the fact that I trained him in the ways of the hunter, and despite the fact that he has been of age for several dark seasons, he still has the mind of a child. He would be excited, too excited, and a hindrance to the haste with which I move. Regardless of the choices, I silently hope that it is Enikk. He is the lesser of evils. I pause at the entrance, my muscles tense and ready for whatever confrontation may lie ahead.

“Oy,” I call out, my voice echoing off the cavern walls as I enter. “Clansman?”

There is a moment of tense silence before a familiar voice responds. “Kuvier? What are you doing here?”

It is indeed Enikk, his tone tinged with curiosity and suspicion. “I have come to gather supplies,” I reply evenly. He nods his acquiescence and we slip into silence.

I avoid his gaze, focusing instead on the supplies stored along the walls. As I move about, he watches me closely and as my pile grows, Enikk’s curiosity is piqued.

“That is quite a lot of supplies you are taking, Kuvier. Are you planning an expedition I am not aware of?”

I continue to avoid his eyes, my hands moving quickly to collect the items. “It is nothing of concern, Enikk. Just ensuring I am well-prepared.”

His suspicion grows, and he steps closer, a playful smirk on his face. “You know, Kuvier, it is unlike you to take so much without explanation.”

He is correct. It would be odd for any hunter. Already, the provisions I have gathered in my leather pack are enough for either several blinks of an eye...or several people. And I have grabbed another pack from the stores to collect more still.

“Peace. Let us sit in it.”

Enikk makes a sound in the back of his throat before he grins widely. “Are you hiding something from me? Or...from the atan?”

This pulls me up short. I narrow my eyes at him as I assess the situation. The veiled threat in that question is not lost on me. I do not believe Enikk would actually tell the atan, but I am hesitant to allow the opportunity for him to do so.

Finally, I relent, my voice low and firm. “The supplies are for others, Enikk. But I will say no more about it, so do not waste your breath.”

Enikk’s eyes widen in surprise, and he steps back, his playful demeanor replaced by genuine curiosity. “Others? Who have you found, Kuvier? You must tell me.”

I shake my head, determined to keep Sedona to myself. Until I have marked her as my own, I will not be confident that my atan, or another, will not try to take her from me. How often have I brought a prized kill home, intending it to be for my mother, only for it to be snatched from me for ‘the good of the clan?’ How often have the choicest parts of the meat been given to others when it rightfully should have gone to me? I will not risk this happening with my Sedona, and I will become even more of

an outcast when I tear apart any who should try to take her from me. No, I must keep her and the other females a secret until she is claimed by me as I am by her.

“It is not your concern, Enikk. I will say no more about this and I suggest you pay heed and push me no further. I ask only that you keep this to yourself.”

He studies me for a moment, then nods slowly. “Very well, Kuvier. I will keep your secret. But be careful. You of all know that secrets are not well received by the clan.”

I grunt in response, and silence descends as I finish gathering all of the supplies I will need. Quickly finishing my task, I have two packs securely strapped to my front and back and a spear in one hand. I will use it as a walking stick for my journey back. I anticipate that I will be hunting for the females soon, and though this haphazard weapon crafted by another is nothing like my perfectly carved one back at the sky cave, it will do me well to have two spears handy just in case. With the supplies secured, I turn to leave, my mind already back with Sedona.

“My thanks for your silence, clansman. May the Great Mother see you.”

Enikk echoes my salutation, and I feel his eyes on me as I leave the cave entrance, but I do not turn around. I have bigger things on my mind; it has already been too long since I last saw my mate, and already I see the sky growing dimmer.

The journey back to my mate and her strange eggs will be a long one. While I was inside, the small flurries have turned to large flakes that fall from the sky, and I know I must move with additional haste, ignoring the burning in my legs and the clapping of frozen hunks of meat against my back. I have packed enough provisions to last through the storm, if it is short, even if the other females hatch. But I will plan to lay additional traps around the camp, as well as a few in the closer parts of the mountain. With any luck, a stray oftii or a small xiixii will stumble into them. I do not know how long we will be in the valley. I suppose that depends on how long until my

female allows me to mark her. So long as the storm does not grow worse, there is no indication that this is among the long storms that always appear just before the dark season begins.

So far, it seems that this will be a passing snowfall.

It is not long after leaving the cave that I hear a rustle in the bushes, and I instinctively reach for my small knife, ready to defend myself against whatever threat may be lurking in the shadows. The bushes move once again and I quickly drop my pack. Bracing myself with a knife in one hand and the spear in the other, I am prepared for a zuhvít to emerge from the shadows. To my surprise, it is Enikk who emerges, his hands raised in a gesture of peace with a grin on his face. I notice he has two packs slung across him similar to my own.

“Kuvier, old friend! It is something special to be meeting you out here, in the middle of nowhere,” Enikk says cheerfully, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

I let out a grunt, my tense muscles relaxing slightly, relieved only that he is a being with far less claws and teeth than a zuhvít. “Enikk, what are you doing?”

Enikk shrugs nonchalantly. “You said you did not wish to tell me what or who you have found. But, as a good clansman, I could not let you go off on your own, could I? You should not face any danger by yourself. No, I decided instead to allow you to show me, and to ensure your safety while I do so.”

“You forget who taught you, kit. I do not need your protection.” I am growing furious. Enikk now poses a threat to my mate and is keeping me from reaching her faster.

“Well, regardless, I want to know what you are doing.”

I narrow my eyes, wary of his intentions. “I am not doing anything, Enikk. I have told you this.”

“True, you have said that you are not. Yet you speak of someone that you have found, and you bring enough supplies for many scores of blinks. Your words and your actions do not align, my good male.”

“It is not for you to determine what aligns or does not.”

Enikk gives an answer in easy agreement. “This is true. It is for the atan to decide. But it does not seem that you wish for him to be the decider, no?” I say nothing, and Enikk’s grin widens in triumph. “Lead the way.”

“I will say this only once, Enikk. Should you pose a threat to what belongs to me or try to take it, you will regret it.” Enikk is taken aback by my harsh words. His eyes peer over me, the tense hold of my shoulders and the irritated flick of my tail, and I see the moment that he determines I am serious.

“You have my word, Kuvier. I will harm nothing and take nothing which is yours.” With a firm nod, I turn from him, grab my packs, and continue on my way.

We continue our journey in silence, the tension between us palpable. Enikk tries to engage me in conversation several times, but I remain steadfast in my refusal to divulge any information.

With two people and two packs each, it takes us some time, but when the second eye is slowly rising in the sky, the destruction of the isolated cave comes into view. I hear the breath catch in Enikk’s throat when he sees the sight before him. It was overwhelming to me as well when I first saw the pieces of shiny black stone scattered across the valley.

The snow in the valley has become much thicker by the time we finally get to the site. I surge forward, feeling as if a string draws me back to my Sedona, and Enikk keeps pace with me. The excitement in me rises and my tail thrashes back and forth as I move. It occurs to me that I should warn the females of our arrival, especially considering I am not returning alone.

“Oy! Sedona!” I call out, my voice being swallowed by the storm and powder snow. But, when I see the strange cloth Sedona gave me to make a flap begin to move, I know I am heard. Sedona and her companion emerge from the cave, slowing when they note that there are two of us. I discard my pack as I bound toward her, the smile etched into my face. Scooping her up in my arms, I give her a fierce hug, burying my head in her hair. From behind me, I hear a choked sound and then Enikk speaks with whispered fervor.

“By the Great Mother,” he murmurs, his voice filled with wonder. “Are those...females?”

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:54 am

- sedona -

The relief I feel when Kuvier finally comes back is ridiculous.

When he had disappeared, I anticipated him being gone for several minutes, maybe an hour or two at most, but he was gone the whole rest of yesterday and into what counts as night in this place. Though I'd kept my cool, as Renata and I tended to the fire, ate the rations, and discussed when or if we should wake the others, I was scrambling on the inside.

Renata and I had reworked my bedding to accommodate two, but I barely slept, still feeling alone and unsafe. I was just finally drifting off, when I heard him call for me. I am a little embarrassed to admit I woke right up. In fact, I threw my furs off of me and bounded out of the crate wearing no additional layers, not worrying if a groggy Renata followed behind me or not.

It briefly surprises me to see that he's brought someone else with him, but I am more focused on Kuvier. When he grabs me in his arms in a big bear hug, the feel of Kuvier's strong body pressed against mine is the only thing I can really think about. After several moments of him squeezing me and nuzzling into my hair, I become aware of other eyes and squirm, trying to get down.

"Too cold," he responds, gripping me tighter. I groan internally as I make eye contact with Renata over his shoulder. God, this is embarrassing.

"Please?" I plead lowly, so only he can hear me. I'm not sure if he's learned the word yet, but he recognizes the tone. He observes me for a heartbeat, before he lets my

body slide down his in a way that burns at the tip of my ears for a reason outside of embarrassment.

I step away and turn around to face his new companion, but Kuvier pulls me back until I'm standing on top of his feet, my shoes no longer touching the snow. He wraps his arm around me so I'm mostly sheltered from the cold by his body. This is far less embarrassing, so I let it happen.

I get the chance to take in the newcomer. This one is much smaller than Kuvier, though that is relative because he still appears to be over six feet and built. Their colorings are different as well. Where Kuvier has chocolate fur with small areas of white, this one is all white fur with small areas of gray mixed in. Their horns also differ. Kuvier has one pair of thick, curling horns close to his face and smaller ones sticking up like long spindles on the top of his head, but the new guy's horns are thinner, both sets sharp and upright.

I also note immediately that there is an odd tension between the two. Kuvier's posture is stiff, and he keeps glancing at his companion with what seems like a mix of irritation and caution, his arm tightening around my shoulder. The new goatman, on the other hand, appears to be more nonchalant, but the tense set to his shoulders communicates otherwise.

The next thing I notice is that they are both laden down with supplies. The new one has two packs strapped to his front and back. So did Kuvier, but he'd discarded his packs in the snow in favor of holding me. Each of the packs are stuffed with scores of supplies, hanging from the outside and shoved inside. I am not a survivalist, but the amount they brought seems like it would be enough to last us a long ass time.

A fact I am glad of because the snow has only gotten worse since he left, and I have a feeling there's an even bigger storm brewing. What started as just cracks of thunder and flashes of lighting, has given way to a fresh powdery layer of snow outside. The

weight of the fresh snow had even pulled down the blanket and fur that Kuvier had used to mend the ceiling. That had dumped snow inside that we'd had to shovel out with our hands before it melted and ruined our supplies. Now, it's just a gaping hole, and it's cold all over again.

The new guy says a string of words in his language. I recognize some, but not enough to actually understand what he's saying. Whatever it is, it pulls a warning rumble from Kuvier's chest. I tilt my head back and see that his eyes are set on the other dude, his teeth bared in a warning. Okay, so he's clearly not a fan of this dude.

I do wonder why, but I don't believe that it would be because the other one is dangerous. I just don't think that Kuvier would bring anyone around who wouldn't be safe for me, which tells me that his behavior is something else altogether.

Still, not wanting to be rude, I decide to try introducing myself again. This time staying in my spot, I look to the newcomer and say, "Hello, my name—"

Before I can even finish the introduction, Kuvier brings his lips close to the edge of my ear and growls low in his throat. It's a warning and I know it. But, the sound sends a delicious shiver through me. With that reaction, I realize that the issue here is me introducing myself, so I decide to go with a different approach. I look back at Kuvier, pointing at the new guy.

"His name?" I ask, since he's apparently picked up on the word 'name.'

Kuvier's growl turns into a resigned sigh, and he finally relents. "Enikk," he says, drawing out the long 'e' sound at the beginning.

"Enikk," I repeat, smiling warmly at Kuvier. I turn to Enikk and point to Renata first. "Renata." Enikk breathes her name out as if it is the most fascinating word in the universe. He says it slightly wrong, Reh-not-ah, defining every syllable. But it is a

similar way to Kuvier calling me 'Seh'-dona.

As soon as I say Renata's name, and before I can attempt to introduce myself again, Kuvier determines that is enough of my interaction with Enikk. He places gentle but firm hands on my shoulders and turns us back towards the shipping crate, my feet still on top of his.

We tandem walk a few steps until we're back in the shipping crate and he lets me step off his toes and straight to the snowless ground. Renata plops down next to the fire and Kuvier softly steers me to follow suit. I take a seat by her and watch as she observes the scene around her. She's only just started to brave Kuvier, and now there is another alien to consider. I can see the wheels turning in her head as she assesses the situation. Her guard is up, and I don't blame her.

Enikk, however, seems completely unfazed by Renata's wariness. It's as if he is fascinated by her, his gaze unwavering and curious. Renata notices this and narrows her eyes, clearly not appreciating the scrutiny. Enikk looks away under the heat of her glare, but I have a feeling curiosity will win out again.

As expected, his impertinent eyes are fixed on her again as he ducks under the awning and follows Kuvier further into the crate. He says something as he walks to which Kuvier grunts in response, sounding not entirely convinced.

From there, Kuvier drops to his knees beside one of his packs, unloading the supplies and setting them out in front of them. Enikk follows suit, and soon both men each have two packs unloaded with all of the supplies spread out.

There's hunks of frozen raw meat, two large bags with leather drawstrings that are full of something lumpy and roundish, ample processed furs of multiple sizes, and what appears to be a sewing kit made from bones. There's all kinds of bone tools actually, many of which have a function I don't know. As I look at the sheer amount

of supplies, it becomes clear to me that Kuvier anticipates we will be here for a while. I can't decide how that makes me feel.

As Kuvier works, I glance at Enikk and then back at Renata. "Looks like we're going to be well taken care of," I say, trying to lighten the mood. "These supplies will make a huge difference."

Renata speaks slowly, still keeping a close eye on Enikk. "We'll see," she murmurs. "I just hope we can trust him as much as Kuvier."

I give her a reassuring smile, but say nothing else.

As Kuvier fusses over the supplies, I notice his gaze lingering on the dwindling rations he left us. My cheeks flush with embarrassment as I realize just how much Renata and I have eaten in half a day's time. We were so hungry after hand-shoveling the snow from the collapsed ceiling that we had devoured the food without a second thought. I also have no idea when I last ate before Kuvier. But, regardless, I wish now that we had been more cognizant. It's clear that every piece of food takes a lot of work here and we should have rationed better.

"Sorry," I say sheepishly as I move from the fire close to Kuvier, though I know he can't understand my words. "We were just so hungry."

Kuvier glances up at me from his layout of supplies, his expression softening as he sees the embarrassment on my face. He doesn't need to understand my language to read the guilt in my eyes.

"Eat much, it is for you, ti khesi." He gives me a gentle smile and reaches into the pile of rations to hand me a piece of dried meat.

I manage a small smile in return, grateful for his understanding, and take the meat

from him. “Thank you.”

I take a bite and look at Renata to see if she’s hungry again. She’s paying us no mind, staring thoughtfully at the fire. I have a feeling she won’t stray far from the fire, especially now that the men are back. She’d barely moved even when they weren’t around. Not that I blame her. Despite the fire and efforts to cover that hole in the ceiling, the cold air still seeps in.

It’s not long until Kuvier and Enikk get started on breakfast. From behind us further into the shipping crate, Kuvier barks something in his native language to Enikk, his tone short and his face stormy. Enikk for his credit seems completely unbothered by Kuvier’s unusual surliness. I can’t help but wonder what happened between the two before they got to us. But, whatever Kuvier says is enough for Enikk to get up and leave. Renata and I exchange glances.

“Is it too much to ask that the extra goat man is leaving for good?” she mutters to me watching the space where he left. “He’s kinda creeping me out with all the staring.”

“Well, he left all of his stuff and only had a pouch so I highly doubt it,” I answer her, my tone joking.

Enikk’s staring is far less intimate than the way Kuvier stares at me. Still, Enikk is not as subtle, and in my personal opinion, Kuvier’s staring is less invasive. Kuvier stares like he thinks I’m the most valuable thing he’s ever seen. Enikk stares at Renata as if he is waiting impatiently for something to happen and he’s disappointed it hasn’t.

To Renata’s chagrin, Enikk returns moments later with additional items in his hands. He’s carrying two large slabs of stone and the leather pouch is hanging from his wrist, looking weighed down by something.

I watch as he moves over to the fire and begins setting up the pouch over the fire, letting me know that it's filled with snow to melt. He's been good about keeping some distance between him and us. I appreciate that at least he isn't forcing his way into Renata's space. Kuvier has, for the most part, also maintained respect for my personal space. And if I'm being honest, the few times he's touched me more, I haven't minded so much.

"This whole thing is still unbelievable," Renata comments, her eyes dancing uneasily to Enikk and then back to me, "and now there's two of them."

"It's definitely weird but at least Enikk seems fine enough and Kuvier has taken care of us the entire time."

"You mean you?" she says it with a laugh, but I don't chuckle along because the laugh sounded almost accusatory.

"What do you mean?"

Renata hesitates before speaking, her voice cautious. "It's just...Kuvier seems fixated on you, and only you. He wants to help me because I'm with you, but I don't think he's really interested in the well-being of anyone but you."

"I don't think that's true."

"Oh, it totally is, but it's fine. It works out for us, and besides, it couldn't be me anyway." She shrugs as if her words just make perfect sense.

"Why couldn't it be?" I keep my voice light and questioning, trying to avoid the hurt I feel building as the weight of judgment settles on my skin.

Renata scoffs. "Because, I have no 'feminine wiles.' I'm not like you, Sedona. I can't

flirt with someone like you did with Kuvier and just wrap them around my finger. It seems like that's what Enikk is looking for from me, so I need to be more cautious about him than Kuvier."

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut, and I feel a surge of hurt and frustration rise within me. Is that really how she sees me? As someone who would use her charms to manipulate others? I want to lash out, to defend myself, but I bite back the words, forcing a tight smile instead.

"Ah, I get it."

I leave it at that and let silence fall over us as the sting of Renata's words lingers. It's a stark reminder that I have more to contend with here than just surviving. When the others wake up, that's six more people to judge me for every choice I've made since I crashed and woke up.

I can't help but wonder if maybe I deserve the judgment. I could have woken them all up as soon as I saw Kuvier was safe. Instead, I flirted and enjoyed his attention, and if I'm honest, I would have kept doing that longer if Renata's pod hadn't turned yellow. Not for the first time, I wish that somebody else had woken up first. If Renata had been up by herself, we'd be way further along, and at least I'd have no one judging me for being cared for by an alien and liking it.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:54 am

- kuvier -

My mind is busy as the dusk light overtakes the white valley. The snow flurries about outside Sedona's cave as my thoughts swirl in the recesses of my mind. Enikk's appearance has thrown off all of my plans. In fact, the appearance of both Enikk and my female's companion have forced me to throw away all of the intentions I had crafted for Sedona.

I had counted on our being alone to properly court her and mate her. How am I to claim her body when you can hear and see everything in this small space? How am I to make her my own when we do not even have the time in the day to learn each other's words any longer? Still we cannot truly communicate past the most basic of needs.

I frown as I consider the setbacks I must now face. If I do not make moves soon, I will be at risk of ruining everything. Two hunters can only disappear for so long before they will send someone to look for us. The mountains are the first place they will turn to, and the valley will come soon after. I cannot risk being discovered before Sedona bears my mark.

Pondering this, I sit by the tended fire with vigilant eyes that alternate scanning the frozen scene before me and glancing back at Sedona's sleeping form. Inside the shipping crate, Sedona sleeps peacefully next to the stone eggs, huddling under the warmth of my furs. Her breaths and heart mix together in one steady and rhythmic beat. I find myself wishing that I was under the furs, warming my mate. I would like nothing more than to feel the soft curve of her body pressed against me in sleep, and yet I cannot bring myself to move from this spot.

In this place next to the fire, I sit between Enikk and my greatest gift and I cannot move an inch. The thought of Enikk stealing her away, though irrational, gnaws at my mind. Enikk has shown no particular interest in Sedona, focusing his attention more on the other female. Yet, the fear persists.

As if called by my thoughts, Enikk sits up from his place under the awning. He still fears the inside of the cave and does not venture far inside. This works perfectly, as I do not believe he has not yet figured out that the strange stone eggs hold additional females.

Enikk is not a male of bad intentions, I know this, but any male could become different in the face of females; our senses have the habit of betraying us when we see a beautiful face. If one of these girls is his mate, will he run screaming to the tribe of his great news? I cannot risk it. There is too much at stake.

“Kuvier,” Enikk begins, his voice low and measured, “I see you are troubled. What concerns you so deeply that you forsake sleep?”

I consider him, my expression guarded. “I have much to protect, Enikk. I cannot afford to be careless.”

He voices my unspoken fears. “You worry about your female.”

I resist the urge to snarl at the mention of her in his mouth. It is the mate bond, I know. It is unfulfilled, and with every moment it remains such, I grow more restless, more possessive. Whatever the Elders described is nothing compared to what the bond is truly like. It is terrifying and captivating all at once.

“I worry about a great many things that are none of your concern.” I am short with my words, but my patience is wearing thin. Enikk should not even be here; he forced his way in, and that is becoming more than a simple inconvenience.

“What are your plans with Sedona and Renata?” he asks, ever unphased by my surliness. “When do you intend to return to the clan and the atan to tell them of these females?”

The question lingers in the cold air. My eyes narrow and my tail begins to thrash against the stone ground with hollow thuds.

“I will return when I choose,” I reply firmly. “You are free to go at any time, Enikk. If you remember to keep your silence.”

“I do not wish to go anywhere, clansman.” His response is measured and calm.

“And your purpose with Sedona?” The question is heavy with my own paranoia. I am not sure that any answer will be enough to settle me, but I would like to hear from him directly.

Enikk’s expression is open and readable. “I have no intentions towards Sedona.”

I hold his stare for a long moment, weighing my options, and then I determine to take a leap of trust. Maybe knowing will help him understand how serious I am. So, I open my mouth and confess what I have not fully told him.

“She is my bonded.”

His eyes widen to the point of hilarity. “How do you know? She does not bear your mark. Have you not—”

“Watch your mouth.” The words are more growl than verbiage, but he holds up his hands in peace.

“I am just shocked.” The look on his face tells me that he is apologetic, so I allow

him to continue. “Worry not, clansman. I do not want your female. Besides, I must now see if Renata is meant for me.”

Does he not know that this is not how the bond works? Mate bonds are instant, a deep connection felt immediately upon meeting. Renata is not his by law of the Great Mother. One of the others may yet be, but he will not know until he smells her, and the eggs hide all smells. I choose not to point out his fallacy, though.

“It appears that these strange females do not feel what we feel as strongly.” My eyes connect with him. “I will not leave this place until she bears my mark and no one can contest my claim to what the Great Mother has gifted me.”

“My clansman, you need to know you have nothing to fear from me,” Enikk declares, his tone more solemn than I have ever heard. “I would certainly not interfere with what the Mother has ordained.”

I nod, accepting his assurances. His words bring a measure of relief, but still, my body remains tense, unwilling to yield to sleep. We sit in silence for several long moments before Enikk takes a swig of his water pouch and lies back on his furs, his back to me.

Speaking over his shoulder, he addresses me once more, “Rest, Kuvier. You cannot protect her if you exhaust yourself.”

This is where I believe he is wrong. For my Sedona, I can do anything. I am her protector, and I will not fail her.

With this in mind, I stay awake through the dusk. I am awake to watch the second eye begin its rise in the sky, and I am awake when Sedona stirs in her sleep. When I hear her breathing pick up, my eyes find her. She sits up and throws her arms over her head in a stretch. My mind is a filthy place as I watch her stick out her ample chest

and throw her head back. Her braided mane falls back, swinging behind her, and for a moment I imagine myself wrapping it around my hands and—

I have to discreetly adjust myself, glancing away from Sedona momentarily. The mate bond. I think to myself. I will blame my lack of control on the mate bond.

When I look back, Sedona pulls her body down from its stretch and runs a palm over her hair, trying and failing to smooth the wild tendrils already breaking out of her tight braids. Her hair grows more rumpled every moment but I find the escaped coils beautiful. I wish to see her curls undone and falling over her shoulders again.

Finally, she leans her head to one side, then the other, before her eyes search around. The corners of her mouth lift up when she catches me staring at her. Taking a moment to glance at Renata's still-sleeping form, she gingerly extracts herself from the furs and finds her way to my side. She folds herself down with less than a forearm's length between us and her smell floods my senses. I have to resist the urge to bury myself in the top of her head and just breathe in. She smells as she looks, soft and feminine, like the sweet fruit of the lycii tree.

Sedona scrutinizes me for a long moment, then she makes a gesture, placing her palms together and tucking her hands under head. It is not until she fakes a snore that I understand what she is miming.

“Did you...?” she asks the question in my language, trailing off as she realizes she doesn't remember the word she's looking for.

I supply it. “Sleep.”

“Yes, did you sleep?” Hearing the words in my language tumble out of her mouth so easily fills me with pride.

“No, I did not sleep.”

“Why?”

We do not each know enough words between our languages to describe the indepth reason, so I just answer, “For you.”

“You did not sleep for me?” I nod, confirming her questions, and her brow creases.

“Why?”

I hesitate, glancing towards Enikk, who is still snoring softly a few steps away. Sedona follows my gaze and seems to understand. Her face falls slightly, a mixture of disappointment and concern etched in her features. She does not voice her thoughts, and after several moments of silence, I decide to offer her something to eat.

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes, I am hungry,” Sedona admits, moving closer to me. I shift just a few centimeters, putting our thighs together.

I grab food off of the flat stone where I had put it earlier and finish preparing it for her. I had intended to eat it myself, but for my mate, I will give anything. I offer bites to Sedona, feeding her by hand. She does not like me to do this when the other female is awake, but I am glad she will allow me to now.

She leans forward for another bite and I hold my breath without thinking. Her lips close over the bite of food, brushing over my fingertips ever so slightly. It is enough. The contact sends an immediate thrill to my cock.

Her eyes flicker to me shyly and I try my best not to scare her with the intensity of my gaze, but, Great Mother, this female is tempting my control. With the mate bond

pushing at every nerve in my body, she is making it near impossible to keep my head steady.

Sedona eats her breakfast like this, taking each bite that I feed her and drinking gulps of water in between. It is not long before I am almost vibrating with desire. It is only the strength the Great Mother grants me that keeps me from pushing things further.

I try my best to control my thoughts so that I might have hopes of controlling my body. Instead, I focus on the other feelings. Such as the pride and satisfaction I feel in being able to feed my mate. It is I, Kuvier, who cares for her. It is I who cooked the meat and ground the mala seeds to make her bread. It is I whose hand she takes her bites from.

When Sedona finally has her last bite and holds her hands up saying, “Stop,” I am disappointed that the moment must end.

Sedona holds out her hand to me expectantly, “Food, please.” I pass her the food, curious. Maybe I misinterpreted the word ‘stop?’ But, no, she does not continue feeding herself. Instead, she begins pulling pieces apart and holding them out to me. I eat from her hands as she did from my hands, and the moment of intimacy makes my heart swell.

After we finish, Sedona makes a happy sound and pats her soft stomach. I love the sloping lines of her body, the curves and bulges are beautiful and enticing, but this action makes me think of how she will look swollen with my kit. I feel I will love to look at that even more.

Sedona taps at my arm, drawing my attention back to her. She motions towards something near the supplies, but I do not know exactly what she is indicating. She gives a cute huff and stands, tiptoeing over and grabbing the sinew-wrapped sewing kit.

She tells me she wants to do something in her tongue, but the last word stumps me. When she references the kit, I finally gather her meaning and say the word in my language.

She nods and reasks her question. “Will you help me sew?”

“Yes, my mate.” She beams at me, and I am especially glad in this moment that I listened when my mother told me that all people should learn to sew. Many of the males, the hunters and warriors, grow without ever knowing how to mend their own tunics.

The skill has never come in so handy as it does now.

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- sedona -

Kuvier stops sleeping all together in the days after Enikk joins our little encampment. It's a point of contention between us, but he refuses to fold on the issue. And really, how much can I argue when all of our conversations are like talks between two toddlers just learning to speak?

Despite the fact that he's learned many of my words and I've learned just as many if not more of his, all of our word exchanges have been surrounding what we need for survival. A conversation about jealousy and territorialism isn't going to work with what we have in our arsenal.

So, for the past several nights, he has sat by the fire staring into the open expanse. And each morning, I wake up to him unmoved, the exhaustion etched deeper into his face. I can tell it's starting to wear him down and he can only go so much longer like this before he truly crashes.

I think his reaction to Enikk is ridiculous. The guy is nice enough and barely even looks my way. I'd hoped that as Enikk's disinterest in me was made more and more clear that Kuvier would calm down on that front. But it only takes a few days for me to realize that he could go like this for a while and I decide I can't bear to watch him like this anymore. So, I devise a plan to combat this insanity.

"I wonder where Enikk and Kuvier disappear every day," I say to Renata as I sit next to her, pulling my sewing needle in and out of the hides on my lap.

I actually do know. Kuvier had managed to convey to me that they go scavenging for

things. I'm not up on the specifics, but I know at least that they always come back with those reeds for firewood or some small animal to roast over the fire.

Renata wouldn't know this, considering she's barely learned any of their language and spends most of her day using pieces of charcoal from the fire to draw on the wall. She's got quite the Sistine Chapel vibe going on over there. It's hard to tell completely, but it looks like a large forest scape.

Considering she was the one who originally suggested we do recon on this new species of being, she's doing a terrible job. In fact, much of the spirit and fire that had swarmed in her before is gone. It's almost painful to see the listlessness in her now, compared to the energy of the woman who refused to give up on a slave ship in the middle of space.

"Must be nice to get out of the crate so often," she comments with some degree of jealousy in her voice.

This is exactly what I figured she'd say. For the past two days, she'd been growing more and more antsy about being stuck in one place. After I'd gotten (mostly) over the hurt of her comment about my 'wiles' and 'seduction' of Kuvier, we'd started talking again. I'd learned she was a private investigator and a bounty hunter back on Earth. Naturally a busy body and a workaholic, sitting in a small space for so long has been slowly driving her insane.

"You know you could probably go with them." Her eyes snap to me, widening. I shrug, feigning calm as I pull the needle and thread taut.

Back on Earth, I learned to sew quilts from my great grandmother. This is harder, but similar, and while my work is way shoddier than whoever created Kuvier and Enikk's clothes, the pants I'm working on aren't terrible. I already completed a large tunic for Renata, which she wears. I'm working on items for all the girls. We've agreed to wait

to wake them up until we have enough supplies and clothing for everyone.

“As much as I am going stir crazy, I don’t know about being stuck with Enikk and Kuvier at the same time,” she rebuttals.

While she’s relaxed around them to an extent, she’s still tense whenever one of them gets too close. Maybe I should be more hesitant like her, but it is hard to keep my defenses up where Kuvier is concerned.

“I could tell Kuvier to stay,” I offer casually as if I just thought of the idea. “Enikk would probably be better company for you anyway. He’s less surly, and he hasn’t been super weird and stare-y anymore.”

“He did completely stop with the whole stalker vibe,” she concedes thoughtfully. Something shifted in Enikk. Gone are the stares and creepy following that he’d done before. What he’d been waiting so expectantly for either came and went or never happened. Whatever the case, he’s seemingly lost his special interest in Renata.

“Yeah, it would probably be easy enough to make happen, but I mean, I love having you stuck with me day in and day out.” I flash her a bright smile. “What’s another day in here, right?”

She considers it for a long moment. “Do you think you could get Kuvier to give me that big ass curved knife he gave you that one time?” I push down the satisfaction at knowing I’ve convinced her.

“Almost definitely.”

There turns out to be no ‘almost’ about it. The moment Kuvier realizes what I want,

he gives it to me and makes absolutely no comment when I promptly give it to Renata. The conversation with Kuvier about Renata taking his place on today's scavenging trip goes similarly my way. If I were a different woman, the power I seem to hold over this man would go to my head.

“Can you find out where he’s taking me?” Renata asks as she wraps her shoes in furs and ties them together with sinew string.

“Sure.” I drop the pile of furs in my arms by the fire and head out of the crate to where Kuvier and Enikk stand, heads pressed together.

“...vaktu masva khesi toh—” Enikk’s words cut off the moment they hear me approach and Kuvier is at my side in an instant. I’m disappointed that I don’t catch any words I already know. Though, I did hear that word ‘khesi’ again. I make a mental note to ask Kuvier about that another time.

“Is wrong, Sedona?” Kuvier asks in halted English.

I correct him automatically, ““Is something wrong, Sedona?””

We’ve both been great about fixing grammar in each other’s language. I think Kuvier struggles more with ours as there are more filler words than his. In his language, everything is succinct and uses as few words as possible to convey meaning.

I choose to answer him in his language, asking through some effort where Enikk and Renata will go.

“Nuku xiixii.” Trap xiixii. I scramble for a second to remember what a xiixii is, and then an image of a small meerkat like animal pops in my head.

“That’s all.” This I say in English, giving a shrug to convey meaning as well. Kuvier

presses a hand to my lower back and I fight to ignore the weight of it through his cloak.

“Go back inside?” He asks it as a question and not a command. I consider, but shake my head.

As much as I won’t admit it to anyone else if they asked, I like being near Kuvier. It’s weird and strange, and despite the fact that I’ve been in love before, the need to be near Kuvier is stronger than anything I’ve felt. But I’m not in love. That would be insane. Regardless, the fact that a goat-lion-man hybrid creature has managed to worm his way into my heart is definitely something I struggle with. But, Kuvier’s sweetness makes it an easier internal fight.

I stay out there with them for a while as they talk and sharpen weapons. It’s not much longer after that when Renata joins us, covered in furs up to her eyes and clutching the scythe like a lifeline.

I let her know the plan, and Enikk and Renata are heading out. Renata seems almost excited as she leaves. She’s clearly more at ease with a large weapon in her hand and the promise that I’ll send Kuvier after her if she isn’t back by the time the second sun sets.

Kuvier and I watch them disappear into the swirling white abyss—the snow hasn’t stopped in days. When they are out of sight, I leave his side and head back into the crate, knowing he’ll follow. He does, and stands watching me as I carefully lay out the furs a few feet from the fire. I place them close enough to feel the warmth but not too close to be overwhelmingly hot.

Stepping back, I eye my handiwork. I’ve maneuvered the furs into a larger, flatter version of the way I spread them to sleep. This’ll do.

With that, I walk over to where Kuvier sits, watching me and chewing at oftii jerky. I stop in front of him and hold out my hand expectantly. He places the jerky in it without issue and I laugh out loud shaking my head. I offer his food back to him and he eats the last bit in one bite looking at me curiously. Trying again, I hold out my hand.

“Come here,” I say in his language. He has told me that many times, so it was not hard to learn.

He places his overly large, furred hand in mine. I guess I could call it a paw? But, it’s not exactly. He has five clawed fingers, and though the palm and fingertips are rough like paw pads, the dexterity is closer to hands. Ignoring my internal debate about his anatomy, I lead him to the sleeping furs.

“Okay, you can sleep now,” I declare, gesturing to the makeshift bed determinedly.

His eyes soften and he glances longingly at the furs, but then he glances back out to the vast expanse of snow in the direction that Enikk and Renata disappeared. He shakes his head softly, refusing my request. He denies me very little, and that makes me frown deeply, thinking carefully about what to do. An idea strikes me, and a preemptive heat crawls up my neck.

But, he needs to sleep and I think the concern he has is not knowing if something happens to me. I know just how to fix that.

Don’t ask why I’m so determined to take care of him. I’ll chalk it up to being a good Samaritan in the face of all he’s done for me, even though part of me knows it’s more than that. Either way, I sit crisscross on the furs, pulling him down next to me. He mimics my sitting position, watching me curiously, his golden eyes dim with exhaustion. I tuck one of the furs in my lap and then pat it.

“Will you sleep now?”

It's a question this time. His eyes widen as he realizes what I am offering. We have been far less touchy the last few days. That's my fault, I know. I feel uncomfortable under the watchful eyes of the other two, and I've given Kuvier less opportunities and cues to touch me. In a weird way, I've almost...missed him, but he's so respectful of my space that, of course, he didn't push it.

Kuvier folds himself over, laying his head in my lap hesitantly, trying not to hurt me with his horns. He maneuvers himself until he's lying on his back, his horns nicely out of the way. His eyes find mine and they peer into me intensely. My breath catches in my throat and the desire for him to kiss me winds through my body with sudden fervor. The sheer force of it takes me by surprise and I disconnect our gaze.

I realize too late that I should've made sure I brought my sewing with me, but it's across the fire and there's no way I could reach it without waking him up. So, instead, I let myself sit and ponder my thoughts for what feels like a few hours. At first, my thoughts stay on what I need to do next to prepare to wake the others. But, despite my best efforts, it doesn't take long for those thoughts to circle right back to the male resting his head in my lap.

His eyes are closed and his breathing has evened out as his chest slowly rises and falls. A small smile touches my lips as I stare at him. He looks so peaceful when he sleeps; innocent and oddly vulnerable. His usually fierce expression is softer, making him appear almost boyish. Well, more...kittenish? Either way, it's sweet and cute and it tugs at me. I reach my hand up, hesitating for only a moment before I begin stroking his head with one finger, gliding across my favorite spot between his horns where I've learned he's ridiculously soft.

It's strange to think about it, considering everything that's happened and the long term implications of where we are, but at this moment, I feel truly ...happy. I'm

willing to admit that part of that is because I won't let myself actually think about where we are, what this means, and what I've lost forever. But, even in the face of denial and running, Kuvier makes me feel safe. If he weren't here, not only would I likely be dead, considering this environment is entirely unforgiving, but I'd also most definitely have succumbed to the panic that threatens to consume me whenever I think too hard.

Sure, I'm stranded on a frozen tundra of a planet and everything has gone to shit as far as my life is concerned, but being around Kuvier makes it easier to push aside the fear and uncertainty. After being forced into a pseudo-leadership position with the other girls and having to think my way out of a massive life or death situation, it's nice to have someone to protect me. Now that I think about it, my whole life I was always expected to save myself and everyone else too.

My mom was never around when I was young, too busy worrying about this man or that who promised her the world and delivered on none of it. Since a young age, I've had to do all the 'fending' by myself. The only time she would appear was when she needed me. Either me saving her from some man she slept with or bailing her out financially as I started getting older before I went no-contact. But, nobody has ever been that safety net for me. There's never been a chance for me to breathe and trust someone else to take care of it. Next to Kuvier though, my brain can relax, my body can calm, and I don't feel like I'm fighting just to stay afloat.

There's something incredibly comforting about his presence. The only time I don't feel isolated and lost is when he's with me. Even with Renata around, or before when all of us were facing threats together, I felt alone somehow. With him next to me, I feel like I don't have to face everything head on, like there's somebody standing between me and the big bad universe.

I do it without thinking.

Leaning down, I brush my lips gently over his. It's just a peck, barely even that, but when I pull back, my breath sticks in my chest as his golden eyes open and fixate on me. There's not an ounce of exhaustion behind that intoxicating gaze now. My mouth opens to say something, but when nothing comes out, I close it back.

Kuvier peers at me, as if considering, before an arm comes up slowly, cupping my head. He pulls me down until our lips are a breath away, and then pauses, giving me the chance to stop this. I don't.

I can't.

Instead, I move the last hair until my lips press against his, and the moment they make contact, everything else seems to disappear around us.

When our mouths connect, Kuvier seems content to leave them pressed gently together. His lips are more of a downy suede than skin-like texture, but still plush and soft. It takes a second of no movement before it occurs to me that maybe kissing isn't a thing where he's from. I hesitate for only a moment before I take over the kiss. My mouth begins to move slowly, and at first Kuvier jerks back in surprise, but then he's following my lead.

I lose myself in the moment, becoming bolder and running my tongue over his bottom lip. He lets out a breath and I take the opening, stroking my tongue in his mouth. He groans and grips my braid to pull me closer as our tongues caress each other.

He has to catch the rhythm, but the moment he does, he takes over. His hand slides down until it's pressed to my neck. The hold isn't threatening, but definitely possessive, and it sends a thrill straight through me. My fingers thread in the fur on his chest as we move in sync, tasting and teasing at each other. The feeling is indescribable. I've kissed my share of men, and some were even what I'd consider a

good kisser, but nothing touches this. Not even close.

When I finally pull away to catch my breath, my lips feel swollen and Kuvier looks at me with so much tenderness it makes my heart hurt as he rubs a gentle, clawed thumb over my bottom lip.

“Ti khesi.” I know the word ‘ti’ means possession, like my, or mine. But the second word is one I’d been meaning to ask about.

“What is ‘khesi’?” I ask the question softly, feeling somehow shy in the face of the kiss we just shared.

Kuvier closes his eyes, thoughtfully, presumably thinking about a way to explain the word. When he opens them, he presses his large hand over his heart.

“Khesi.” He gestures from his heart to me a few times and I realize that it must be like ‘love’ or something, an adoration for someone who holds your heart, maybe. It’s a big declaration, indicating that I, a woman he’s known for only a few days, holds his heart. So why does it fill me with so much warmth?

My fingers stroke at that favorite spot on his forehead as I ponder this. But, my thoughts are cut short when I hear a loud chime go off behind me. My head whips around, and Kuvier sits up just as fast.

A pod light flashes yellow. My eyes widen when, like a row of falling dominoes, the other pods flicker yellow, sounding a warning.

And then, as if seeking to make my life hell, two of them blink twice before glaring red.

“Shit.”

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- sedona -

“What the fuck?” A voice screams before their concerns are being echoed by another.

“Where am I? What the hell? Help!”

The other girls waking up is proving to be a challenge to say the least.

“Wait! It’s okay. I know this is strange, but please don’t worry, you’re safe. I promise.”

My hands are up in almost surrender as I look at the two women who have awoken first. They’re both huddled in their own pod, pressed firmly against the metal back as their eyes flick between me, Kuvier, and their surroundings with varying degrees of curiosity, fear, and confusion. I opened their pods when they flashed red, and it took a second for them both to wake up fully, but clearly they’re awake enough now.

“Who the hell are you? Where am I?” The voice comes from the mouth of a pretty Asian woman with honey-blond hair as she glares at me with distrust. “Do you know who I am? Do you know how much trouble you’re going to be in?”

“I didn’t do this.” I put my hands on my hips and give them a serious look. “I know you’re both scared, but the first thing you need to know is that I’m a victim in all of this just like you.”

“And this is what exactly?” An incredulous voice questions from the other open pod. It’s a South Asian woman, her big brown eyes wide as flying saucers. Pun intended.

So far, only these two have fully woken up, but two other pods are now flashing red, and the last two are still flashing yellow, so they'll probably turn red soon. I didn't anticipate having to conquer this conversation without support. Even when Renata and I talked about waking them, the plan was always to wake Amari and Sabrina first. That way the four of us could be together to break the news to the new girls. But, here I am doing it all by my lonesome.

Go with the flow, I guess.

"Well, we're not where we're supposed to be—"

"Yeah, I can see that," Blondie bites back. "What I want to know is where in fuck are we, and what the hell is that thing?" She shoots a look of fear and disgust at Kuvier as he calmly stands several feet behind me. Irritation rises in me at the contempt on her face.

The hostility rolls off of her in waves, and I take a deep breath, trying to force myself to be understanding. Despite her bad attitude, I have to remember that I've been awake for days and she's just coming out of stasis. Patience is a virtue that I need more than anything right now.

"Not a what, a who. His name is Kuvier and he's the only thing standing between us and freezing or starving to death, so have some respect," I snap back. Blondie arches an eyebrow and appraises me, flickering her gaze between me and Kuvier, who I'm sure is probably a little lost right now. Much of this conversation holds language he hasn't learned yet, but he stays quiet and patient.

"Right...and why is that?" Brown Eyes watches the heated exchange between us with quiet reserve.

"Take a look outside." I step aside and give them both the space to move. Kuvier

mimics me, stepping to the side, his eyes fixed on me.

Naturally, Blondie is the one to step a wobbly leg out of her pod first, but Brown Eyes follows closely behind as they make their way forward. They don't make it past the fire pit before I hear an expletive come from one of them. I don't have to guess to know that they saw the red mountains and endless snow. Believe me now?

"How did this happen?" Blondie demands as they come back to stand in front of me.

"We crashed and we're stranded somewhere that isn't on Earth, and—"

"Wait, what?" Brown Eyes looks at me as if I've lost my marbles.

"What the hell do you mean we're not on Earth?" Blondie speaks again. Her arms grip her body tightly, warding against the cold. She's looking at me like I'm crazy too, but the doubt wavers when her eyes set on Kuvier again.

I'd like to go ahead and just give them some furs and food, but I know that they'll need more details before they feel comfortable enough to accept help.

"Look," my patience flickers, "I know it's hard to believe, but I'm telling you the whole truth. There are other girls stranded too who can back up my story."

"Which is?" Brown Eyes asks again, imploringly. "You haven't told us much besides we're safe, stranded outside of Earth, and reliant on a goat man."

I sigh because that's fair. "I only know so much about all of this honestly. We're all in pretty much the same boat here."

"This is insanely fucked up!" Blondie throws her arms up in exasperation. "Last thing I remember, I was falling asleep at an AirBnB the night before my wedding. Now,

you're telling me I'm not even on Earth now?" Her voice is shrill at the end, and I start to feel truly bad for her.

I had a job back home that I mostly loved—teaching is not for the weak but I loved those kids with my whole heart. I had my new house, but those were the only real things I had going for me. On Earth, I really had no one to look forward to spending time with outside of work. I'd gone no contact with my mom three years prior when my grandmother, the last person in my family I cared for, died. Past that, I've always had a hard time making friends, and my colleagues were just that—colleagues. This girl seems to have truly had a life that she's been forced to leave behind.

"We were kidnapped by aliens," I reveal cautiously, not wanting to really set her off. "I don't know why or how exactly. None of us do."

"Kutti k bache." Brown Eyes mumbles the foreign words under her breath and I don't have to know the language to deduce it's a curse. "This whole thing is fucked six ways to Sunday."

"No kidding," I say to Brown Eyes, giving a bark of laughter. "Here, let me get you guys situated and at least a little warmer. I'll tell you everything I know."

Because my luck is so fucking great, the next two to wake up are the other two new girls—Xiomara, a pretty Latina with ringlet curls, and Meghan, a fiery woman with the red hair to match and pale skin. Their wake-ups go about as well as Samra and Krissy's though everyone else besides Krissy—aka Blondie—are at least nice about it.

Of course, Sabrina and Amari are the last to wake up. It isn't until after they do, when we're all gathered around the fire, that Renata and Enikk finally return.

“Well, shit.” Renata pulls up to stop in front of the awning, small dead animals hanging from the leather strap around her waist. Her face is flushed with life and finally expressive again, but definitely showing concern as she takes in the sight before her.

I’m about to stand to fill her in when I see Enikk come up behind her and stop short. He tenses as he takes in all of us before he throws his head back and takes a deep breath. I see the moment his eyes light with that same fire I’d seen in Kuvier’s the first time we met. Hell no.

He was not about to make my life harder. I might be able to handle that kind of attention and deal with being kidnapped and stranded, but something tells me the other women are going to need a little extra encouragement to get there. Whoever he’s about to become infatuated with is not ready.

“Kuvier?” He looks at me immediately from his designated spot off to the side. I mouth to him, “Enikk.”

The moment he looks at Enikk’s determined face, he understands what I’m silently begging him to do. Kuvier quickly and discreetly moves around the women, putting his hands on Enikk’s chest and pushing him back out of the crate, murmuring to him as he goes. None of the other ladies really pay them too much mind and I breathe a sigh of relief at the crisis averted.

Renata makes eye contact with me and I know we need to talk so I stand from my spot, leaving the other women softly discussing or staring into space in Krissy’s case. We step off to the side, a bit away from the fire pit, near our gathering wall of supplies.

“When did they all wake up?” Renata whispers to me, setting down the things in her hands and around her hips.

“Not long ago. Their pods went out one at a time,” I answer, biting at my nails. “I already explained everything and after the initial shock they seem to be all calming down.”

“Of course they all wake up before we’re ready,” she huffs with a roll of her eyes. It’s a sentiment I second. Even now, things are proving to be difficult considering I wasn’t able to finish enough clothing for everyone. All of them are covered in furs in various stages of sewing. Samra even has on my incomplete pair of pants, the waistband tied with sinew rope to keep them up.

“We’ll have to tell them about the fact that there’s probably no way home.” I cringe away from the idea. “I hadn’t wanted to be alone when I broke it to them.”

Her face scrunches in worry, but she nods. “Let’s talk about it over dinner.”

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- sedona -

“I...I have something to confess,” Xiomara announces suddenly, breaking through the short silence that had fallen over us as we all watch Kuvier prepare our dinner for the night.

Enikk stands apart from us, his eyes fixed on the group, clearly back to his stalkery staring, but this time focused on Amari. Thankfully, I don't think she's noticed yet. That girl is too fragile for him to push anything. She hasn't started crying since that first time in the ship, but there's something about her that just screams vulnerable. I know Enikk is a good guy, but I don't think he realizes what an upward hill he has to climb if he thinks he's going to catch her attention.

“What's up?” Sabrina asks, patting Xiomara's arm encouragingly.

We'd all been talking now for a few hours and I was warming to all of them, except maybe Krissy who was still sulking and only talked to barb insults.

When Xiomara speaks again, her voice is laced with the weariness of someone who has been through it all. “I've been...well, I've been in situations like this before.”

Renata looks up, disbelief etched on her face. “What do you mean, situations like this? You've been stranded on frozen planets more than once?”

Xiomara meets our gazes, her eyes flickering with a mixture of resignation and resolve. “No, I mean that I was kidnapped by aliens when I was young and I've been living through it since.”

“How young?” I can’t help but ask the question. She looks like she’s in her mid to late twenties at most.

“I don’t know exactly, but the last thing I remember before being abducted was being on a field trip in a national forest with my teacher.” She winces. “I never learned how to read if that gives any indication of my age at the time.”

A gasp flows through all of us as we process what she says. She’s been away from Earth far longer than she lived on Earth. What if I’d had to go through these past couple of weeks as a child? I shudder at the thought.

“Wow, so you’ve grown up with the mantis aliens?” Amari reasons, her voice full of horrified awe.

“Not permanently. I’ve been through multiple cycles of being sold, returned, and sold again.” She gives a mirthless laugh. “The Xclixan—the mantises, have a great return policy.”

We all hesitate as the weight of that confession hits us.

“God, Xiomara,” Sabrina looks like she wants to hug her, but refrains. “I can only imagine what you’ve been through.”

Her mouth quirks in a half-hearted attempt at a smile. “Well, this is the first time I’ve ever been marked for breeding, so it hasn’t been as bad as it could’ve been.”

“Wait, what do you mean ‘marked for breeding?’” I realize at that moment that Xiomara may be the resource we were looking for when we were trying to do recon on the ship.

“Galactically, human women are really special because of how many pregnancies we

can carry in our lifetime,” Xiomara explains, her tone matter-of-fact. “We call a great price on the breeding market for alien species that struggle with reproduction. Humanity also has some of the most unique and complex DNA. So if we were all put on the same order then they chose us all based on some genetic profile we share that they find valuable.”

It’s like the air got sucked out of the space.

“God, this is a lot,” Meghan exclaims, raking her hands roughly through her auburn locks.

“Well, there’s more.” Xiomara flashes us an apologetic look. “They also scrambled our DNA,” she continues, her voice gaining strength as she recounts what she knows. “Made us quicker, stronger, and able to learn and heal faster. It’s probably why we are able to breathe the atmosphere here.” She glances at me. “It’s also why you’ve learned Kuvier’s language more rapidly.”

“That actually makes sense. I was shocked because I sucked at Spanish in high school.” My joke falls flat in the face of everything.

“So, do you know how?” Krissy demands. “How did they get to us? I wasn’t hiking through the middle of a forest. I was literally in a house, and I still wound up here.” She blanches suddenly. “Do you think they took the other people that were with me, too?”

Xiomara gives her a soft look. “I don’t know, hun. I’ve never heard of mass abductions, but you’d probably have been separated if things like that occurred anyway, so I can’t give you an answer.”

Renata ponders for a second before she speaks. “Anything else?”

Xiomara shifts uncomfortably. “I have a chip in my head, a translator, that helps me talk to the clients,” she admits. “I got it a few clients ago, but I just thought you’d want to know. It’s able to recognize lingual and vocal patterns to determine meaning and decipher foreign languages rapidly. It might work with the goat guys’ language.”

I feel myself getting excited, but try to hold it back. Renata beats me to speaking, though, and I’m glad for it.

“We should hop on that. We need to know more about them and their people, and to find out if they have anything at all that can help us to get home.”

The girls all look to me, and I startle a bit realizing they want me to get the guys’ attention. Even in the short time they’ve been awake, it seems everyone is well aware that there is an interesting dynamic between Kuvier and I.

“Kuvier.” He’d moved from his spot cooking at some point and is just outside. His forehead is tilted close to Enikk’s, and they appear to be in a very heated conversation. I almost feel bad interrupting, but he looks up as soon as I call his name, and he’s heading towards me before anything else is said.

When he comes to stand next to me, I motion towards Xiomara. I tell him to talk to her in his language. I stumble over my words a bit, nervous to be on display before the other women, but he gets the gist. He seems confused but he looks at her and begins talking. He gets out a few sentences, with some words I recognize but many I don’t. He goes quiet, but I encourage him to keep talking so that her chip has time to get a read.

“Oh!” Xiomara exclaims after about five or so minutes of him talking, cutting off his monologue. “I understood that last part.” She looks at him and says in the grunts of his language, “Keep talking.”

Kuvier reels back at first, but hesitantly starts talking again, looking between me and Xiomara. She cocks her head towards him, listening intently. She lets out a chuckle and looks at the rest of us.

“He said he’s confused by us ‘Sky People,’ and that it’s a good thing ‘his’ Sedona is worth it.” Heat crawls up my neck and over my ears at being called ‘his’ in front of the other women.

Krissy looks at me with a quirked eyebrow, but before she can open her mouth and say something sly, Renata jumps in. “Ask him where the rest of his people are, or is it just him and Enikk?”

Xiomara thinks on the question a second, seemingly forming the words, before she asks the question in Kuvier’s language. Kuvier frowns at the question and makes eye contact with Enikk who’s crept forward slightly in interest, before he answers, his tone halted.

“He says that he will take us to meet his people when the worst of the storm has passed.” Xiomara looks at us. “But, I feel like there’s more to it than that.”

Kuvier butts in and speaks to Xiomara. She nods and his face breaks into a breathtaking smile as he turns on me. He speaks directly to me, looking in my eyes, and I hear that word ‘khesi’ again.

Xiomara’s breath catches and she looks at me with shock. “He, um, he has declared that you’re his...mate essentially. You were gifted to him by what I’m assuming is their deity? The ‘Great Mother.’”

My breathing picks up in time with my racing heart. Khesi wasn’t just a term of endearment. It was a claiming. Kuvier speaks again, his words at Xiomara, but his gaze trained on me.

“He’s making promises to care for you, and love you, and—oh god.” She covers her face in embarrassment but finishes the translation, “He promises to fill you with many, um, kits.”

My whole body catches on fire as Krissy snickers and the other women fight hard to hide their reaction. Samra pats my arm and gives me a reassuring smile. I like her already.

“Well, if you had to have any alien in love with you,” Renata says with a shrug. “Kuvier’s a good dude, for a goat-cat hybrid.”

Our awkward moment is interrupted when Enikk suddenly approaches the fire, his eyes fixated on Xiomara. Kuvier steps in front of him, speaking rapidly.

““Enikk, stop this. You will scare her. You have not given time to sway her heart,”” Xiomara translates automatically. “Enikk says, ‘You have declared your intentions for your female, I wish nothing but the same. Move out of my way or I will make you move.’ Oh god, is he about to declare he loves me?”

The air feels tense as we huddle around the fire. Kuvier stands between Enikk and us, his chest rumbling with a deep, vicious growl.

Xiomara winces as they continue speaking. “They’re going to go at it. They’re just exchanging taunting words.” Someone needs to stop this.

“Stop!” I shout, stepping forward instinctively, but Renata grabs my arm, holding me back.

“They’re going to kill each other,” she mutters, her eyes wide with fear.

Kuvier and Enikk begin circling each other, their eyes locked in a deadly stare. Enikk

is shouting something, his voice raw with emotion, and Kuvier's response is a low, menacing growl.

"Enikk gave Kuvier one more chance to move and Kuvier essentially told him to shove his chances," Xiomara relays to us.

"Kuvier, please," I beg, hoping he'll listen to me, but he's too focused on Enikk, his body coiled like a spring ready to snap.

Amari is trembling, tears streaming down her face. "Make them stop," she whispers, her voice barely audible. Enikk freezes, his eyes snapping to Amari, who has barely said anything since waking up.

Oh god, I think desperately. Why did he have to pick the most fearful of all of us to fixate on? Sure enough, Enikk declares something with gusto in his language. We all look to Xiomara expectantly.

"Dios mío ," she mutters. "He's declaring that Amari is his fated mate. He's basically repeating similar promises."

Amari's eyes widen in shock, and she shakes her head. "No, that can't be. I don't even know him."

Enikk speaks again, his tone calmer now, and Xiomara translates. "He's saying it's a bond, like a connection that can't be broken. He felt it the moment he saw her."

Amari's face crumples, and she starts to cry. "I don't understand any of this," she sobs. "I just want to go home."

I feel a pang of sympathy for her, and Enikk, honestly. The guy looks absolutely broken at her tears. But, this is too much for any of us to process, especially someone

as young as Amari. She can't be older than twenty, and she's already been kidnapped by aliens, fought said aliens to the death, and crash landed on a strange planet. Now, some intense alien is claiming ownership over her? Not everyone is as insane as me and finds comfort in being someone else's responsibility. This has to be overwhelming for her.

"Enikk, you need to give her space," I say, my voice firm but gentle as Xiomara translates to him. "She's scared and confused. This is all new to us."

Enikk's expression softens and he backs away slowly, giving Amari some much-needed distance. Kuvier watches him closely, ready to intervene if necessary, but the immediate threat of violence seems to have passed.

I turn to Amari and put a comforting arm around her. "We'll figure this out," I promise her. She doesn't answer, but instead rests her head against my shoulder, tears still silently rolling down her cheeks and her eyes closing from pure exhaustion.

Kuvier steps closer to me, his eyes searching mine for reassurance. I shoot him a small smile, hoping it's enough to convey that I understand, even if I don't have all the answers. There's a lot to unpack about what was conveyed tonight, but now was not the time for us to unpack it.

With seven women relying on me, my focus has to be on getting us all through this first night.

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- kuvier -

Tonight, I will finally sleep.

With Enikk having discovered his own bond with one of the Sky People, my instincts have calmed. I worry that he is more likely to run off with the fearful girl than to attempt anything with Sedona.

Tucking the roll of furs under my arm, I walk carefully around the prone bodies to make my way to Sedona. As I reach her, she is stretching her curvy legs out in front of her. She looks up, and it warms me to see her eyes brighten as she takes me in. It is more confirmation that I am not the only one who feels the shift in our interactions since this morning.

Despite the chaos that has ensued with the awakening of the other Sky People, I have not forgotten the feeling of Sedona's plush lips pressed against me. I do not know what it is called that we did today; it must be some mating custom from the sky that she has taught me. But, I do know I wish to press mouths with her every day of my life.

Sedona looks at me expectantly and I wrack my brain for the words in her language to convey what I want. I refuse to go get the curly haired female. It feels less intimate to have my words inspected by another as they are relayed to my mate.

"Can I sleep here?" I finally manage to ask a coherent sentence, piecing together words and phrasing I have learned over time.

Sedona smiles brightly at me, as she does anytime I get something correct in her language. Her eyes scan the cave to find that the other females are either asleep or preoccupied and not focused on us in the least. I am not offended by her worry. My mate appears to be the leader of these females. They look to her often for guidance and I know that leaders must fear what their people think of them. It is a wonder that such a strong female would be the mate of someone like me, the very bottom of my community's hierarchy. I will take whatever I can get from her anyhow.

Regardless, she gives me a nod and answers with a soft, "Of course." This is just a long way of saying 'yes' in her language, and so I unfurl my furs on the other side of her, putting myself between the opening of the cave and her.

Although this move is a bit unnecessary, as it seems Enikk would be the first person to respond in an attack. He has not moved from his spot at the fire, facing the entrance, since the females began spreading out to go to sleep. Now that he has a mate bond of his own, it seems that he has taken over my nightly vigil.

As I settle next to Sedona, our eyes lock. I feel the same as I did earlier, before we pressed mouths. It is the feeling of free falling, as if I have been tossed from the highest peak of the Blood Mountains. It is a rush greater than that of the most exhilarating hunt.

The feeling is heady and addictive.

I cannot help myself and I reach out one large, clawed hand, moving it gently towards her face. I give her plenty of time to pull away. Unlike Enikk, I recognize how easily frightened our females are. I never want Sedona to look at me with fear again. Not now that she has come to know me.

With a soft touch, I skim the lines of her face. I flutter over her lips, tracing the outline of her smile and toying with her bottom lip. It is one of my favorite features

on her body, and I always find myself fixated on it. My fingers stop their gentle exploration, smoothing back a loose curl before I let my hand fall.

Sedona lifts her hand to my face, hesitant at first, but encouraged by my calm acceptance. When her fingers make contact with my fur, I cannot help the rumbling in my chest.

She bites her lip and I am enraptured. Before I can give it much thought, I lean forward, brushing my lips over hers. Remembering the way her tongue had moved in my mouth earlier, I swipe my tongue against her lips, seeking access. She gives a soft, whimpering gasp that allows me to explore her sweet mouth further.

Our mouths move in rhythm until she pulls away to catch her breath. It is good that she has stopped us. We are not alone, but a few more seconds of her lips on me and I would have pushed past a place of no return.

I do not want this moment to end, but when my mate gives the smallest little yawn, I know that it is time for sleep. I shift closer, using my body heat to add to her comfort. Spurred by the way she is letting me touch her without shame, I pull her close, tucking her against my arm. I hesitate for only a moment before letting my tail slide up her leg to rub soft circles on her thigh. She contentedly lays back, unbothered.

Settling on my side, I run my hand in gentle strokes up and down her arm, warming her more. With the influx of females, she has less furs than she did prior. I do not like it, but I know that I cannot let the other females freeze just to shower my mate in warmth. Well, I would, but she would not let me if I tried.

Within moments, her breathing evens out, and in her sleep she clutches me closer around the waist. A potent sense of possession unfurls in my chest. This female was meant for me. I know this with every fiber of my being.

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- sedona -

“I want to take you outside.” I look up from the stitch I was ripping out and see Kuvier holding a small knapsack and a spear.

“Why?” We’re both speaking in his language. I find that we mostly use it since I’ve learned more of his than he has of mine. In all fairness, that’s likely due to the DNA scrambling by the mantis dudes. He is still learning surprisingly fast, and sometimes our conversations are a jumbled mix of English and Lieq as we try to get our meanings across. With Xiomara around now, we have a built-in Duolingo, so the past few days, our grasp of each other’s words has grown exponentially.

“To gather more vifer and check traps.” It takes a second to remember what a vifer is. The red reeds we use exclusively for kindling.

“Okay, give me some time.”

Kuvier looks at me in astonishment. “Sky People can give time? This is not a magic I possess, my mate.”

A loud laugh bubbles from my lips. Sometimes I forget how literal Kuvier is. Colloquial phrases don’t usually make sense to him or Enikk.

“No, it means that I’m not ready and I will need you to wait until I am ready.”

“Very well. I will wait patiently for you by the fire.”

He leans down and kisses me thoroughly. When he pulls away, I'm winded and jittery. Because the first two kisses we'd shared had both been really heated, Kuvier only knows how to kiss me passionately. And boy does he love kissing me. I walk around loopy and lightheaded too often. I could probably show him how to do more chaste ones, but I've never complained about not being able to handle some heat.

It's begun to happen so often that the other girls mostly ignore it, for which I'm grateful. I know there's some judgment there, but I've chosen to ignore it. Renata at least doesn't seem to feel the same way about it as she did considering she's one of the first to jump in to stick up for me when Krissy chooses to poke the bear.

Once I catch my breath, I put my sewing aside so I can pull all of my outside layers on. With so many women awake now, my layers had grown more limited, but I'd managed to piece together an outfit for myself.

Getting ready is quick and it doesn't take long before we are heading out into the cold. The air is crisp, biting at any exposed skin, but the walk warms me up quickly. I stay close to Kuvier to steal some of his crazy body heat, too.

We walk along for a while in comfortable silence—Kuvier is not an unnecessary talker—but after a while, I can't help but ask, "How far are we going?"

I have no problems with my body. I love the lushness of it, and I think my curves are sexy as hell. But these legs were made for gripping, not hiking.

"We are almost there. I am keeping us within the valley and on the edge of the Blood Mountains." He tilts his head down to get a good look at me. "Are you tired? I will carry you."

I consider it for only a second. "Yes, I am tired."

He doesn't need to be told twice and he picks me up with excitement clear on his face. A chuckle slips out at his expression. The man loves to carry me—has since we first met. If I'm honest, a big part of me loves it too. Kuvier has a way of picking me up like I weigh nothing and it gives me a little tingle every time. But, I've let him do it less since the others woke up because I'm embarrassed by being shown physical affection in front of them. We don't get as many comments or ribs about our relationship—it's been a few days, and everyone is pretty much used to the way he acts with me now. Still, it's something I avoid.

Thankfully, we aren't with everyone else right now.

With our chests pressed together and my legs wrapped around him, we're now eye level, so close that I can make out the individual shades of gold and amber in his irises. It felt wrong at first, but I find him more attractive every day. I'd always known he was handsome, but I was hesitant to admit it because, well, he's not human.

Now, I realize that his otherness is part of what draws me to him. The glow of his eyes. That sweet smile with those wicked teeth. The strong set of his jaw. The way he's so soft to touch. All of it makes me want him more. In fact, the more time he's around me, the more my want turns into a craving.

It's a pit at the bottom of my stomach that won't go away. A constant rush of desire that I know without a doubt only he can quench. God, I scoff internally, where is this coming from? I was never a high libido girl before, but with him, I feel like I'm in heat.

“Whatever you are thinking, stop.” I blink, taken aback by his statement.

“Um, what?”

“Sedona, your desire is clear and you smell sweeter and sweeter with each step. Whatever thoughts are running through that pretty head of yours needs to stop.” He squeezes my thighs in warning. “For your sake.”

Yeah, that did not help my thoughts go away. In fact, I’m more acutely aware of my desire than before. Now, all I can think about is the way he’s pressed so tightly to me. The way every breath he takes causes his chest to brush against mine, making my nipples pebble. How every step creates a delicious sort of friction in my core.

Kuvier stops in his tracks and connects his eyes to mine, and the look in them makes my heart rate kick up.

“I am trying to be a patient male, ti khesi, but you are testing me. Are you sure that is something you want to do?”

My hands grip his broad shoulders as I weigh his words against my options. Whatever I do next will change our trajectory, I’m sure of it. The big question is, am I ready?

“If my smell bothers you, you could always fix it.” His eyes darken as he regards me carefully.

“Fix it?” His words are measured. “And how would you suggest I do that?”

My shoulders rise and fall. “I feel like that’s up to you.”

The words are hardly spoken before I’m sliding down his body, landing gently on my feet. Kuvier cups the back of my neck and leans down to capture my lips with his. The kiss, like all of the ones before it, is deep and sensual, and I find myself swaying into his embrace.

When he pulls away, his fingers massage the back of my neck. “If you say stop, I will.”

That’s the only heads up I get before he spins me, pinning me flush against him. His body drops to the ground and he pulls me with him. I land in his lap with my back to his chest, my body supported by his crossed legs, and my own legs scrunched in front of me.

His hands are on me before I can think, and once he starts exploring my thoughts evaporate anyway. He slides under my cloak easily, slipping underneath the yellow shirt until he finds what he’s seeking. My head falls back against his shoulder while he squeezes and massages my breasts with both hands. His thumbs brush back and forth over the peaks, his finger pads rough, scratching against me in a way that is absolutely intoxicating.

“Kuvier, I need—” My plea is cut off as my voice catches in my throat.

“Show me what you need. Take it.”

I grab one of his hands from my chest and move it down my body, slipping over the slope of my stomach and under my elastic waistband. Careful of his claws, I push two of his fingers through my folds. I use his fingers as my own, making quick circles around my clit.

“Oh my god,” I breathe out, the pressure starting to build in my abdomen.

Kuvier continues pinching and rubbing at my nipple with one hand. But, he takes over with his other, mimicking my circular motion against the bud between my thighs. I move my hands out of my pants, entrusting my pleasure to him and reaching back to find something to grip.

He bites the side of my neck, gentle enough not to break the skin but hard enough to spike my pleasure. I buck into his hand and he groans low in my ear. Then, to my chagrin, he pulls his hand out of my pants.

I make a frustrated sound, something between a screech and a moan, tilting my head back so I can look him in the face when I chew him out. My words never make it out of my throat because he sticks his glistening fingers in his mouth and his face clouds with lust so intense it makes me breathless.

A vicious snarl tears through him and the hand on my breast tightens, blurring the line between pain and pleasure. He pulls his fingers out of his mouth with a pop.

“Not enough,” he mutters, almost to himself. Then he shocks me completely when he sticks a claw between his teeth and snaps it at the base.

“What—”

“I need to feel you,” he says as a way of explanation before he dips back into my pants.

I understand exactly what he means when his now-clawless finger pushes inside me. Just a single digit is so impossibly long and thick, that it sends me into ecstasy. His rough palm glosses over my clit with every movement and my body starts building pressure all over again. I lose control over my own body and it moves of its own accord, riding his hand like it’s my fucking job.

“Kuvier,” I gasp his name as he thrusts deeper inside me.

“You are all I can smell now,” he murmurs, his lips brushing against my ear. “I do not think I am fixing it very well. Should I stop?”

I choke out the answer, “Please don’t,” but my sentence ends in a mewl when he pinches a nipple between his fingers. My hands grip his thighs, digging in as he lights my nerves on fire.

“Say it again,” he demands. “I want to hear you beg, ti khesi. Your pleas are so pretty.”

“Please, Kuvier,” I whine. “Please, please, please .” My pleases turn to screams as my body bows out of his lap. The blood races in my veins and everything goes hazy around the edges of my vision.

Pleasure courses through me like nothing I’ve ever felt before as I jerk and moan uncontrollably, dripping all over his hand. He doesn’t stop thrusting into me until my high dies down and my cries are tinged with desperation. When he does stop moving, he doesn’t take his finger out of me. I clench around him, the aftershocks gripping me. My breathing is still ragged when he nuzzles his nose against my neck, spattering it with kisses and tender bites.

“Find your breath,” he whispers into my ear, “because I intend to feel you again.”

We never make it to the reeds or the traps.

- kuvier -

My thumbs make gentle circles against Sedona's thigh, as she giggles along with the conversation. We all sit around the fire, having finished dinner. In the time since the others have hatched from their eggs—or pods, as Sedona told me they are called—I have found myself by this fire, surrounded by females, a great many times.

The females enjoy spending most of their time together around this fire. They gather here before and after meals, while sewing or helping prepare meat—they seem to rarely wish to be alone. This is an odd thing to me. Besides clan celebrations, such as births, deaths, or mating, Lieq are not companionable like this. We do not seek each other out to share stories and jokes.

Sedona gives a small yawn, stopping her sewing to cover her mouth. As she shifts in my lap, I do my best to ignore the warmth of her pressed to me. I find myself struggling with my composure a lot lately. Having learned what she looks like coming undone around me, how the clench of her cunt feels around my finger, it is hard not to find my mind straying to that pretty place between her legs. But, it is not the time for that.

“There is but one eye open,” I murmur under the droll of conversation around us. “Do you want to sleep now?” She cocks her head, processing my words.

“One eye? Did I misunderstand you?”

“No?” I do not think I was unclear. I gesture outside. “There is only one eye open. We may sleep freely if you wish.”

“Oh!” she exclaims, popping her forehead. “Duh, the suns.”

“Yes, the suns.” I had forgotten that is what she calls the Great Mother’s eyes in her language.

“Why do you call the suns eyes?” I do not understand why she is confused. Would she not know this, having fallen from Great Mother herself?

“The Great Mother has three eyes that watch over us,” I explain slowly. “They see all, even that which is hidden.”

“What about when it gets dark?” She pauses and ponders for a moment. “Does it ever get completely dark?”

“During the dark season, yes. That is when the Great Mother sleeps,” I answer, though I grow more perplexed. “It is when the most danger occurs because She is not there to watch over us.”

“Oh, wow,” she hums, “that’s really interesting, honestly.”

My puzzlement grows and I tilt her in my lap slightly to get a good look at her face. “There are many things you do not know to have come from the Great Mother.”

“Well, where I came from is...complicated.” She winces and briefly looks at the female with ringlet curls, the one who has the name that is difficult for me to pronounce. Sedona must be considering getting the female to translate, but I steal back her attention. We can have the conversation alone. I can simplify my words.

“So are your people not of the Great Mother? Do they not come from the sky?” The thought is preposterous. I saw her fall from the sky myself, but she knows so little about the world the Great Mother made. If she was of the Great Mother, if she was a

Great Child, she would know these things.

“Would it make you upset if I said not exactly?” she whispers the question, almost dejected.

“No, I was meant to find you,” I assure her immediately, comfortingly nudging her neck with my nose. “Wherever you are from, She has given you to me, and that is all that I need know.”

Her body relaxes against me once more.

“We did fall from the sky, but we are not from the sky. We come from a different planet.” The last word she says in her language, and I do not recognize it.

“What is this ‘planet?’” She thinks for a moment about how to explain it.

“Like here. This whole world is your planet. The place where everything around you lives.”

“Ah, Atiqarii, you mean?”

“Yes! Atiqarii is your planet. Ours is called Earth.” This thought is astounding to me. There are more worlds than just Atiqarii. I cannot fathom it.

“Is Atiqarii very different from this Ert?”

“Earth . But yes, very much different. The weather is mixed up for one. Some places are cold like this, but other places are warm and can grow lots of plants. There are some places so hot almost nothing grows. The mountains are definitely not red,” she continues, stating more differences that I cannot picture. “There’s also a lot more people. Probably more people than you could even imagine.”

I reel back at this. “You have multiple clans?”

“Yeah, pretty much.” She leans back into me, laying her head back against my shoulder. “We have hundreds and hundreds of different clans. Like all of us women, we are all human, but we are all from different, uh, clans.”

I softly repeat the word ‘human’ a few times. “You are human as I am Lieq?”

“I think? Are there no clans other than the Lieq?”

“We used to have many clans,” I tell her, my hands absently stroking her exposed skin. “They have all died away.”

“Did you ever meet any of them?” I grab his cheeks and softly shake his head. “Do you know if they looked like you?”

“They lived before my time.” It is a sadness that I feel at times, knowing that Lieq are the last of the Great Mother’s intelligent creations. The tales passed down from generations describe a time where there were once many clans. A time where we fought and battled, yes, but also married into new families, traded, and helped each other survive. Being the last clan left makes survival harder and lonelier.

“Well, then, yes, you are Lieq as I am human.” The word human plays over in my head. I have known that there are differences between us, but to have a name for what she is feels important. My Sedona is human. I look at the other human females introspectively.

She is the most beautiful human to exist, of this I am certain.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:54 am

- sedona -

I giggle as I twist out of Kuvier's arms and dance away, taunting him as I go. "Come on, slowpoke, catch up."

"I do not poke, nor do I do it slowly," he quips, lunging at me. I just manage to skirt out of his reach at the last second.

He's definitely letting me get away; I have no doubt he could catch me easily if he wanted to. But, he lets me have my fun, giving a playful growl as he dramatically prowls after me.

"It means that you're too slow. Can't catch me." I wiggle my hips a little bit, glancing over my shoulder with just a tad of pretend seduction.

Kuvier's eyes flare despite the lack of seriousness in my sultry gaze, and I suppose that is when he decides that he is done playing. He pounces on me, wrapping a wide arm around my middle and yanking me up against him. My back presses into his chest and the air turns from playful to charged in a second. He hasn't touched me in that way since our little excursion the other day.

I'd been waiting for a break in the weather to ask him to take me out again, but the snow hasn't stopped. In fact, it's almost getting worse. So these moments, a few feet away from the crate, are the only outside time I'm getting right now.

Kuvier nuzzles at the base of my throat, breathing my scent in deeply. He plants a kiss on the side of my neck, and I can't help the sound that escapes me. My neck is

my hotspot and he figured that out when he was fingering me in the snow. Now, he seems to love to kiss and bite at that place on my body most.

“I will always catch you, ti khesi,” he murmurs gruffly into my ear.

“Sedona!” Both of our heads snap up at the call and we look to see Sabrina standing several feet away waving me towards her.

Kuvier sighs and nips at my neck before letting me go, knowing I have to see what Sabrina wants. I don’t know why or how, but the other girls have come to rely on me heavily. I feel like the mother and leader of our group at times, and the responsibility is a lot.

“Are you hungry?” he asks me as we approach the fire where everyone is gathered, as usual.

“Not really, but the other girls probably are.”

“I will prepare them something.” I give his hand a grateful squeeze and we peel away from each other, me sitting down between Amari and Sabrina at the fire as he goes further into the crate to go through our pile of food.

“So, Samra has some news,” Sabrina announces to me as I settle in. My brow arches and I look at Samra who just gives me a sheepish smile.

“What’s up?” I’m curious to say the least.

“Well, when I woke up this morning, I just randomly decided to look around the wreckage, and I found this.” She pulls out a tangle of wires and metal pieces. Noting the confused look on my face, she jumps to add, “It’s a telecommunicator—an alien iPad basically.”

“But it’s trashed,” I respond cautiously, pointing out the obvious.

“Yes, but I’m a technological engineer,” Samra declares importantly. “Well, I was on Earth anyway. I think that if I just...” She launches into a spiel that uses so many engineering terms that I get lost immediately.

“Long story short,” Krissy butts in, interrupting the monologue with a roll of her eyes, “she thinks she can fix it and make it at least put out a signal to connect with any ships that pass by.”

I look between Samra and the other girls for a moment before speaking. “Have we considered that the ships that pass by could put us in a worse situation? Xiomara, how friendly are other aliens to humans?”

Xiomara winces as she answers. “It depends on the species, but in general we are seen as lesser sentient life forms.”

“See,” I say, my voice almost an aha, “we could be inviting new kidnappers our way. That puts us and Kuvier’s people at risk. Then what?”

“So you’d rather be stuck in the Ice Age with Manny and Sid over there?” Krissy retorts, throwing a thumb at Kuvier and Enikk who are diligently chopping up meat.

“I’d rather not be recaptured and sold into alien slavery.” My voice is as cold as the ice that surrounds us. Krissy is really starting to work my last nerve with the way she talks about Kuvier.

“Look, we get that you’ve shacked up with Tall, Dark, and Hairy, but the rest of us—”

“You need to watch it,” Xiomara warns Krissy harshly. “Kuvier has done a lot for us.

Both of the guys have. It's thanks to them and Sedona that we're all even alive."

Krissy, always quick with a retort, scoffs from where she sits by the fire. "How is it thanks to them? She was too busy with her man to even wake us up when we all crashed."

My cheeks flush with indignation, but before I can respond, Renata steps in, her tone sharp and commanding. "Krissy, enough."

"Besides, what Sedona chooses to do with her affection and her body is her choice," Amari adds with an indignant sniff. Despite my original dislike of her crying, Amari has turned out to be one of the girls I am becoming closest to. It is very much a big sister-little sister relationship, but I don't mind.

Krissy glares at all of us but wisely says nothing more. I keep my composure as I break the short silence.

"I am fine with trying to find a way back home, but I don't want to end up in a worse situation. We need to do this cautiously if we're going to try."

"This is all based on if I can actually get it working," Samra replies with a sigh. "It's alien tech, so that's a big 'if,' but I'll try my best, and I'll be safe doing it." I give a nod and ignore the glare Krissy shoots my way.

I've gotten to know all of the girls pretty well, considering we've been attached at the hip for days. Of all of them, Krissy is the one I can't stand. She's snobby, bratty, and rude. Sabrina once told me, in confidence, that she's caught Krissy crying several times. I know she had a fiancé and a life back home, more of a life than I did, so I try my best to recognize that her rudeness is just her lashing out against her situation.

But, I'm growing tired of being her punching bag.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:54 am

- sedona-

We're eating and talking as we all break off bits of xiixii meat, coupling each bite with mala and swallowing it down with water. The food here, while lacking in variety, is the freshest I've ever tasted, and it's honestly delicious.

Enikk and Kuvier stand away from us, exposed to the snow, their heads together as they talk. My eyes naturally track him, and I can't help but wonder what they're discussing so seriously. I contemplate asking Xiomara to see if she can hear, but that feels nosey and invasive, so I let it go.

The conversation around the fire grows animated, but I find myself falling into a listening role as the women with the biggest personalities, Meghan, Krissy, and Xiomara, carry the topics. Amari sits beside me, also quiet, her eyes flickering with uncertainty as she picks at her food.

Leaning closer to her, I speak in a low voice. "How are you feeling about Enikk?" I ask, keeping my tone gentle.

It's been days and days since his declaration, and she has continued avoiding him at all costs. For his part, despite the pain I can tell it causes him, he's let her be. Besides ensuring that she has food and water, he hasn't pushed being around her.

Amari hesitates, her brow furrowing slightly. "I...I don't know," she admits quietly. "It's overwhelming."

"I get it. It's a weird feeling, knowing someone feels like they have some claim to

you and you don't even really know them."

I don't say I relate because my relationship with Kuvier is so different than theirs. In some ways, Kuvier is the least strange to me in this group. I am less and less concerned about how he thinks he has a claim on me, and more and more concerned about the fact that I am starting to feel the same way about him.

"I just—," she sighs and starts again, "I just don't have the best track record with relationships and finding good guys." The look in her eyes is far more haunted than a twenty year old should possess.

"I get your hesitation," I tell her. "But if it helps, I can tell that Enikk is a lot like Kuvier. He respects boundaries and cares deeply. It's your choice completely, but I'd encourage you to give him a chance to prove himself and get to know him better before making a decision."

Amari gazes at me, gratitude mingling with uncertainty in her eyes. "I wish I could. Really I do." She shakes her head. "I'm damaged goods, Sedona. Their Great Mother fucked up making me his mate."

"You're not damaged and you're not goods. No one can possess you." I wrap an arm around her shoulder and squeeze. "Take it day by day. We're stuck here anyway, for now, so what's the rush?"

"Thank you," she murmurs back, leaning into my hug just a bit.

Before I can respond, Kuvier's deep voice cuts through the chatter, drawing everyone's attention. He looks expectantly at Xiomara and begins to speak. She jumps to translate his words for the group. It must be important because Kuvier hates having Xiomara translate for him.

““Tomorrow morning,” she relays, “we will head for our clan. I plan to go on one last hunt today to catch a large kill and Enikk will go searching for additional kindling. We will all refill our supplies before we leave.””

“Why? I thought we were staying through the storm?” Meghan asks, looking between Kuvier and Xiomara, expecting her to translate, but he’s learned these words in English and instead begins responding immediately. He speaks in Leiq, since it takes him a while to form full sentences in English, but pride swells in my chest when I see the girls all briefly look impressed that he understood her.

“He says that they don’t think the storm is going to stop.” Kuvier speaks again, and I’m impressed with myself when I understand most of it, even before Xiomara begins translating. “Basically, he’s saying that if the storm doesn’t stop that means the dark season is coming.” She asks him about the dark season in his language and tells us his answer. “It’s a period of several weeks, or maybe months, when the suns stop rising.”

“Jesus,” Renata murmurs, pushing a long loc over her shoulder.

“So,” Meghan starts incredulously, “not only is this planet trying to kill us with the cold, but it’ll soon be completely dark for weeks on end?”

“I hate this damned planet,” Krissy says, her lips turned down into a pout. “Samra, hurry up and fix that tablet so we can get out of here.”

“I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again,” Samra states matter-of-factly, “there is no guarantee I can fix it.”

The topic of the tablet had circled around more than once. I’d yet to tell Kuvier about it. I wasn’t even sure how to begin explaining technology to him. But, moreover, I was sworn to secrecy by the other women. There’s a fear that if Enikk and Kuvier knew we were trying to leave, they might try to stop us. I don’t see Kuvier doing that.

Honestly, I feel like he'd do anything I asked to make me happy, even if it meant letting me go.

The problem I'm having is determining if I even want him to let me go.

The morning moves rather quickly after that and soon we are all splitting off where we are best suited. Enikk brings some of the women with him to go looking for reeds, and to my surprise Amari volunteers to go with him, dragging Sabrina with her. Krissy thankfully also chooses to go with them, giving me a much needed break from the attitude.

Kuvier asks me if I want to go hunting, but I turn him down since we both know I am not built to be a fast hunter, and I don't want to slow him down. No one is surprised when Meghan and Renata volunteer to go with him.

That leaves Xiomara, Samra, and me to hold down the fort. We've been tasked with finishing putting together cloaks and wrappings for everyone's shoes. I've managed to get three out of eight cloaks made and a few tunics, but if we are traveling, we'll need a lot more.

"I will not go far," Kuvier tells me for the umpteenth time as he wraps himself in the cloak I made him take back.

"I know, Kuvier. I'll be fine," I respond, giving him a comforting pat on the chest. "Enikk's within yelling distance, and you're not going too far. Everything will be fine."

He frowns, still not loving the idea of being away from me for any period of time. Since we've started becoming touchy, his protectiveness and possessiveness have gone through the roof.

“You will promise me that you will not leave the cave.” It’s a demand not a request and I resist the urge to roll my eyes.

“I promise I won’t leave the cave.”

Kuvier and Enikk both believe we are in a ‘sky cave’ and that the pods are eggs that we hatched from, according to some translation from Xiomara. One day I’ll explain more in-depth where we come from and how, but I want to be able to do it with my words, so until then, I mostly let him think what he wants.

“I will return soon.”

“Kuvier, we’re burning daylight!” He looks to Meghan and Renata who wait outside, suited up and ready to hunt. Meghan is tapping her wrist as if she has a watch and I crack a smile.

Kuvier looks at them deadpan before turning his attention back to me. With an exasperated sigh, he cups the back of my neck and pulls his head down to meet my lips. The deep kiss leaves me breathless with hot ears as he pulls away.

He gives my ass a possessive squeeze, and I swat him in embarrassment. A grin breaks over his face, and then he pulls away and bounds outside without another word.

I stand there for a while longer, watching as Enikk’s party heads out too. I finally come back to my senses when the crate goes quiet. With everyone else gone to do their own tasks, I settle beside the fire with Xiomara and Samra, who are organizing threads and needles for our sewing tasks.

“Alright ladies, let’s get to it.”

Needles flash through fabric, and the rhythm of our work creates a calming background. I'm glad when it becomes clear that both of them know how to sew already. Having to teach them would have eaten up valuable time we do not have.

After a long stretch of silence, I glance up from my stitching. "What do you guys think of everything so far?"

Samra pauses, her brow furrowing slightly before she replies, "It's less overwhelming than I would have expected. Maybe it's because there are seven other people here going through the exact same thing. It makes it feel less lonely, you know?"

"Do you miss home?" It's a question I've hesitantly asked myself. Hesitantly because I don't love the answer being 'no.'

"Yes and no," she admits truthfully. "I miss some things, but there's so little pressure here. I like that." Her eyes take on a distance before she pulls back to us.

"And you, Xiomara?" I inquire, turning to the Puerto Rican woman beside me.

Xiomara smiles faintly, but there's a hint of worry in her eyes. "I'm not having a hard time adjusting," she admits, her voice tinged with uncertainty. "But I do wonder...what can I really offer to this way of life? Everyone here has a purpose, but all I've ever done in life is be a furniture slave, a decoration to powerful leaders, or a servant. I've never had to live like this, to pitch in and contribute in such a direct way."

"You're our translator," I retort with genuinity. "Without you, we'd be so lost."

"One day, you guys won't need translations anymore," she continues softly. "Based on how much everyone is already picking up, especially you, that won't be too long from now. And then what? My earthly life essentially stopped at childhood, so I have

no other good skills.”

She hesitates before adding, “My head is full of information about aliens and alien societies. But not these kinds of aliens, and beyond translating, I don’t know how much I have to offer.”

I place a hand on hers and squeeze it comfortingly. “I don’t have much as far as survival skills go, but neither of us need to worry about being put out.”

“Well, you have Kuvier. He’d never let anything happen to you.” Her eyes take on a dreamy faraway look. “I can’t imagine what it must feel like.”

“What?”

“To be someone’s whole world.” She looks back at me and clears her throat. “But, it’s fine. I know you’re right; I’ll find my place somehow.” She gives me a wide smile that feels a bit ingenuine in contrast to the sadness in her eyes.

“You’ve already offered so much, Xiomara,” I reassure her again. “Your ability to translate has been invaluable to all of us. And as for the rest...we’ll figure it out together. We’re all learning new things every day, and Kuvier or no, we both need to find a way to contribute. We can find that together.”

Samra nods in agreement, her gaze thoughtful. “Sedona’s right,” she adds quietly. “None of us would let anything happen to you. Besides, clearly, we can all sew. That’s definitely a skill.”

We laugh lightly, letting the serious topic flit away. As we continue sewing, the conversation flows more freely now that barriers have been gently nudged aside. But I can’t help letting my thoughts circle back to what Xiomara said. What will life be like if we don’t find a way off this planet? I think back to Kuvier’s words to Xiomara

the other night.

Babies? Mating? Is a life with Kuvier what I have to look forward to if I never return home? My heart twists as I come to an only somewhat-startling realization.

Part of me doesn't mind if that is what my life becomes.

- kuvier -

I am surprised to say that I do not hate hunting with these additional females.

Meghan and Renata turn out to be suitable companions for a hunt. Though I find these females to be less desirable company than my mate, I am not bothered by their presence. They keep up well, and their feet are quiet on the snow, a skill necessary for any hunter.

This turns my thoughts to my female, as so many things do. I cannot help the smile that tugs at my lips. Unlike these two, my Sedona treks through the snow like a gangly baby oftii—stumbling and awkward, but endearing. It is for this reason that our morning trip was focused more on trapping and collecting kindling. Though we never did make it to completing our purpose.

She may never be a great hunter, but I do not mind this. Some males may value a mate who can do all things for themselves; I find that I enjoy knowing my female needs me. I enjoy the responsibility of caring for her.

Our small hunting party continues forward, each of our eyes scanning for tracks or clues to indicate an animal is nearby. Though I am mostly focused on the hunt, my attention is still divided.

My mind continues to circle back to the conclusion Enikk and I reached this morning. The snow that has fallen the last several days has not lessened, in fact, we anticipate it will get worse. We both worry this is the first snowstorm to indicate the onslaught of the dark season.

As much as I do not wish to bring Sedona back to the clan yet, I have no choice. I cannot risk her life or that of the other females by keeping us out here in the dark season. We will need the support of a clan to survive that; the assistance of more males than just the two of us. If it were only myself, my Sedona, Enikk, and his fearful little mate, we would be fine. But with so many additional females and only two of us familiar with the landscape and able to keep up the labor of hunting, survival would be a low chance.

I will need to pull Sedona aside and, with the help of the curly-haired female, explain what she should expect when we return. I clench my jaw as I consider this. I have yet to reveal that I do not have high standing among my clan, and I worry how she will react when she learns this truth.

Despite being the best hunter, I will forever be at odds with the clan for the mistakes of my father. Sedona will be at odds with them too, simply by accepting me as a mate. I am certain Atan Junq will try to pry her away from me. The thought fills me with dread because what if that is what Sedona wishes? I try my best to push those thoughts away. The female who presses her lips to me so hungrily would not betray me for my clan, but I cannot quiet all the doubts in my mind.

Meghan suddenly stops, ripping me from my thoughts, and crouches down, pointing at a set of tracks in the snow. I move closer to examine them and my heart skips a beat. They are large, pronged, and deeply set, indicating a heavy, oversized animal.

These tracks are unfamiliar, yet known at the same time. They are similar to the ones I had seen many blinks of the Great Mother's eyes ago. The same tracks that had urged me to speak with Atan Junq and led me on the path to where I am now.

The urge to follow these tracks is strong.

They pull at my hunter's instincts, urging me to uncover their mystery. But I glance

at Renata and Meghan and realize that I cannot put them at risk. This would be a dangerous hunt, so I must save it for another time, perhaps with Enikk by my side. I will need to discuss this sighting with him and plan accordingly. Committing the shape to memory with the intention of using the charcoal and drawing it for Enikk later, I encourage the females to continue ahead with short words and grunts.

My thoughts are diverted once again when we catch sight of an oftii herd in the distance. I signal for Renata and Meghan to stop, and we crouch down, observing the herd's movements. The oftii are large, wooly creatures, their breath visible in the cold air. They are an excellent source of meat and fur, and capturing one would make our journey a success.

We move quietly, inching closer to the herd. Meghan and Renata follow my lead, their steps mirroring my quiet. I am impressed by their adaptability and skill. As we close in, I focus on a lame oftii grazing near the edge of the herd. It will be our target.

“I will complete the kill,” I murmur to the females in their language, the words halting, but understood. “You two move it. Make sure it does not run far. Wait for my sign.”

They nod their understanding and we disperse. I signal Renata first. She leaps out and startles the animal to the right. With a signal to Meghan, the animal is veering straight toward me. I hold my position until the last minute, jumping out and throwing my spear with force. The spear sticks itself in the side of oftii's neck. With the rest of the herd long gone, the oftii has nowhere to turn for help and within moments, we descend on the fallen creature.

I send a prayer of thanks to the Great Mother for a successful hunt and slit the animal's throat, putting it out of its misery. From there, it is simple to drain the blood, the stream freezing quickly in the cold.

We do not need to carry around a dripping kill. It would only tempt predators we need not encounter, and the blood makes the animal heavier. Soon enough, the kill is slung over my shoulder and we are trekking forward. With another Lieq male, I would likely hunt another large game, but to burden the females with a kill to carry would slow us down too much. Instead, I lead us to the many traps set along our way back to the cave.

As we go, the females pull any catches from the traps and gather the materials that make each trap. We need not leave good traps here when we will not be returning to this space to check them.

By the time we finally reach the cave, the hunt has proven to be highly successful. Alongside the large oftii, we have managed to catch several smaller prey from the traps we set. We will be providing more than enough food to sustain us on our journey and enough to replace some of what we took from the cache.

Only one of the Great Mother's eyes remains in the sky, casting a soft glow over the frozen landscape as we approach the cave. In the dim light I can see that Enikk's group is back and everyone is gathered around the fire already.

Enikk notices our approach first. I am surprised to see he is seated next to the scared one and she does not flee from him. I arch an eyebrow at him as I get closer, but he just gives me a wide smile.

"Oy, clansman, your hunt was bountiful I see," he calls out, alerting everyone else of our arrival. Immediately, the two females with me are enfolded in the group. "You are just in time, Kuvier. Your female has made us quite the meal."

"You made this food?" I turn to Sedona in question, shifting the large oftii off my shoulders. She gives me a sheepish nod. "I will eat more than any other."

Sedona throws her head back with a loud laugh. “How about you get cleaned up first, then worry about out-eating everyone else?”

I grin at her joy, but continue around the gaggle of females to deposit the oftii with the catches the other two had already set down. As I pass Sedona, I cannot help but smack a kiss on the top of her head.

Once I have rinsed my hands and face of the grime of the hunt, I find myself seated next to my mate with a helping of what she calls ‘gyro.’ She has cut oftii meat thinly, adding spices from my pouch I would not have thought to mix. There are purple leaves served alongside mala that has been toasted. The leaves are from one of the few mountainous plants that grow through the snow.

“Where did you get the averii leaves from?” I ask curiously as I take a bite. Letting out a groan, I am astounded by how delicious the meal is.

“Your female is very resourceful,” Enikk butts in. “She sent me searching for an edible leaf. I brought her several, and she liked averii the best.”

“She is a great many things,” I retort, gazing at my Sedona with awe.

A great many things indeed.

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- sedona -

“Seriously, why do I have to carry this stuff?” Krissy grumbles, heaving under the weight of the furry knapsack on her shoulders. “I didn’t sign up to be a pack mule for some frozen alien safari.”

Renata shoots her a glare. “Quit whining, Krissy. You’re literally carrying like twenty pounds. Chill.”

“We all have to carry our own weight. You’re not special,” Meghan adds with a roll of her eyes. Meghan and Renata walk next to each other, several paces ahead of the rest of us, close to Enikk and Amari who are leading our group.

“Yeah, well, some of us have more weight on their shoulders than others,” Krissy retorts, shooting a pointed look in my direction.

I roll my eyes, choosing to ignore her jabs. Not much I could say anyway, I am one of two people in the group carrying nothing. When it came time to divide weight, I’d packed my bag with every intention to carry it. But, Kuvier being him was adamant about me not carrying anything, insisting that I “focus on staying warm and saving energy for the journey ahead.” Thankfully, Enikk made the same choice for Amari, so I’m not alone.

“We’re headed to a village full of swinging dicks. If you’re that upset, get your own goat dude,” Samra butts in with a matter-of-fact tone, referencing the fact that Kuvier had already explained his clan’s lack of women his age.

I fight the grin threatening to split my face. Samra's come to be one of my favorite people. Her no bullshit attitude and willingness to tell the truth above all else makes her someone I enjoy being around. I love not having to guess her thoughts.

Her statement shuts Krissy up, a respite I know won't last long. If there's one thing that girl can do, it's complain and talk. She'd told us all (very haughtily, I might add) that she was a big shot lawyer on Earth. So, I guess her never ending arguing makes some sense.

The landscape stretches out before us, a vast expanse of snow-covered terrain that seems both daunting and exhilarating. As we walk, the crunch of snow beneath our shoes fills the air, punctuated by occasional murmurs of conversation. We've been on the move for several hours. The walk is slow but consistent, and we haven't stopped once.

"How long do you think we will walk today?" I ask Kuvier, squinting up at him through the three suns at his back.

"Many more paces. We will want to reach the cache before the second eye closes."

The further into the mountains we walk, the more the path begins to narrow. Now in an alleyway created by mountainous rock, the wind and snow become even more treacherous, howling around us like a living entity. It's definitely colder up here too, the kind of chill that seeps into your bones and makes you ache.

"How are you?" Kuvier asks after we've walked for a while without another stop. We're down to only two suns in the sky and his voice is barely audible over the wind.

"I'm okay," I reply, squeezing his hand reassuringly. He continues staring at me, not believing me. He always seems to know when something is up. "Well, I'm just a bit cold."

He pulls us to a stop, but says nothing to the group. “We will catch up quickly enough. It is a straight path ahead,” he says when he sees my look of concern. He rearranges the things he carries and with his arms now free, he holds them out to me.

“Kuvier, you can’t carry me,” I protest, staying where I am. I don’t feel like dealing with extra comments from Krissy or any good-natured, but still annoying, ribbing from the others.

“And why can I not?” He reaches forward, snagging me by the wrist. He pulls me closer, his body heat offering some relief from the biting chill. “Are you not my mate?”

“Yes, but—”

“So then it is for me to determine how to care for you.” I bat halfheartedly at his chest.

“Yes, but the other girls don’t get carried.”

“My Sedona, with all respect,” he levels me with a stare, “I do not care about other females. One day, they may have a male such as I to carry them. Maybe not. It matters very little. Now come.”

With those final words, Kuvier pulls his cloak over my head and hefts me into his arms. I’m clinging to him like a koala, buried underneath the weight of his cloak that now wraps around us both. Despite my reservations, I can’t help but burrow deeper into the warmth. Between the cloak and his body heat, I feel better already.

“Hold tight.” That’s the only warning I get before Kuvier takes off at a jog up the mountain path.

The sudden movement startles me, but I quickly adjust, wrapping my arms around Kuvier's neck and holding on tight. The world around us blurs as he maneuvers through the rocky terrain with impressive agility, his strides sure and strong despite the icy ground.

I steal a glance ahead of us and see that we've already caught up with the rest of the group. In fact, we are squarely in the middle of the group now, and Kuvier is keeping pace easily. Krissy catches my eye and scowls. My ears heat and I duck my head back into Kuvier's neck, choosing to ignore the world around us, otherwise I'll die of embarrassment.

Kuvier keeps us moving, and for a some time I ride along in silence. A while later, Enikk pulls the group to a stop. I would never admit it, but I'm glad for the break. My feet are killing me, but I refuse to join Krissy in complaining, especially with me having it easier than everybody else. All of us gather around Enikk to listen. I lean my body against Kuvier, using his body to take the load off of mine. He rests an arm on my shoulder as his tail wraps possessively around my waist.

“We are about to enter the deepest parts of the Blood Mountains,” Xiomara says, repeating Enikk's words to us in English. He rumbles on a bit longer before she speaks again. “He says we are about halfway to the cave that we will rest at tonight. He says that going forward, we have to keep our eye out for anything unusual.”

“Define unusual,” Meghan quips back, earning a smirk from Renata.

“Anything that looks like it wants to eat us,” Renata replies dryly, scanning the surroundings with a wary eye.

Krissy scoffs, shifting the weight of her pack. “Great, just what I wanted to hear.”

Xiomara relays back to Enikk and Kuvier what is being said. Enikk chuckles, a sound

that carries warmth despite the chill in the air. “Enikk says that you’ll be fine, Krissy. Just stick close and watch your step.”

We all take a moment to eat some of the leftover dried meat and drink some water. Enikk continues ahead of us, leaving Amari with me, to scope out the cave. Kuvier tells me it’s to make sure it is empty and safe.

When he’s ready, Kuvier rounds us all up and we are back to walking. His hand finds mine as we walk and our fingers interlace.

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- kuvier -

Our first day is slow, but we make it to the cave before the final sun sets over the mountains. As we all file into the hunter's cave, I'm relieved that unlike last time, it is empty. I place Sedona on her feet and she immediately moves away, springing to help the other females unpack and start dinner.

She complains about being carried, but I know that she secretly enjoys it. It is the judgment of the others, especially the flaxen haired one, that she actually hates. But, she does not know how long I have waited to have her. Nothing will keep me from caring for her.

I turn to Enikk, who is watching his mate with a look of longing and agitation. I tap him on the shoulder and tilt my head toward the cave's mouth. We move towards the entrance to speak in private. The curly haired female, called Xiomara (I have finally learned how to say it), is quite nosey.

"You look troubled, clansman," I say, studying his tense expression and rigid body. I have a guess as to why, but I choose to let Enikk tell me for himself.

He runs a hand through his mane. "I am growing worried about returning to the clan," he confesses. "You know as well as I that I am the youngest male. Some may feel, 'why should Enikk receive a mate when we have waited so long?' Pah! My mate barely stands my presence. What hold do I have to claim what is meant to belong to me?"

"Your mate was chosen for you by the Great Mother," I state simply. Though I have

learned more about Sedona and these humans, the belief that they are gifts has not swayed. “That is all the claim you need to fight for what is rightfully yours.”

“If I didn’t think it would make Amari hate me,” Enikk admits in a shameful, whispered voice, “I would steal her away and keep her for myself.”

I understand his turmoil all too well. “I know the feeling,” I concede. “But our females need to be with their people. You see how they love to commune and chatter. We cannot separate them.”

Enikk’s eyes meet my gaze, and he places a hand on my shoulder. “Whatever happens, I will fight with you, Kuvier.”

“And I will fight with you, as well,” I promise, gripping his shoulder in return. It is strange to consider, but this journey and this secret we have held together has done more to bond me to my clansman than years of camaraderie in hunting.

Enikk and I turn our attention to cataloging our supplies, separating what we will carry for the rest of the journey from what we will leave behind in the hunter’s cave. We decide to take the choicest parts of the meats we have hunted as a hopeful peace offering to the clan. Perhaps it will ease the tension and help integrate our females into the commune.

As we work, the females do as well, unpacking and preparing for the night. Sedona’s laughter rings out as she kneels at a cooking stone and uses a bone knife to push meat around. I am drawn to the sound like a meplaq to a carcass, and I abandon my duties to move near her. I hear, and promptly ignore, Enikk’s irritated muttering behind me. He is perfectly able to count the last set of vifer stalks without me.

The other females pay me no mind as I approach. They are accustomed to me appearing wherever Sedona does. But, Sedona looks up from her cooking as I step

beside her and gives me a wide smile. I settle on the ground, easily maneuvering my female into my lap, still close enough to the stone not to hinder her efforts to cook.

The aroma of cooking meat fills my nose. She has added a new combination of spices today. I place my hands on her hips and massage the muscles there.

“What are you making, my Sedona?”

“Just meat and mala, but I thought I might add some different flavor.” She frowns, twisting to look at me. “Do you guys have bowls? Or a pot? Utensils? That would change how I cook a lot.” She says it wistfully and though I don’t know what some of these things are, I vow then to find my Sedona all the cooking items she could possibly need.

“No, but you will explain more to me what you mean later. I will get you what you need.” She nods contentedly and settles deeper into my arms.

The other females are talking and joking around us, their laughter mingling with the crackle of the fire. Soon enough, Sedona joins in, giggling and chattering animatedly. I sit quietly, listening to their conversation. Though there are many holes in my understanding, I recognize more and more of their language as I notice the females do the Lieq language. The more Xiomara translates, the more everyone knows. It is a slow process, but we are learning to understand each other better each day.

The easy kinship of the scene weighs heavily on me in the best way. There have been many moments in my life where I have seen others gathered around a shared meal as they share their company at celebrations, but I have always looked on from my loneliness. It is only now in all of my thirty-three seasons that I have found my place at a communal fire, and it is because of my Sedona that I have this.

I place a kiss on her neck out of instinct and tiny bumps bloom over her skin. A

sweet, enticing scent hits my nose, and I know that it is completely separate from the food that my mate cooked. My fingers grip at her hips, careful of my claws. She squirms slightly and the friction creates a line of desire that leads straight to my cock. Sedona stills when she feels my length grow hard pressed against her.

For a moment.

With a completely straight face, she shifts in my lap again, moving under the pretense of adjusting her position. But, the purposeful, slow grind of her plump ass into me leaves no room for guesswork about her intentions. It has been too long since I have watched her writhe in pleasure at my touch and my line of control is thin.

I put my lips to her ear, ignoring the conversation that has continued around us. “Behave.”

“I am, aren’t I?” Sedona counters as she twists enough that I can see the innocent blink of her eyes and the knowing tilt of her lips.

I shift her until her back is pressed flush against me again and bring my lips close to her pulse point. This is the spot I will mark when my mate allows me. On Lieq females, marks are placed on the wrist or shoulder where it can be visible through our downy fur. But, this spot on my Sedona calls to me. Exposed and so soft, I ache to sink my teeth into her and claim her for my own. Skimming my teeth over the throbbing spot, a shudder wracks her body.

“You know I do not care what others think of my behavior.” My voice is a whisper, spoken against her skin and audible only to her. “So, be a good girl if you want me to behave.”

Her body stills, but I feel her pulse jump under my lips. I smile against her smooth skin before nipping at it and pulling away. Sedona stays still for the rest of the night,

but the pebbles never leave her skin, and with every passing moment the scent of her arousal grows thicker in the air.

I am grateful when fatigue finally settles over the group, and the females begin yawning and talking of going to sleep. We are the first to leave the fire area, as I pull Sedona to the back of the cave. I had claimed a spot earlier, that was half hidden behind supplies, giving the semblance of privacy.

Sedona sits down, settling into the bed of furs I had already laid out. As she does every night, she pulls off several layers. Tonight, with the air saturated by her desire, my eyes track her movements hungrily. My eyes zone in on a sliver of smooth brown skin that is exposed when the tunic gets pulled over her head.

I pull my cloak off and spread it over her, ensuring that it covers her enough. It only covers my top half, but I generate enough heat to be warm regardless. Sliding under the cloak next to her, Sedona automatically finds her spot in the crook of my arm. She nestles into me, her body fitting perfectly against me.

I hold her close, savoring the feel of her warmth and the steady rhythm of her breathing. We lie still for a long while and eventually even breathing fills the cave as the others fall asleep. Sedona is quiet and still, and I think that she has fallen asleep. I let my tail go to her ankle, making soft circles. When she shivers against my hold, I realize then that she is awake and from there I cannot help myself.

My tail slides over her legs, rubbing gently, starting at her ankle and moving higher and higher. The tip of it brushes along her inner thigh and her breathing changes, becoming shallow and rapid.

Light fingers skim over my abdomen and I inhale deeply, searching for my calm. With the draw of the unfulfilled bond only getting worse, I find myself fighting for restraint. It is a fight I am sorely losing. It seems that my mate is working against me

in this when her fingers move lower until they are on the edge of the waist of my pants. She dips a finger under the leather waistline and I grab her hand.

“Sedona,” I whisper, my voice rough with need and warning. I move her hand to rest back on my chest. She finds my eyes in the dim light, hers dark and leaden with hunger.

“Kuvier,” she breathes my name like a promise, but her next words cause me to break. “Please touch me.”

“The others?”

“I can be quiet. I promise.”

Lowering my head, I capture her lips in a fierce trap. She responds immediately, her hand moving to tangle in my fur as she pulls me closer. Our tongues meet and the taste of her is almost more than I can bear.

My hands roam her body, finding the soft curves and the hidden places that make her gasp. Her skin is like silk beneath my fingers, supple and warm. She arches against me, her body pressing into me. My tail moves on its own, sliding under her thin, yellow tunic and tracing along her stomach. I slip it over the crest of her breast, rubbing back and forth over the rock hard bud. She shivers, a soft moan escaping her lips. I lean down to steal her sounds for my own. Enikk will hear nothing. These noises are for my ears alone.

Pressing my lips into hers, I take my time, enjoying the way she writhes beneath me. I roll us over, holding her to me until she straddles my body, her tanned legs coming to rest on either side of my hips. The position puts her cunt right over me, the warmth seeping into my cock and making it strain in my pants.

Sliding my hands under her hips, I tilt her so her back arches, making her fleshy ass stick in the air. I trail my tail up the back of her legs, slipping over her knees, and under the loose shorts she wears to bed. I almost lose it completely when I realize she does not wear the thin covering over her cunt that she usually does. I have immediate access to her; I can feel her wetness, and my tail slides between her slick folds with ease. She groans and I swallow the sound greedily.

I move my tail with purpose, teasing and stroking, listening for changes in her breathing and feeling for tenses in her body to show me the path to make her come undone. When my tail slips over that small nub at the apex of her folds, she jerks against me, her sounds barely contained.

I circle it over and over, and it is not long until she is trembling on top of me. Her cries come closer together, getting harder to stifle as she grinds herself into my tail with fervor. I can feel her body tightening, her breath coming in short, ragged pants.

When she finally shatters, her body convulsing in ecstasy, I hold her close, capturing every breath and sob in my mouth. Her fingers grip the fur on my chest tightly as she convulses on top of me. Soon, too soon, her trembles slow and her breathing evens. She relaxes onto my chest, still straddling me.

I let my claws trail gently up and down her spine, as I wrap my wet tail around her ankle. Her head rests against my chest, her breath soft and even. I stroke her hair, my heart swelling with a fierce, protective adoration.

She makes a move to slide off of me, but I hold her still. "Sleep, my mate. I will be here when you awaken."

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- sedona -

Soft kisses trail over my face, planting on my forehead, my nose, each cheek, and then lingering on my lips. Each touch sends a shiver down my spine, igniting a familiar heat deep within me that quickly chases away the sleep.

When my eyes open, Kuvier is looming over me, encompassing my entire view.

“Good morning, my Sedona,” he mumbles against my lips, his voice husky with want.

I knew I wanted him before, even before our fun time in the snow. But, after last night, I feel like someone lit a fire under my desire. If we didn’t have a potential audience, I would have gone all the way with him last night. As it was, what we did do...the tail ...god was it something magical.

A small smile tugs at my lips. “Good morning.”

He attaches his mouth to mine again and I fall into the kiss.

“If I could leave my mouth against yours for the rest of my days, I would have nothing to complain of,” he murmurs against my lips.

“You like kissing then?” He takes my bottom lip between his teeth, nipping at the flesh, before trailing pecks down my neck. Fire ignites in me and I squirm under him.

“Is this what this custom is called? Kissing?” I nod wordlessly, my head falling to the

side as his ministrations find their way to the slope of my collarbone. “Then yes, kissing pleases me.”

His hands move gently over my body, his touch both tender and searing. I feel his desire for me through every touch, a primal need that matches my own. For a moment, it's just the two of us, lost in the intimacy of the morning.

But before things can go any further, a rustling sound interrupts us. I turn my head slightly, peering around the pile of supplies around us. Nearby, Renata stirs, her eyes blinking open as she yawns and stretches. Some of the other women are waking up as well, their movements and quiet conversations filling the cave with life.

Kuvier and I exchange a knowing glance, a mixture of frustration and amusement flickering between us. He leans down to press a lingering kiss on my lips before reluctantly pulling away and rolling off of me.

We separate without any other words and begin packing our things for travel. Well, Kuvier does. As I've come to expect, he wants to do it all for me. I choose not to fuss with him about it, especially because I plan to walk on my own two feet for the whole day. Might as well give him some wins before then.

I decide instead to go ahead and start breakfast. Shared meals have become almost exclusively my job. The others will sometimes help me with chopping and prepping, but for the most part, it's a role I slid into easily and one that I like.

As I approach the fire, I can't help but notice the dark cloud that is Enikk hanging over the cave. He sits leaned against a far wall, glaring ahead. He's gotten increasingly agitated since the boys announced that we were returning to their village. I feel like it has something to do with the lack of progress he's making on the Amari front.

She's been a bit fickle with him. One minute going with him to gather vifer reeds, or walking alongside him while we travel, and then the next she'll ignore him completely. I don't push her on it, it's her right to decide how much she's willing to give and take. But, I do feel a little bad for the guy.

I consider trying to pull him into conversation, but his posture is tense and his expression dark. He scowls mostly into the distance, occasionally casting disappointed and frustrated looks towards Amari, who seems to be avoiding him and his gaze once again.

Deep in thought, I continue with the breakfast preparations, focusing on slicing some dried meat and placing it on the heated stone near the fire. We're back to dried meat from the rations in the cave, and whatever Kuvier and Enikk had left. Kuvier and Enikk want to save the frozen raw meat for refilling the cache and giving to the clan. Kuvier said that they didn't want to show up without food since that was what they'd been sent out to do originally.

He's still really weird about his clan, freezing up whenever I try to ask him what it's like for him there. Both he and Enikk get weird with us when we ask and it's making some of the women a little tense. I trust Kuvier completely, whether that's a good thing or not, I don't know. But, regardless, I'm not worried that I'm walking into anything unsafe; I am concerned by the stress on his face whenever I mention it.

I'm bent over the fire, stirring meat around the cooking stone, when I feel something brush over my ass and see Kuvier staring at my backside, his tail trailing over the curve of it. Giggling, I swat it away, straightening. He pulls me against him, kissing the top of my head.

"You seem lost in your mind," he comments, peering down at me. I consider talking to him about the clan, but don't feel like worrying him over it.

“Yeah, I was thinking that Enikk seems really off this morning,” I murmur quietly, glancing over at where he stands still alone, lost in his thoughts.

Kuvier nods, his brow furrowing in concern. “He has similar worries as I do,” he admits reluctantly, his gaze flickering towards Enikk. “Among our people, the bond between kthesis is sacred, if proven.”

“What do you mean by proven?” Kuvier blanches but answers the question after a beat.

“Typically, a Lieq male and female both feel the pull of the bond,” he explains in a soft voice, massaging the knots in my shoulder. “They will be so driven by desire that they complete the bond immediately.”

“How do they complete the bond?” I have a feeling I know, and my ears grow hot in expectation of his answer.

“They lie together in the furs.” He rubs a hand along the length of my body and I shiver under his caresses. “And then the male will mark his female with a bite.” He leans forward and tenderly bites at his favorite spot on my neck. Goosebumps erupt along my skin.

“Is that what you want to do to me?” I should be disturbed and put off. Instead, I sound breathless and needy.

“When you accept me into your furs, I will mark you with my teeth and my scent and none will question what belongs to me.” His words are a statement, a promise, and a prediction.

I consider that for a moment. “Is the lack of marks why you guys are so worried?”

“Without the mark, some males may see it as an opportunity to stake a claim. It is especially difficult for Enikk because his mate does not grow warm and wet around him, and others will be able to tell.”

I feel my whole face heat up at that last comment but don't address it. My mind is focused on this whole marking thing. Part of me blazes at the thought, but the other part feels fear.

A mark like that would be permanent, it would make this change in my life a forever thing, and it's hard to know if that is what I want. It's a primal gesture of claiming and ownership, something I'm not entirely sure I'm ready for, despite the undeniable pull I feel towards him. I've only been on this planet for maybe a month at most after all.

But, as I absorb his words, the gravity of our situation dawns on me. This world, with its unfamiliar customs and expectations, demands more from us human women than I initially understood. It's not just about survival, it's about navigating relationships and traditions.

“That's...a lot of pressure,” I murmur softly, my gaze drifting towards where Amari sits, wrapping up her furs, still lost in her own thoughts.

“Pressure?” He cocks his head in confusion.

“Um, weight. A lot to deal with that would be my fault if things go wrong.”

Kuvier pulls my gaze to meet his, frowning deeply. “I did not tell you of this to force you to make a decision you are not ready for.”

“Still, I would rather you not have to worry about it. I am just not ready yet.”

“And so we will wait until you are.” He brushes his lips over mine. “I have waited thirty-three seasons for this joy that you so freely give me. I will wait a never ending amount of seasons if that is what you need me to do.”

“Alright you two, break up the lovey dovey fest. I want brekkie,” Meghan announces, breaking through our conversation with ease, as she plops down on the dirt ground near the fire. I snigger and somewhat reluctantly pull away from Kuvier. He gives my hips one last squeeze before letting me go and moving towards Enikk.

For the next little while, I pass out food and eat myself. Enikk and Kuvier both stop in for helpings, but scarf their servings down before quickly returning to whispering with their heads pressed together. As everyone mills around, eating and preparing, I make my way to Amari.

“Hey, you okay?” I prod gently, glancing sideways at her. She’s sitting off to the side, quiet and watching.

Amari nods, though her eyes flicker nervously towards Enikk before returning to the task of arranging her things in her knapsack. “Yeah, just...does Enikk seem off lately? Like, really off?”

I sigh softly, understanding her concern. “Yeah, I noticed too. He’s worried about the village, about what might happen when we get there.”

“Why? Isn’t it his home?” She looks up at me with wide, young eyes. At twenty, she’s pretty like a doll, with a look of innocence that makes you want to protect her.

I explain quietly, mindful of Enikk's proximity. “Kuvier told me that he’s concerned about how others might view his bond with you.”

She grimaces at the reminder. “That’s not my responsibility.”

“I know, and I know you don’t love the whole mate thing. I’m just explaining why he’s acting weird.” I hand her the serving of food I set aside for her and she takes it gratefully.

“I don’t get why he’s making it such a big deal. He just met me.”

“True, but it goes pretty deep for them.” She picks at her food while listening to me. “We don’t feel what they feel quite as much, but apparently, for them, it’s like a strong ass biological drive. And it’s really important in their culture.”

I pause and consider my next words carefully, but I feel that she needs to know. Even if it might give her additional anxiety she doesn’t need.

“Kuvier told me that people might not respect their ‘claims’ over us. Meaning that other randos might try to, like, steal us or something because they don’t feel like our dudes are worthy or whatever.”

She reels back at that, glancing between me and Enikk’s direction. “What the hell?”

“Yeah, there’s a mark and shit that’s supposed to tell others that we are spoken for.” I gesture between us. “Neither of us have fully completed the process, so it means that other people can challenge Kuvier and Enikk for our hands, basically.”

“Like, hands in marriage?” she exclaims, alarmed.

“Sorta, just without the paper and priest.” The joke falls flat in the face of her horror.

“So, basically, my options are let Enikk claim me in marriage, or get shoved off onto some other goat dude that I know even less?” I grimace at the wording.

“Well, when you put it that way...”

“There doesn’t really feel like another way to put it.” She groans and rakes her hands through her wild hair. “Look, I get that this is easier for you. You and Kuvier, like, love each other already, or whatever, but this is a nightmare for me.”

I open my mouth to correct her about the love part, but I can’t seem to form the words. Instead what comes out is, “I’m sorry. This is sucky.”

“Yeah,” she huffs roughly, “no kidding.”

We sit in silence for a moment, and I think about how to approach what I need to say next.

“I, uh, I know this isn’t ideal,” I begin hesitantly, “but of all the people to have forced on you, Enikk isn’t all that bad.”

Amari levels me with a fierce glower. I hold up my hands in defense. I know what I’m saying sounds terrible, but for her sake, I need her to hear it. She might think Enikk sucks, but I have a feeling she’d feel worse with someone less sweet and understanding.

“I’m just saying, whoever puts up a fight for us could be worse. And old.” Her expression crumples as she realizes how big of a possibility that is. “I’m putting my eggs in Kuvier’s basket, and I know that it isn’t the same for you, but I think you should put yours in Enikk’s. Even if it’s just in a friendship way.”

Amari’s brow furrows in a mix of frustration and resignation. It’s a long moment before she speaks again.

“I get it, I do. This is a different world, a different culture, and I’m going to have to adjust. Especially if Samra can’t get us out of here.” Her voice is tinged with uncertainty as she continues, “But this is everything I didn’t want anymore.”

“Do what’s best for you. Regardless of what that choice is, I’ll support you.” I tell her, placing a reassuring hand on her arm.

Amari’s gaze is distant as she considers my words. We sit in silence for a while after that, until everyone is ready and packed. The time to go arrives, and we quickly set off for our second day of travel.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:54 am

- kuvier -

“Enikk,” I call, walking a bit further up the path away from the females who are huddled around a small fire, eating and warming their hands.

Enikk leaves his spot where he watches his mate from several feet away and finds his way to me.

“We are close to the cave,” I state when he is within hearing range. Even for us, our hearing is impeded by the whistling wind.

“Yes, I know.” He looks back at his mate. “I would not like to go ahead this time. My Amari seems strangely on edge today, and I do not wish to leave her in such a mood.”

I do not like this. I also would not like to leave my Sedona behind, but fairness is fairness. He has already left once, it is only right that I make the same sacrifice.

I nod in understanding. “Very well. I will tell my mate that I will be walking ahead.”

Enikk claps me on the shoulder. “Thank you, clansman.”

We break apart, and he returns to watching his mate from afar while I go to my Sedona. She sits huddled closely with the female who knows all of our words. I have practiced her name, Xiomara. My Sedona told me that the other females do not like only being addressed as ‘female.’ I do not understand this as, if they simply called me ‘male,’ this would be nothing. But, she was adamant that I practice their names. I remember some better than others.

She looks up the moment I am near and moves away from Xiomara to come to me.

“I am going ahead to scout the cave.”

“Okay, I’m ready.” I shake my head at her.

“No, ti khesi, I am going alone.” I shake my head, my voice gentle. “It is better if you stay here and rest. It is cold, and the trek is rough.”

She crosses her arms, her jaw set stubbornly. “That’s not a good enough reason. I want to stay with you, so I’m going.”

I know I cannot convince her to stay without revealing too much about my relationship with the clan and explaining why I worry someone may be in the cave.

“Fine, but I am carrying you.”

She does not protest, and I lift her into my arms. We are off, bounding up the path immediately. I do not like that she will be near a cave where any hunter could stumble upon us alone. But, where she nestles against me, despite the cold, I feel a warmth spread through my chest.

The journey takes a bit of time, and at first, Sedona chatters at me about something that she found funny from one of the other females, but after a while, she quiets down. When I hear her breathing steady, I look down; she has fallen asleep in my arms. I smile softly, adjusting my grip to make sure she is comfortable.

She sleeps the entire second half of our walk, and I do my best to keep my footing steady so as not to wake her. But, when we get close to the cave, I gently wake her up and set her on her feet.

I pull my cloak off my shoulders, ignoring the cold that hits me, and put it around her shoulders. “Wait here.”

She nods, still half-asleep and moves off the path to sit against a rock wall across from the cave. I move forward quickly, not wanting to leave her out here for long, and step into the cave, my senses on high alert. With relief, I realize that while I do smell a hunter, Ruuq, his scent is old, meaning that he has come and gone and will likely not be back.

I return to Sedona, who is now fully awake and waiting for me. Holding my hand out to her, she slips her palm in mine and I lead us into the cave.

The moment we are inside, Sedona sits around the rocks that signify the fire pit and I get to work starting the fire. When I get a spark going, I add more vifer stalks and the fire blazes a deep red before settling back to orange.

Sedona walks around the cave, chewing on a piece of mala as she inspects our surroundings. I let her explore while I move around the cave to find a place to set up our furs for the night. When I finally unfurl them, I am pleased with our space. The cave has a small divet in the back that allows for just the tiniest bit of privacy.

I cannot help but hope for a repeat of last night when we retire today.

“This is a good place to sleep,” Sedona declares, coming up behind me, still holding her mala.

She pulls off another small piece and puts it in her mouth. Feeling playful, I snatch the big piece from her and take a bite, grinning at her. She makes a squeal of outrage and reaches for it. The effort is futile of course. I am nearly three heads taller than her.

“Hey! That’s my-nuh.” I pause at this as she says a word in her language I have not heard her use. I take a thoughtful, but small, bite, still playing with her.

“What is this ‘my-nuh?’” She harrumphs and puts her hands on her hips.

“It’s pronounced ‘mine,’ and I’ll tell you if you give it back.” I smirk but offer her the half piece back. She snatches it from me and shoves the whole thing in her mouth, chewing haughtily.

When she swallows, she speaks, “Mine is like ‘ti’ in your language. It’s something that belongs to you.” I think on this.

Mine. The word sticks in my mind, powerful and primal.

“Mine,” I say as I step closer to her, feeling an urge I cannot quite name. My hand reaches out, and I cup her jaw, tilting her head up to look at me. Her breathing shallows as our gazes lock and the temperature in the cave raises.

“What’s yours?” The question is breathy and low. I do not answer at first as I toy with her bottom lip.

“You.” Her lips part and she takes the pad of my thumb between them, suckling gently before nipping at me.

“Prove it.” My grip tightens ever so slightly on her jaw as a fierce stab of desire rips through me.

“Do not test me, ti khesi,” I murmur in a low, rough voice. “You may not like what I do to prove it.” Her eyes darken in lust, a challenge clear in those dark irises.

“Prove. It.”

My mouth is on hers before the words have fully fallen from her lips. She is immediately receptive to me, her body moldable in my hands. My hold on her jaw slips and my fingers cinch around her throat in a firm, tender grasp. The scent of her arousal sweetens the air, a fruity, smoky musk that I would drink in if I could.

I am in my body, but not the leader of it, as I clutch her to me, my free hand palming at her full ass. I grab and caress her, loving the way she arches her body into my hold. She fits into me so perfectly, there can be no doubt whose she is.

“This mouth is mine,” I say as I take her bottom lip gently between my teeth and suck. I pull away with a pop. Moving my attention on, I place soft kisses along her jaw, following it down the curve of her neck.

“This neck is mine, and one day I will put my mark right here.” I bite down, not hard enough to break skin, but hard enough to make her moan and leave an imprint.

My fingers find the edge of her tunic and I lift it up, gripping the yellow one as well, pulling them both off of her. She is bare underneath the tunic, gone is the band that had covered them from my eyes the day she bathed. I stare hungrily and cannot resist dropping to my knees, putting my face level with them. My fingers graze the edge of her teat, following the swell down her body.

“These,” I say, taking them in my hands and sucking at each of the deep brown nubs, “are mine.”

Her head falls back with a deep mewl as I suck and nip at her until she is taut and puckered to a hard point. I move my mouth to the crater between each teat and place sloppy kisses on her chest, following down her body until I get to her soft stomach. I bite it and she jerks with a breathy gasp.

“This is mine, too.”

I take her hips, and steer her backwards before slowly pulling her down to her knees on top of the furs. When she is kneeling in front of me, I push her to a seating position and then lay her down on her back. Her chest heaves as she looks at me from beneath her lashes. Slowly, I pull her lower layers off until she is revealed to me completely.

She is too exquisite for words. All curves and soft skin that calls to be gripped while I pump into her. But, today is not the moment for that. When I first take her, I will need more than the time we have before the others get here.

Her knees are up, the bottoms of her feet on the ground, and I keep my eyes on her as I slowly part her legs. I look down and groan. Great Mother, give me strength. Her cunt is a beautiful brownish pink and covered in fur the same color as her mane, but just a bit coarser. It is slick and swollen and I want nothing more than to own it.

I move one hand to part her lips exposing her more to me. Up close, I zero in on the raised bud at the top of her cunt. This is the point that makes her wild. I blow over it, teasing her and she writhes.

“This cunt,” I take my clawless finger and rub it between her slick brown folds, “is mine.”

I make a few circles around her most sensitive spot and she bucks into my hand rasping out a breath. Gliding my finger down, I thrust my finger into her and her hips leave the ground.

“It is mine to touch.” I continue my thrusts, strong and smooth, shifting my body until I am laying in front of her. Her knees fall open, exposing her to me in the most beautiful way.

I pick up speed, my finger pumping in and out of her wetness as her cunt clenches

around the digit. “It is mine to pleasure.”

“Fuck, Kuvier,” she cries out, meeting me thrust for thrust.

“And, it is mine to taste.” I flick my tongue out, just skimming over her swollen bud, and I almost lose control at the taste. She whines at my light lick and tries to press her cunt to my mouth.

“Please,” she pants, wiggling her hips, trying to find some kind of friction, but I don’t allow her to find the satisfaction she craves just yet.

“Are you going to beg your mate, ti khesi?” I make lazy half circles around her with my finger, just enough to pleasure, but not quite what she wants. “You know I love to hear those ‘pleases’ fall from those pretty lips. Beg for the pleasure only I can give you.”

She makes a wailing sound of frustration, but opens her mouth and says, “Please, Kuvier, I want to feel your mouth.”

I lean closer, blowing along her wet, clenching cunt. “Tell me where.”

“On my pussy,” she rasps out before using a finger to push mine down harder, “on my clit. Just on me. Please, I need you.”

With those words, I let myself do what I have wanted to do since the first time I smelt her arousal. Growling, I press my face to her like a mad beast, sucking and lapping at her sweet juices. She cries out, her hips bucking against my mouth, pushing her sweet core further into me. I hold her steady, one hand gripping her thighs and pressing her into the ground, being careful of my claws.

I focus on her pleasure center, her clit as she said. Latching on to it, I suck and her

cries rise to a high-pitched vibrato. Her moans grow louder, more desperate, and I can feel her nearing the edge. I do not let up, slipping my clawless finger back into her, thrusting in rhythm with my sucks and licks. I am driving her higher and higher, until she finally shatters, her body arching off the furs as she screams my name. Her whole body quakes, shaking around me and a rush of wetness coats my tongue.

I switch from sucking, to placing gentle kisses along her inner thigh, and pull my finger out of her, not wanting to overwhelm her. Slowly her trembling stops, and her clutch on my mane gives way to affectionate stroking.

“Mine,” I repeat one more time, biting her inner thigh and leaving a light imprint.

“Yours.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:54 am

- sedona -

The steady thumping of Kuvier's heart is what finally wakes me up. For a moment, I just lie there, savoring the warmth and comfort of being so close to him. It's a new feeling; one I'm growing increasingly fond of.

His chest rises and falls gently, pressing into mine with each inhale. I'm sprawled across him, our limbs tangled together. His tail is wrapped around my upper thigh, desperately close to a place I can't help but wish he'd touch again. I sigh, pushing away the encroaching dirty thoughts. Today is our last day of travel and we need to get up and get started.

A glance around the cave tells me that others have started to wake up too. It won't be long until we are supposed to be leaving. I sit up slowly, carefully swinging my leg off of him and ending up kneeling next to his still sleeping form. I stretch my arms above my head, working out the cricks in my muscles. The one thing I really miss about Earth is a bed. Sleeping on a fur covered metal floor was doing horrendous things to my back.

A hand dives under my shirt and brushes over my breast, tweaking my nipple. I inhale sharply and look down into bleary, golden eyes. I grab his hand before it can do anymore to get me riled up.

"Good morning to you too," I tease with a soft chuckle, leaning down to press a kiss to Kuvier's forehead.

He gives me a small smile, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Good morning, ti

khesi,” he replies, his voice deeper and a bit rough from sleep.

I study his face for a moment, my fingers tracing the line of his jaw. I can sense the tension in him. His muscles are tight, and his usually calm expression is marred by a furrowed brow. Something is bothering him, and it’s impossible not to notice.

“Are you alright? You seem...upset.” The word I wanted to say was ‘tense’ but I don’t yet know how to say that in his language. I make a mental note to ask Xiomara, who has become like my Lieq to English dictionary.

He hesitates, then nods. “I have many thoughts. I will share them, but first we must prepare.”

I can tell there’s more to it, but I don’t press him. Instead, I crawl out of the furs and stand up. The bitter cold hits me almost immediately and I quickly start getting dressed, pulling on the layers we’ve fashioned to protect us from the cold.

I always wear my yellow scrubs as a base, and when I sleep, that’s all I wear. Kuvier is such a space heater, that he and his cloak draped over me are all I need to stay warm. Walking around alone, however, I need a tunic, these wonky pants, and snow wraps around my ankles to fight back the cold. And even then it’s not always enough.

The morning moves fairly quickly with everyone pitching in to get us ready. Xiomara is organizing the supplies and making sure everyone has what they need. Renata, Sabrina, and Meghan are sorting the last of the food, and I catch sight of Amari and Enikk sharing a quiet moment near the fire as they bind red reeds together to pack away for the journey. Samra sits tinkering with her tablet and Krissy is french braiding her hair.

No one has started breakfast, so after I’ve folded up our sleeping furs to give to Kuvier, I make that my job. Knowing that we need to be fueled well for today, I make

the alien version of steak and beans using diced xiixii and a deep purple bean that Kuvier once told me was used to make the mala bread. Mushed up with spices and water, it was the texture of refried beans and the taste of butter beans. Coupled with diced, sauteed oftii meat, it's a hearty and filling breakfast.

I can't help but feel pride when the others make comments about it. Xiomara's words the other day about finding a place in the group stuck with me. She's right, as long as I have Kuvier, I don't have to worry about my place. Still, I don't want my only saving grace to be the man I'm attached to or my terrible sewing. So, discovering that my love and skill for cooking translates well on Atiqarii is a big win in my book.

After breakfast, I'm packing away the cooking things when Kuvier finally approaches me. He'd been almost avoiding me since this morning. His expression is serious and Xiomara is behind him, so I know that whatever he has to say is important. He hates including her in our conversations if he can avoid it.

"What's going on?"

"Ti khesi," he says softly, and then in a mix of his language and mine, "there are things you need to know before we reach my clan."

"And he asked me to translate." I look between the two of them before gesturing for them to sit in front of me. We settle in a triangle and I look to Kuvier expectantly.

Kuvier takes a deep breath, glancing at Xiomara, who nods encouragingly. He begins, his voice steady but tinged with apprehension. I listen intently as Kuvier explains, with the help of Xiomara, his childhood, his words coming slowly and heavily. He tells me that he was born through infidelity. The bond that we have is abnormal for his people, but they are still heavily monogamous and enter chosen matings that seem similar to Earth marriages. His dad was shitty, though, and cheated on his chosen mate with Kuvier's mother. That is something that apparently never happens among

his people.

“It brought shame upon our family and has placed struggle upon our heads.” He looks away from me as he talks, and it pains me to see him believe that he has any need for shame over the choices of his father.

I glance at Xiomara, who translates the more complex parts, her voice gentle. Kuvier continues, explaining how after his birth, many bad things happened to the clan—a cave-in, an epidemic that Xiomara calls the Death Calling, the death of his father, and a sudden drop in birth rates. Essentially, everything went to shit, and the clan, superstitious as they are, blamed Kuvier and his mother for these misfortunes. They believed they broke the sanctity of mating laws in the Great Mother’s eyes. My heart aches for him as he speaks.

“Because of this, the current Atan, my father’s brother, will do anything to ensure that I am not happy.” His eyes meet mine with intensity. “He will turn the clan against us and try to sway you away from me.”

I peer at Kuvier for a long moment, taking in the dejected set of his shoulder and the subtle fear in his eyes, and I realize that he thinks I will be swayed. He thinks that this story he’s told me somehow changes my mind about him. I feel a deep surge of anger towards his father, his clan, his chief—all of them are at fault in my eyes.

“Thank you for help, Xio,” I say instead of addressing Kuvier right away. “I got it from here.”

“For sure, call me if you need me.” She pats Kuvier’s shoulder comfortingly and gives me a soft smile before heading back to the group.

I scooch closer to Kuvier, my hand reaching for his. “Kuvier.” When he doesn’t look at me, I crawl closer to him, swinging my leg over him until I’m straddling his lap.

He still doesn't meet my eyes, though his hands slide over my hips, clutching me closer.

"Hey, look at me." I put a finger under his chin and tilt his head up. When his eyes meet mine, I speak firmly, a mix of his language and mine as I work to get my meaning across. "I'm not superstitious, and none of those things are your fault, Kuvier."

"It will be hard. Junq will do everything in his power to take you from me." He looks so forlorn it literally tears at me.

"Kuvier, your chief sounds like a terrible dude, but I don't care." I speak with conviction. "No one is swaying me away from you. Not him. Not anyone."

Kuvier's eyes soften, the majority of his anxiety alleviated, and he leans forward, brushing his lips over mine. "I will work my whole life to be worthy of you."

My heart clenches and I rub a hand across his jaw. "You already are. Don't doubt that for a moment."

He pulls me into his arms, holding me tightly. "Thank you, ti khesi," he murmurs, his voice thick with emotion. "You have brought me great comfort on this day."

Kuvier kisses me deeply, pouring all his relief into the embrace. I respond with equal fervor, my hands tangling in his mane. The world around us fades away until the sound of wolf whistles and playful laughter from the other women brings us back to reality. We pull away, both of us chuckling softly, our foreheads resting against each other.

"Mine?" Kuvier murmurs, his breath fanning across my face.

“Yours.” I say the word with the most conviction I’ve ever felt because I know it’s true.

Whatever might happen going forward, Kuvier has taken my heart for his own and I am never getting it back.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:54 am

- kuvier -

On our final day of walking, the journey to the village takes less time than I anticipate. The females move with haste they did not have before, and we are within paces of the clan commune far too soon. My restlessness rises as we get closer.

A sense of unease gnaws at me. Threats from every direction loom over us, but we have no choice but to press on. I cannot help but feel that we may be leaving behind the dangers of being caught out here in the Dark Season, but the clan certainly poses dangers of its own.

My concern is made worse by the mate bond. Moving closer and closer to a clan of unmated males, closer to challenges I know will come, has my blood humming. I feel confident in my Sedona's desire to be with me. Our conversation this morning was everything I needed to hear.

But, I know my Atan, and I know my clan. Something will happen. Something will go wrong. Every instinct is telling me to prepare for a fight. When Enikk makes our first and only stop before the village, I am practically shaking with energy I do not have a way to release.

"We are almost there." He declares this to the females in their language.

He has been far better about learning their words than me. Where I struggle, it seems to come with ease for him. Of course, he has a greater incentive. His female seems determined to only use the one with the tight curls who knows all of our words to talk to him. Enikk has worked hard in the days since the females hatched to learn more

and more of their complicated language. I am once again the luckiest male, as my female enjoys talking in Lieq more than her human words.

“We made good time,” Enikk continues, “We will rest and continue soon.” Everyone seems in agreement as they collapse against boulders or on top of their packs.

I leave Sedona in the circle of females and move just a few feet away toward Enikk, my eyes still trained on her as I talk to him.

He assesses me. “You feel restless as well?”

“The closer we grow to our home, the less at ease I feel.”

“Me as well, clansman.” He shakes his head with a deep sigh. “My scent is nowhere on my female nor is hers on me. We are scented like strangers, not mates. Things will not be easy for me when I reach the clan.”

This pulls me up short. I had not considered the lack of scent today. While I know she smells of me—she has been locked in my embrace for quite a while—I know that the scent I leave on her is not lingering. There is only one way to leave a lingering, claiming scent on her. Arousal scents last far longer than any other.

“I will scent mark my female before we arrive,” I declare suddenly. Enikk nods as if he expected this.

“It is a joy for you that she will let you.” His words are sincere, but tinged with bitterness as his eyes track the movements of his elusive mate.

“I will move further away from the group or Sedona will grow embarrassed.” Plans are forming in my head as I see the many large boulders scattered around us. Some are big enough to block my full form, and I spot one such stone that will do just

nicely.

“You will return soon?”

“Yes, I will not be long.” Though we have made good time, the second eye will set and we will want to already be with the clan when there is one eye still open.

I leave Enikk and walk to my mate. She sits on a smaller rock, slightly away from the others, her face pulled into a pensive expression. When I approach, I hold out my hands to her. She looks up at me, but does not move to get up.

“Are we leaving already?”

“No, my mate, I wish to take you over there.” I point to the largest boulder in our vicinity.

Sedona cocks her head, curious and confused. “Why?”

When it comes to her safety, I make demands not requests, but for anything else, my Sedona’s word is paramount. What she wants and does not want is my greatest concern.

“I wish to pleasure away the crease in your brow.” As I say this, I reach my thumb out and carefully smooth over the wrinkles on her forehead, careful of my claws.

Her lips part and I can see the lust tinge her gaze. But she hesitates, likely thinking of the many things she has to weigh her with worry. I wait for her response, willing to accept whatever the answer is. Yet, I feel relief and desire as she puts a hand in one of mine.

“Okay, but I want to walk.” She looks around at the other females. “I don’t want to

bring too much attention to us.”

I give no response to that, though I do not pull her into my arms as I desire. Instead, I walk with her several paces away and behind the cover of the large stone.

The moment we are away from prying eyes, an urgency like that of a wild beast falls over me, the aggression I have felt all day channeling into pure lust. I grip her jaw in one hand, wrapping a clawed hand around her throat with the other. She swallows against my palm and I groan before pressing my lips to hers in a heated caress. She responds to my touches immediately, her scent perfuming the air as chills work their way up her body. Her small hands clutch my hips, gripping me for stability as much as to pull me closer.

My hands roam over her body, feeling the warmth of her skin beneath my touch, gripping and grabbing at the soft flesh. I waste no more time, pulling her pants down. Sedona lets out a squeal but makes no move to cover herself.

She shivers in the cold and I move closer, allowing my body heat and sheer size to hide her from the chill. She grabs at my shoulders, but lets me continue to undress her until she is bare from the waist down, her many lower layers laying safely across the rock.

Dropping to my knees in front of her, I growl when I realize the height difference is still a problem. Slipping my arms between her legs and under her thighs, I heft her into my arms until her core is pressed to my face, her bottom resting in the crook of my arms and both legs slung over my shoulders. Now cradled in my embrace, she is at the perfect height.

“Oh my god, Kuvier,” she gasps out as my tongue darts out, dragging over her wet slit.

Her hips buck into my mouth on instinct. Her scent fills my senses, intoxicating and familiar, and the taste of her is enough to make me lose my thoughts. I could drown in her taste and die a happy male.

Flattening my tongue, I swipe it across her cunt, this time passing across the entire length of it, collecting her nectar on my tongue like I am starving. She groans, her hands tangling in my mane as I taste her, my tongue working feverishly to draw out her pleasure.

“Please,” she moans softly, her voice filled with need.

Wanting this to last, I toy with her at first. Licking and sucking with fervor, I move my mouth against her core, but I avoid the place I know makes her wild. I expertly avoid her pleasure button at the apex of her cunt until she is absolutely drenched and panting for me.

“Are you going to come on my tongue?” I redouble my efforts, my hands gripping her hips as I bring her closer to the edge.

“Fuck!” she calls when I nip ever so gently at the bud that all but controls her reactions. Her hips start to move of their own accord, bucking and grinding against my face and I revel in it.

“Wring your pleasure from my mouth,” I choke out between suckles and licks at her. “I am yours to use.”

At my words, her breath comes in quick, shallow gasps, and words fall from her lips that I cannot even fully understand. When I feel her start to tense, I know she is close. I lock my mouth around the small nub and suck, using my tongue to circle it.

That is all it takes.

With a final, shuddering cry, she reaches her peak. Her body bows in my arms as she presses her dripping cunt further into my mouth, writhing against me. I do not stop as she rides out her ecstasy. I do not stop until she is sagging against me, until the last drops have been wrung from her and her nectar fills my mouth.

I hold her up for several moments after that, waiting until her legs stop shaking before I carefully set her back on the ground. She wobbles but I hold her up with hands around her waist, still on my knees. She drapes her arms over my shoulder and captures my mouth in a searing kiss. When she pulls away, her eyes are still dark with desire. Knowing it is cold, I start to help her pull her pants back on, my hands lingering on her bare skin.

“What made you want to do that?” she asks, her breathing still ragged.

“I am marking you with scent.” My voice is low as I finally stand to my full height. “Your arousal covers my face. Any Lieq can smell it now.”

“But doesn’t that mean, I marked you with my scent?” Heat crawls up her flesh, but she bites her lips thoughtfully, continuing before I can answer. “I know what to do. Can I have this?”

“Of course, why?” I unwrap the fur around my waist without hesitation and pass it to her, curious.

If she plans to just wear my clothes, that will not do. Short of rutting her in the snow, I cannot think of another way to get my mating scent on her. She tosses my fur to the ground and drops to her knees. I fix my mouth to ask her what she is doing.

But, any words I could have said fall away when she confidently reaches her hand into my leather pants and grips my length. This is the first time she has ever touched me in such a way. A strangled sound escapes my throat as she pumps her fist up my

hard shaft two good times.

My mate wiggles my pants down a bit until she reveals my cock to her eyes. She pauses when she sees it. I wonder briefly if it is much different from the men of her people. It is a nice size, even amongst Lieq. My thoughts are interrupted when she leans forward and does the most incredible thing.

She licks me.

Sedona drags her tongue across the head of my cock and I thrust instinctually, growling low in my throat. My beautiful female giggles at that, the sound sultry and light. She peers up at me from the ground, her eyes hungry as she wraps her lips around the whole tip, sucking softly.

When she takes more of me in her mouth, I nearly black out. She takes more and more of me until I feel the strain in her throat. She cannot take all of me at once, but Great Mother she sure tries, and most of what she cannot fit in her mouth she covers with her hands. A curse leaves my lips when her tongue swirls around the head of my cock while it is still shoved between her lips.

Never could I have imagined this from my mate. Never have I seen or heard of females taking their males into their mouths. It is considered an honor to taste the sweetness of your mate, but this? This is a bliss I could not have imagined. This is the sweetest kind of torture. The sensation is overwhelming, and I grip the boulder for support, my head falling forward as pleasure courses through me.

She works with skill and enthusiasm, her tongue and lips driving me wild. I can barely think, lost in the ministrations of her mouth and hands on me. My groans and grunts come faster and faster as she bobs up and down, stealing my breath completely. I use every bit of power in my body to keep myself still when everything in me wants to take control and fuck that pretty face of hers.

With her mouth sucking at me and her tongue teasing up and down my length, I feel my climax approaching and try to pull away. “Sedona, I am going to...” My words fail, ending in a groan as she sucks harder.

“Good.” She moves to sucking down the length of me, tracing the ridges along my length with her skillful tongue. She pauses when she reaches my nodules, the spattering of raised bumps at the base of cock.

“Are these sensitive?” She runs a light finger over them and a burst of her arousal hits my nose.

“Everything is sensitive because you are the one touching me,” I choke out, running a possessive hand over the back of her head.

She hums and goes back to working my cock in her mouth. Licking a flat tongue over the rounded tip. When she pulls away again, I could almost cry like a little babe. She whips her upper layers off, exposing her smooth, brown chest to my eyes.

I zero in on her buds, a dark umber against the smooth lighter brown of her breasts. They have pebbled against the cold and they call to me. I cannot help but reach down and pinch each one in turn and she moans loudly.

She starts her effort with renewed vigor bobbing along my length, working her mouth over what she can fit and rubbing her hands over what she cannot.

“Sedona,” I grind out, my grasp fixed firmly on the back of her head. She places a hand on each of my thighs and stills her head, dropping her jaw. Her eyes find me and I nearly spill. Knowing what she is wanting me to do, I do not have to be told more than once. I start to thrust into her mouth, loving to watch the way it stretches around me.

When she begins sucking around me, as I fuck her mouth, I know I am too close. I pull out of her mouth before I spill down her throat, but she does not let me go far. She leans forward and spits on my tip before she starts working me with both hands, her hands slipping over me easily.

“Come on me. Then they’ll smell that I’m yours.”

Her efforts coupled with those words are enough to send me over the edge. My seed shoots from my cock in ropes, spilling along her chest and covering her neck and part of her cheek. She continues stroking her hand over my length until it becomes too much and I have to still her hand. She smirks and gives me one last lick before pulling away, her backside resting on the heels of her feet.

Her eyes still on me, she rubs my spill in, an inviting smile playing on her lips. “This should help, too,” she murmurs, that deep ebony gaze never leaving mine.

As I watch her, I have to physically grip the rock, letting it dig painfully into my palms, to keep my control. To keep myself from flipping her around, pressing her against this boulder and rutting her until I succumb to exhaustion.

Instead, I restrain myself and I pull her up to a rising position. An arm snakes around her waist, dragging her against me, uncaring of my seed that is already sticking to her skin.

“You are testing me, looking at me like that and speaking to me such. Behave or I will push you against this rock and take what is mine.”

She swallows and her arousal becomes stronger in the air. “If we didn’t have people waiting for us...”

I drag a thumb across her lower lip. “That you believe I care is astounding.”

Her breath catches in her throat and she sways forward, her body seeking me out even as her mind pushes her to say, “We should get back to the others.”

“Very well.”

I dip my hand in the snow, rubbing a small bit in my hands to melt and warm it before wiping at her, relishing in the feel of her soft skin. Soon enough, I have cleaned her satisfactorily. Even without the visual evidence, she still smells overwhelming of me, and I wish I could bottle the scent of our arousal intermingled.

With her relatively clean, I slip her clothes back over her head, pressing her trembling fingers to my chest for additional warmth. But, too soon, my seductress of a mate moves away from me, swaying her hips as she walks ahead of me, rejoining her companions as if nothing happened.

I watch the swell of her hips and the jiggle of her ass as she walks, and if there is one certain thing in this life, it is that this female will be the end of me.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:54 am

- sedona -

“So,” Meghan draws out, her voice just loud enough for our group to hear, “these guys aren’t as friendly as our guys.”

She’s not wrong.

I figured there would be some resistance when we arrived, but not like this. Not a single person has said a word to us. In fact, they all move away as if we have some sort of contagious disease. I grip Kuvier’s hand tightly. He let me walk into the village when I made it known in no uncertain terms that I would be pissed if he didn’t. The idea of being carried in was beyond mortifying.

Part of me wishes I was wrapped in his protective arms right about now, though. All of me would like us to be anywhere but here. Perhaps back behind that boulder from earlier.

Enikk leads the group, his posture tense but confident, while the other women stay close, their expressions varying degrees of apprehensive. According to Xiomara’s translation and what I learned from Kuvier, Enikk is taking us straight to their chief.

As we move through the commune, it’s hard not to feel like a zoo experiment. Around us, Lieq people move with purpose. Some are tanning hides. Others are expertly cleaning animal carcasses. Nearby, women sit together sewing silently.

Yet, despite their busy tasks, all activity manages to pause as we pass by.

Kuvier's village puts into perspective how far back we have fallen technologically as well. The huts, varying in size and shape, are constructed from animal hides stretched over frames of large bones and wooden supports. There are at least two dozen of them and they form a circular arrangement around the heart of the village—a massive fire pit where a whole animal turns slowly on a spit.

As we get closer to the center of the community, it's also not hard to figure out which is the chief's tent. Kuvier instructs us all to sit around the fire, facing the largest hut that is adorned with intricate bone carvings.

The atmosphere crackles with a mix of anticipatory apprehension. As we settle onto haphazardly strewn rocks, whispers pick up around us, as more villagers crowd on the outskirts of the circle. None of them venture close, but they all continue doing what they seem to love. Staring.

I sit on a smoothed stone with Kuvier standing protectively behind me. Leaning into his warmth, I try my best to slow my racing heart and catch my speeding thoughts. I'm not sure how long we sit there, several minutes for sure, but no one in our group speaks, until finally, there is a rustle at the entrance of the chief's hut.

A large figure emerges from the hut in front of us, and from the way the crowd and our boys respond, it's easy to determine that this is the man of the hour. Atan Junq is not what I expected. While he is dressed in finer furs than what I've seen, with carved bones adorning his neck, his actual form is so much...smaller than I thought.

Draped in a thick fur cloak, the atan is almost dwarfed by his own clothing. Even his large ram's horns outweigh him, making him appear even slighter. With slim shoulders and an aging frame, Junq looks more like he should be somebody's grandpa than a feared leader.

And yet, everyone cowers in his presence.

Even my brave mate seems to deflate slightly under his scrutiny. In all honesty, it pisses me off. This guy reminds me of a boyfriend my mom had when I was a teen, Richie. God, I hated that man. He was scrawny and older, a wealthy doctor that thought he was god's gift to Earth. Despite being skinny enough I could take him in a fight, that man scared the hell out of my mom. Abused her for years before he finally went to prison for embezzlement.

If there's one thing life has taught me, it's that bullies come in all shapes and sizes. And, if there's one thing I cannot stand, it's a bully.

"What is this, Kuvier?" Junq begins his eyes narrowing on us women. Xiomara whispers translations to the others, but I'm understanding just fine.

Enikk jumps in first. "Atan Junq, we—"

"I asked Kuvier." Junq levels Enikk with a stare that quiets him. "Kuvier? Speak, boy."

"We return to the village in triumph, my atan," Kuvier responds, clapping his fist over his heart. "We bring females gifted from the Great Mother herself."

The crowd murmurs, and it's clear this declaration does not go down lightly. I knew that there would be few other women in the tribe, but Kuvier's description still didn't prepare me for the way the testosterone in this tribe far outweighs the estrogen.

"And when did you discover these," Junq peers at us, taking in every difference, "females?"

This brings Kuvier up short and it is a long pause before he answers, "We encountered many challenges and—"

“When did you find the females, Kuvier?”

“At the start of this storm,” he finally admits. Murmurs move through the crowd.

“So, many blinks passed before you chose to bring this to my attention?” Junq hums his disapproval.

Kuvier just says, “Yes, my atan.”

“Are we sure these creatures are even female?” An older-looking woman speaks from Junq’s left side, her voice grating and condescending. “They look so different from us. They could be a danger.”

I cannot help myself as the words are clipped from my lips, “We are not creatures. We are people.”

Every set of eyes snaps to me, and for a moment, there is silence.

“They speak our tongue?” It’s an older male this time who speaks up, standing at Junq’s right. He addresses Kuvier as if I am merely a decoration for him.

I clench my jaw and murmur in English, “This talking around us shit is getting old fast.”

“I don’t have a good feeling about this chief guy either,” Renata retorts, her words barely audible. No kidding.

“What is this? They have their own tongue?” Junq peers at us with increased interest. “What are these females?”

“They are human women, atan,” Enikk inserts. “They talk, eat, and fellowship like

us. They each are working to learn our tongue fully.”

“Can they carry our kits?” The question comes from Junq, unsurprisingly. The way he looks at me makes me want to scrub my body under a hot geyser.

A rumble starts in Kuvier’s chest and he moves me behind him, partially out of sight. “This female is mine. She is my bonded.”

Enikk references Amari, but doesn’t touch her. “As this one is mine.”

Their declarations turn the muttering from the crowd to an all-out roar. Junq glares at them as one of his elders leans in to whisper in his ear. His anger drops at whatever is being said to him and his face breaks into an eely grin. The older dude leans away from Junq’s ear and fixes his stare on us.

“I do not see a mark. In fact, none of these females carry marks.”

Enikk tries to defend us saying, “Elder Viquum, human females have different customs tha—”

The irritating female elder interrupts, “Without the marks, they are all unmated and available to any who are worthy of them.”

Junq’s grin gives way to a wide, vicious smile, and I know in my gut that whatever shit comes out of his mouth next is not going to be good.

“Clansmen,” he turns to the crowd with victory in his voice, “the Great Mother has gifted us eight unmated females to carry on our clan's lineage with the worthiest of males. Rejoice!”

A roar of celebration rises in the crowd and I feel my body go cold. Kuvier’s grip on

me tightens and I see him exchange a look with Enikk.

Junq holds up a hand to the crowd and everything quiets.

“Much has been revealed today, but I think there is one thing we can all agree upon,” he turns his eyes towards our group, “Kuvier and Enikk have proven themselves unworthy of any female in their selfishness. While their clansmen starved for female affection, these two males took it upon themselves to withhold them and pursue false bonds.”

“That’s not true!” Amari exclaims suddenly, her eyes bulging with fear. “Our bonds are not false.” There are crickets at first since her words are entirely English. But then Xo jumps to translate, her voice echoing in the air as she relays what Amari said.

“If they were not false, they would be complete already.” Junq waves away her words as if they are gnats in the air. “None can resist the pull of the bond.”

“We are not Lieq,” I assert in their language. “Human women do not feel the bond as your males do, but that does not make it less true.”

This is news that the crowd was not expecting. Nor, it seems, was Junq. The fact that we don’t feel the bond as intensely means that any claim to us needs to be proven. How can they prove or disprove it? They would need to rely on our word alone, whether we confirm that we felt it or not. I can see the wheels turn in this grimy man’s head as he tries to find some other way to pawn us off.

My eyes stay on him, but out of my peripheral vision, I see that awful woman slide away. She disappears into the chattering crowd, and a minute later a voice breaks through the crowd.

“I call upon the Rites of Challenge for the females that stand with Kuvier.” My head

snaps towards the voice and Kuvier goes statue still behind me. The man that steps forward is broad and clearly closer to Junq's age than Kuvier's.

"Jepiil," Kuvier growls his name as a warning, moving closer, but I stop him with a hand on his wrist. Something in me is screaming not to let him go more than a foot away from me. I do not feel safe without him right next to me.

"Atan, that custom has been long forgotten," Enikk protests and pleads at the same time. "Surely you cannot allow this to happen."

"Forgotten does not mean it holds no weight," the older female reappears beside Junq and smirks at him.

Junq continues addressing the crowd once again, "In accordance with ancient laws, we will host a Rite of Challenge for each female. For eight blinks, the unmated males of this clan will have the opportunity to enter the pit and fight for the female of their choice. Each time, as the second eye sets, a different female's hand will be offered. The male left standing at the end of the day will claim them as his mate."

"Atan, you cannot—" Kuvier protests, his body nearly shaking with anger, but his sentence is never finished.

Junq locks eyes with me and says, "The first female up is that one."

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:54 am

- sedona -

“This whole thing has gone to shit,” Krissy announces.

“No kidding,” Meghan concurs, her normally boisterous attitude stunted. Honestly, all of us are wracked with tension and a good bit of anger.

“The way they talked about us like we’re not even real people.” Sabrina shakes her head, her face crinkling in disgust. “I guess men don’t change regardless of species.”

“Anybody got an idea?” Renata asks from the corner of the hut. After Junq’s announcement last night, everything went from bad to worse, and it landed us stuck in the hut of Tiqii—the elder woman who was terrible—without Kuvier or Enikk.

“None that don’t involve Kuvier and Enikk ending up fighting their whole clan,” Samra retorts with a grimace.

That fact is why we’re stuck in this damn hut in the first place. When Junq declared that we would be separated from our guys due to ‘fairness,’ Enikk and Kuvier were ready to set fire to the whole thing. But, I could see it in Junq’s eyes, that’s exactly what he wanted. He wanted an excuse to put them in a situation they couldn’t win, so I made Kuvier let me go. It was a hard sell, and an even harder pill to swallow. The only thing that made him finally back down was reminding him that if he tried to take on his whole clan over it and lost, he’d lose me.

“We can’t even run away with all the damn eyes they have on us,” Xiomara laments from her place on the ground with an arm covering her face. She’s admittedly the

most calm of us. Likely because this pales in comparison to being an alien slave for decades.

“So, basically, we just get to sit here and be fought over like scraps of meat.” Krissy’s voice is going for disdain, but falls short, landing a little too close to dejected.

“Sedona, do you have any ideas?” Everyone turns to look at me and I feel like I want to cave in on myself. Right now, I don’t want to be the leader. I didn’t sleep a wink last night, my mind won’t shut the hell up, and my heart just...hurts. Right now, I want to break down. But I can’t.

Heavy is the head, right?

“No,” I answer honestly, my voice flat even to my own ears. “I’m still thinking.”

“Don’t worry about tonight,” Sabrina says, shooting me a sympathetic look. “Kuvier is huge and he loves the hell out of you. He’ll win.”

In some ways, the girls know I have it the worst. I’m the only one who has someone to lose that I’ve built a connection with and grown feelings for. I give a strained half-smile, but can’t muster a decent response. Everyone falls silent after that, each of us spread across the small hut’s floor.

None of us know what to do with ourselves. They stuck us in here, and besides bringing servings of food, no one has come back for us. But I wouldn’t doubt that they’re around, waiting and watching. Renata had peeked her head out of the hut earlier and found that we were surrounded by clan women. She’d reported that our guys were nowhere to be found.

Our fitful peace is interrupted a long while later when the flap on the hut parts and Tiqii plus two women I do not recognize walk into the hut. They’re carrying things in

their arms and I don't have to question long what they're here for.

"You," Tiqii points at me, "come here. Our atan wishes that you be prepared for the Rites in the proper way."

I stay right the hell where I am, waving her away and saying in her language, "No, thanks."

"It was not a request," she sneers at me. "What the atan says is to be followed."

"Yeah, for the people of your clan." I glower at her. "If you cannot treat us with the same respect allotted to the other females in your clan and let us pick our own mates, then why should I follow what your atan says? He's not mine."

The additional women look scandalized, but I give them my back.

"Very well, I am sure that your lack of respect for our rules will not impact the atan's judgment of Kuvier at all." My back goes ramrod straight and for the first time in my life, I want to commit a violent act.

I turn slowly, my jaw clenched. "What do I need to do to prepare?"

- kuvier -

We should have never come back.

This is the thought that plagues me. We should have never come back. I knew it in my very being that returning would lead to trouble, but I could not have fathomed this. I was well aware before coming back that Junq would do a great deal to try to

undermine my claim to Sedona, but reviving a practice that has not been used in several generations just to spite me? That is more than even I could have imagined.

“Kuvier, you must eat,” my mother says, cutting through my never ending spiral of thoughts.

“I am not hungry.”

“You need your strength today,” she replies gently. Her words carry the weight of today’s impending events.

With a heavy sigh, I hold my hands out accepting the portion of oftii and mala she has brought me from the communal dinner I chose not to go to. I stayed at the fire pit for ages this morning, ate breakfast at the fire and everything. It had been in hope that at some point they would bring Sedona out of Tiqqi’s hut and I could at least glimpse her. But when I realized that they would keep her confined to that hut until the Rites began, being anywhere near Junq no longer felt worth it.

Eating no longer felt worth it. Sleeping no longer felt worth it.

To appease my mother, I pick apart my meal, roughly swallowing. This action, as every other action, makes me miss my Sedona. After many meals spent with her, tasting the amazing flavors she created with the same ingredients, this meal falls flat.

“Is this female, this human, truly your bonded?” Her question hangs heavy in the air, and for a moment I do not feel like answering, but I muster the energy.

“Yes, I knew it the moment I smelled her,” I answer, setting my food aside. Lieq do not waste food, but today I do not feel like a Lieq.

“Junq has truly wronged you in this.” She says it as if shocked and I feel an ache of

anger at her. Has she not seen every wrong that he has done to me in all my seasons alive? For the first time, I feel blame towards her for her loyalty to this clan and its customs.

“Junq knows no other way,” I retort bitterly. I prepare for her defense, her chiding to be respectful.

Instead she shocks me and says, “These wrongs are a payment of my transgressions and for that I am so sorry, my son.”

My mother has never directly addressed the choices she made that led to my birth and our ultimate fall from grace. Everything I ever learned came from taunts and stories whispered behind hands. To hear her acknowledge it is enough to pull me out of my despondency.

“Junq was always this...vengeful,” she admits, her eyes not on me but trained in her lap. “I knew this as a young girl, so when he demanded to mate with me, I said no.”

“What?” I reel back in shock. I had never known that my mother had other options besides my father. Not that a mated man was truly an option.

“He has never forgiven me for that sin. Then, I was swayed to be with your father, a mated man, a man I could never truly have, his own brother. Then to bear him a son? Junq saw it as the ultimate act of treachery. You have borne the brunt of Junq’s anger for too long. I feel that in this, I have failed you.”

“You have not failed me.” I would never have expected to hear this story from her, but I mean what I say. My mother has loved me thoroughly my whole life. “Junq is atan. He should not be led by a perceived wrong from thirty-three seasons ago.”

“I tell you this story for a reason.” She wrings her hands, the emotions bubbling

within her eyes. “My son, you must leave.”

“Mother, what—”

“Listen,” her voice is sharp, but whisper quiet. “When you win today, because you must, you must take your mate and leave. Junq will never forgive, he will only broaden his anger to include her, and one day your kits. You will never be truly safe here and neither will she. You must leave.”

I do not get to respond to this, or even process it because we both go rigid when the familiar thump of drums begins.

“It is time,” she says, her tone softening. She stands and moves to me, holding my face in her hands. “When you win, this hut will be empty for you tonight.”

With that, she pats my face one time and then leaves the hut. I stay there frozen with the revelations and demands she has placed on me. But then, I shake myself loose of those thoughts. It is time to fight for what is mine.

In this, I will not fail.

When I get to the communal fire, the stones of the fire pit have been cleared away, the rocks are being used as seats moved to the outskirts of the open circle, creating a large ring of empty space. The air is brutally cold, though no snow falls from the gray skies. With only two eyes left in the sky, and one of them falling below the other, the light is dim.

The majority of the clan is already seated and waiting when I make my way to the circle of people. I do not take a seat, nor do I bother paying attention to the many glares and stares sent my way. Instead, I scan the crowd, my eyes searching for my mate. My fists clench and unclench when I realize that she is not here.

My gaze connects with a different set of eyes instead and I barely resist the snarl in my throat. Junq curls his lips cruelly, his gaze mocking. I know he is doing this on purpose. Keeping Sedona out of my sight, driving me to the brink of insanity. After what my mother has told me, I realize that he probably does believe me.

He probably does know that Sedona is mine by the act of the Great Mother, but what better punishment than to be forced to watch my fated mate be taken by another male? I look away from him. I will give him no more of my time or energy. I cannot win if I am focused on the desire to pull his throat out with my teeth. Instead, I will channel this rage into these Rites.

And I will win.

I sweep the crowd and it is not hard to guess which of the males I see will be fighting today. Like me, there are several who stand in nothing but leather pants, as the rules of the Rites require. The atan determines the parameters of each Rite, according to our laws. However, the one rule that is always consistent is that you may not use anything but your own body to defeat your opponent. Hence being stripped of any opportunity to hide a weapon.

Eventually, Junq rises from his seat on a rock, and as he does, the crowd quiets. The tension and anticipation are so palpable I can nearly taste it. Everyone is eager to see this enactment of an ancient custom.

“Clansmen, greetings. May the Great Mother see you.” The crowd echoes with the words of the appropriate response, but I remain silent. “We gather today in triumph. After many seasons atoning to the Great Mother for great betrayals,” his eyes skim over me, “we have finally been given a blessing. The arrival of the human females is a harbinger of change for our clan. She has seen our penance and given us these females as gifts for the most worthy males.”

Cheers erupt from the crowd and Junq basks in the attention for a moment before continuing, “Today, many males will step forward to fight for our first gift.”

As he says this, it finally happens. My Sedona emerges from his hut and steals the air from the room. She is striking, dressed in the traditional wear of a Lieq mating ceremony. Her mane is worn down with intricate braids at the top of her head. Bone beads have been woven into the braids and she wears bone beads in a rope around her waist. She is clothed in a dress made of fine furs that follows the curve of her hips and sweeps the ground. They have even painted her face in the dotted pattern customary for a mating. Her eyes are trained on the ground and I wish she would look up.

My heart swells as I stare at her, and for a moment, I forget this entire thing. I forget where I am and I can only appreciate seeing my mate adorned for me. Ready to give herself to me . But the reverie is broken when Junq speaks again, and my fury is reignited when I remember that other males are leering at her, believing that they will be the ones she will give herself to.

“In keeping with our laws, I have determined the rules of the Rites today,” Junq announces self-importantly. “Every male who wishes to challenge for this female will fight in the pit at once. Two knees must hit the ground to be removed from the fight. The last male standing will have proven himself worthy of her.”

He has done it again. Found a way to put me at a disadvantage. With every male fighting at once, it is not hard to guess what will happen initially. I will be surrounded, targeted, and taken out. I grit my teeth together, the determination surging through me. My knees will hit this ground only if I am dead.

“All unmated males who wish to participate, step into the circle to be blessed for your Rites.”

My feet move automatically and I am the first in the circle, though not for long. Nine other males step forward, including Enikk. We make eye contact and I remember our vow to each other. Today, he will fight with me, and for this I will call him brother.

Standing in the circle, I train my eyes on my ultimate prize. As if feeling the weight of my gaze, Sedona finally looks up. I nearly abandon the entire pretense when I see the tears in her eyes. She is terrified, I can see it and I want nothing more than to take that fear from her. I take one step, but she shakes her head at me and I remember where we are, what I must do to be able to care for her as I am meant to.

She mouths a word to me and my heart swells with renewed commitment. Yours.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:54 am

- sedona -

I have never felt such intense hatred in my life. As I sit on this stone, my eyes on Kuvier, every bit of me wishes I had the power to stop Junq in his tracks. I wish I could put him in his place and save Kuvier from this insanity.

Instead, I watch as my man gets painted like a fucking offering ready to die on an alter. All of the men who are competing in this barbaric tradition stand in the middle of the arena they've turned the firepit into. Older women stand in front of them, their hands holding the same paste-like paint they'd used to paint my face.

Where I have dainty dots and lines, Kuvier and the others get broad strokes and large circles across their chest and stomach. His eyes never leave mine and I couldn't look away if I wanted to. I'd tried to keep my eyes down earlier because I didn't want him to see me cry. But when I felt his gaze burning into me, I couldn't help but look.

As the last man receives his ceremonial marks, the drumming picks up again, pounding lowly, but intensifying my terror with every beat. This is it. Everything rests on Kuvier, and I don't know what will happen if he doesn't win. There's no world where I will willingly be going with any man but him. Something tells me my consent doesn't matter in Junq's eyes.

"With the blessing of the Great Mother," Junq bellows over the low drums, "begin!"

As soon as the words are out of his mouth, the men in the circle are in motion. Kuvier and Enikk put their backs to each other as the other eight men circle them. Kuvier's stance is low and his chest vibrates with an unending growl. His teeth are bared and

his pupils are blown as he looks at his challengers with savagery.

He's powerful and terrifying and wild. And I need him to use every bit of ferocity and make these assholes pay.

When the first challenger lunges for Kuvier, it's like the spell is broken and all hell breaks loose. In a blur of motion, the eight challengers surge forward, roars reverberating through the clearing. Kuvier and Enikk meet their attackers head-on and the movements become so fast they're hard to keep track of.

Kuvier moves with uncontained brutality, his movements fluid and vicious. Someone throws out their fist and he ducks under the swing that was aimed at his head. As he comes back up, he grabs the attacker by his wrist and snaps it back. A howl sounds from the man's mouth, but Kuvier shows no mercy, throwing the man's body forward and slamming him into another guy who had been running full force towards Kuvier. The momentum sends them both to the ground and I can't help but fist pump. Two down.

Beside him, Enikk is a whirlwind of motion, his form darting in and out of reach. Where Kuvier fights with sheer force, Enikk is all about speed. He ducks under a wild swing, delivering a series of rapid strikes to the challenger's ribs and then spinning away, avoiding a kick from a different attacker.

The melee is a maelstrom of grunts and clashes as bodies collide and blood flies. All of the males in the ring use their teeth, claws, fists, whatever it takes to get the upper hand on their opponent. Bodies break and drop, and soon, Kuvier and Enikk are down to their final competitor.

The asshole who started this whole thing, Jepiil.

He outweighs both of them; Kuvier is taller and Enikk has more defined musculature,

but Japiil is broader, stout, and thick. He's a boar in the face of leopards.

Enikk and Kuvier face Japiil down, the three of them covered in scratches and blood. At first, the fight almost pauses, no one making the step to break the line between them. But then, Japiil opens his mouth and speaks.

"I look forward to the end of this," he taunts with a salacious grin, blood dripping down his face. "I think that pretty female will look wonderful pinned by my—"

With a roar that actually scares me, Kuvier leaps forward. He throws vicious blow after vicious blow, some landing while others don't, but his efforts put Japiil on the defensive. Japiil shoots an arm out, aiming straight for Kuvier's face, but Kuvier grabs it in the air and with a twist of his body, he breaks it over his shoulder with savage strength that makes me wince.

Japiil bellows and pushes forward, swiping his claws viciously over Kuvier's back. I gasp and clasp my hand over my mouth to choke the sound as Kuvier staggers forward, momentarily off balance. He works to right himself, but Japiil, his broken arm dangling at his side, raises the other hand to deliver a devastating blow. Fortunately, he's made a key mistake. He turned his back on Enikk.

I don't even see the actual kick, but suddenly Japiil's legs buckle underneath him, and when his knees hit the ground, Enikk is behind him, standing in triumph. Kuvier rights himself and turns to face Enikk.

With a bloodied grin of victory, Enikk drops to his knees before Kuvier and it's over.

It's over.

I'm off the stone and running for Kuvier before the crowd can even register that the Rite has ended

“Kuvier,” I call out, darting across the wide circle. He turns to me, his chest heaving and his fur matted with blood and sweat. A breath-taking smile spreads over his face and he holds his arms out to me. I lunge into them and the moment I make contact, my feet are off the ground, my legs wrapped around his waist. My dress rides up to my thighs and it’s freezing, but I don’t care. I’m with him and that’s all that matters.

“You did it,” I say, all of the stress that had been bundled in me coming out in heaving, quaking sobs. He rubs my back with one hand, soothing and shushing my cries.

“You are mine, ti khesi, failure was never an option.”

There’s a hush in the air and, as we pull away, Kuvier turns us to face Junq. The chief sits, statue-still, his face contorted with rage and disbelief.

“I have defeated your challengers, atan,” Kuvier calls out, his voice booming in the silence. “I now claim what is mine. ”

The words are a declaration, but they are tinged with a mocking and I see the moment Junq realizes that. It’s the same moment a calm falls over his face.

“You fought dishonorably, clansman,” Junq announces, rising slowly from his seat. “The rules were—”

“The rules were every male fights at the same time, knees to the ground eliminate you, and the last man standing wins,” Kuvier retorts, his voice harsh and deadly. “I have broken no rule and I will not have you spit in the face of what the Great Mother has bestowed upon me. Hear this, all of you,” he turns in a circle, me in his arms, “this female belongs to me and none other shall have her unless they wish to challenge me to the death.”

You could hear a pin drop in the full crowd that was so rowdy moments ago. Kuvier's vow hangs in the air. It's not Junq that cuts the silence, but a male that steps forward from the crowd. It's a shock to my system when I take him in. He looks so much like my Kuvier that it's astounding. They have the same chiseled features, deep eyes and strong build. The only difference being that where Kuvier is brown and white in coloring, this one is almost platinum blonde with splatterings of red.

"Atan, Kuvier has fought with integrity," the male says, his voice a low timber, "let us end this with integrity."

Junq looks at this man with a face of betrayal for a long, weighty moment, but he turns back to Kuvier.

"Take your mate, Kuvier," he says, before he grins cruelly at Enikk and addresses the whole clan. "Today's Rite is over, clansmen, return to your huts and rest. Tomorrow, it shall be the smallest human's Rite of Challenge. We shall see which worthy male is left standing then."

Enikk's face storms over and I feel the hatred in my heart seethe. I don't care what it takes, I'm going to figure out a way to knock that man off his throne if it's the last thing I do.

The clan slowly begins to disperse and I put my attention back on Kuvier. He's covered in blood, and now that the challenge is over, I can see the exhaustion filling his eyes. My arms rest on his chest and I take note of the scratches I can see. Thankfully, Jepsiil missed any major arteries, but my heart still aches for him. And who even knows what his back looks like after that?

"I need to tell the girls we won, but we can be together tonight, right?"

"Of course, we will never be apart again, ti khesi, this I promise you." He leans

forward and captures my mouth in a hungry kiss. When we pull away, I feel several eyes on us, but I pay them no mind.

“Let’s go.” I don’t bother asking him to put me down. With what he’s been through, and how much I’ve missed him, he can carry me wherever he likes.

We begin walking towards Tiqii’s hut, and when I look over Kuvier’s shoulder, I see the eyes that are on us. Several other men, not challengers, stare at us as we walk away. What’s in their stares is what pulls me up short. There is no hatred, no disgust, instead, there’s just longing as they witness our happiness. And in that moment, I realize what I have over Junq. I realize that this man was playing checkers, but I’m about to up the ante.

Because I’ve got a checkmate, bitch.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:54 am

- sedona -

That night, I sit naked criss-cross in Kuvier's hut using my hands to gently stream water over the wounds on his body. After the chaos of the last twenty-four hours, the quiet and stillness of the dimly lit hut are very welcomed.

I put the water pouch back over the fire and pick up a small skull full of a foul-smelling paste Kuvier's mother had given me. She'd stopped us as we left Tiqii's hut and pressed it into my hand with a watery smile before walking away. Kuvier promised that we would take time for a proper introduction. Carefully, I spread a thin layer over the cuts and scratches on his back and shoulder.

"How do you feel?" I ask him when I'm done. I crawl around him and the moment I am in front of him, he pulls me towards him. Straddling his legs, I sit on his lap, carefully resting my hands on an uninjured spot on his chest.

"Better, the tiva paste is already soothing the pain." He nuzzles his nose into the crook of my neck and inhales deeply. "Having you back in my arms soothes everything else."

"I missed you," I say, leaning into his gentle nosing.

"I was half a male without you," he states, honesty clear in the timber of his voice.

"Kuvier," I begin hesitantly, "what do you think will happen now?"

He pulls away and considers me for a moment. "My mother told me to take you and

leave. She thinks that Junq will never give up and that his ire will transfer to you and then our kits.”

I try not to focus on the flutter in my stomach when he mentions us having kits.

“We can’t leave without the others.” I frown deeply. “I want to leave, but they won’t be safe here. Not with the way some of some of these men see us as objects.”

“I know this,” he responds with a sigh. “This is why I do not have a true answer for you. I do not know what we should do next. Tomorrow, Enikk will fight, and I will fight with him again. But after that, I do not know. We cannot fight for the other females, as they have no one else to claim them at the end.”

This circles my brain back to the idea that’s formulating in my head.

“How did you know I was your mate?” I’ve guessed the answer already, but I want to know for sure.

“By your smell,” he divulges. “Liek are scent driven, and when I smelled you, I knew that you were mine as surely as I knew that there are three eyes in the sky.”

More pieces of my plan fall into place.

Switching to English, I tell him, “I have a plan to stop these Rites.” I lay out my idea, completely in English in case of wayward ears.

His gaze sharpens and I know he’s with me when he says, “It will antagonize Junq, but you are right. It will stop everything in its tracks. Are you prepared to deal with the fallout?”

“After we stop the Rites, we need to do what your mom said and run,” I answer. “I

don't want to stay in a clan that treats you or us like this."

"It will be dangerous to leave now," he admits, though his voice isn't telling me no. "The dark season is quickly upon us."

"I thought about that, too. What if we go back to the cra—er, cave in the valley? We can stop by the hunter's caves on the way and take back what we put in."

He considers this for a moment before giving a slow nod. "This is what we will do. I know Enikk will come with us."

"All of the girls already know about the first part of my plan, but I don't doubt that they will be happy and ready to leave." My nose crinkles in disdain. "We all hate it here."

"Then we will do as you have said. Tomorrow." He gently tilts me back until I am laying on my back, my legs spread open over each of his hips to completely expose me to him. "Tonight, I have other plans for you."

"I want you to mark me," I blurt out before I lose my nerve. Kuvier's entire body goes still around me. I sit up on my elbows and hold my breath, waiting for his response.

"Ti khesi," he begins carefully, "I want nothing more, but I will not allow you to be pushed into this decision by Junq of all people."

I shake my head, but keep my eyes trained on his chest. "No, that's not why. I want you to. Really."

"Before you had been very clear that you were not ready." The uncertainty is evident in his voice.

“I realized tonight that I’ve never wanted anything or anyone more than the way that I want you.” I finally look back up at him. “I’ve spent my whole life running from emotional connections because I didn’t want to end up in loveless relationships like my mom. I didn’t think there was anyone who could make me as happy as I was alone. But, you do. You make me so much happier.”

Even if the other girls find a way back to Earth, this is where I want to be. He’s silent for a long moment, so long I think he doesn’t believe me and my gaze drops back to his chest. But then, his one clawless finger touches under my chin. When my eyes are lifted to meet his, the unbridled joy in his face is more than I could have expected.

“I want all of you.” His eyes scan over my face searchingly. I know what he’s asking, and I know what answer I want to give.

“Take all of me,” I whisper back.

He needs no further words of encouragement. Gently, he pushes me down so I’m laid back completely, my body still spread in front of him, draped over his crossed legs. His eyes fall on my exposed pussy, drinking me in hungrily in the dim firelight. Reaching his one clawless finger out, he skirts over my core, teasing my folds but not delving in quite yet.

“You look so beautiful like this,” he murmurs reverently before he suddenly thrusts the finger in me and I moan at the invasion. “You look even prettier like this, with your eyes screwed shut and your head thrown back.”

His finger slides in and out of me, fucking me in a slow rhythm. I grind into each thrust, riding his hand with abandon. His thumb brushes against my clit with each movement, sending jolts of pleasure through me. When his finger curls inside me, hitting that perfect spot, my back arches up off of the furs.

He leans forward, using the claws of his free hand to skillfully snap the thin leather straps of the ceremonial fur dress and yank the top down until my breasts fall out. With a guttural growl, he uses that same hand to pinch and pull my nipples until they are taut under his fingers. My breaths come faster as I ride the waves of pleasure coursing through me. Every thrust and curl of his digit in me is intoxicating, but I want more. I want him.

“More, Kuvier,” I pant, needing more of him, all of him. “Please, I want to feel you inside of me.”

I plead, knowing that it’ll drive him crazy. My Kuvier loves to tease me and make me beg, but when I clench around his finger, he caves quickly. He withdraws his finger, making me whimper at the loss, but only for a moment. I watch him with hooded eyes as he raises me off of his legs to stand and remove his leather pants. He slides them down his muscular thighs, freeing his huge cock. Once he’s fully naked, he kneels back down, positioning himself above me, his hard length pressing against my entrance. He pauses, his eyes searching mine for any hesitation.

He’s never said the words, but I’m pretty positive Kuvier is a virgin. With no women in his tribe and the way they treat him, I wouldn’t be surprised. I’ve never been one to care about body count. Still, something about the idea of being the only one to ever give this man pleasure does things to me.

“Please, I want to feel my mate’s cock in me.”

With a deep groan, he pushes into me, filling me completely. The stretch is intense, almost too much, but I welcome it, reveling in the sensation of being so utterly claimed by him. His cock in my mouth was amazing, the glide of it like the softest suede, but god, his cock in my pussy makes me see stars. When he begins to move, those hard, raised nodules along the top of the base of his shaft rub deliciously against my clit and I throw my head back in ecstasy.

His thrusts are slow and deep, each one sending waves of pleasure crashing through me. I cling to him, my nails digging into his back, urging him on. His pace quickens, the rhythm becoming more urgent, more desperate.

“Kuvier,” I moan, my voice breaking on his name as he drives me closer to the edge.

He leans down, capturing my lips in a searing kiss, his tongue tangling with mine. Our bodies move together in perfect harmony, each thrust bringing us closer to the peak. His hands roam over my body, caressing and claiming, making me feel like I belong to him completely.

I need him deeper so badly that I take over. Pushing him by the shoulder, I keep my legs locked around him so he can't pull out. I tilt up and he lets me roll us over until I'm straddling him. I sit all the way down, taking him to the hilt. Fuck. I'm filled to the brim, walking the line of pleasure and pain so deliciously.

I stay still and savor it for a moment, wanting this to last, and wanting to tease him with only the pulse of my pussy around him, but I start moving a second later. My body raises up and down, my pussy sliding along his ridged length, the tip pushing against my cervix every time I lower myself down completely. I try to go slow, but when he begins meeting me thrust for thrust, I lose what little control I have left.

I bounce on his dick, my hands on his chest for stability. I end every bounce with a deep grind, pressing his nodules against my clit with incredible friction. The pleasure builds, coiling tight in my belly, and I know I'm close.

“You are so tight, ti khesi,” Kuvier groans out, his eyes watching me with adoration. “So tight around my cock. So wet for me.”

I whine when he gives a particularly deep thrust as we crash into each other. “Only for you.”

“Whose cunt is this?” he demands as he reaches up and tweaks my nipples, making my cries grow louder.

“Yours.” My eyes screw shut and my movements become erratic. “Always yours.”

Kuvier sits up so our chests are pressed together. He wraps a hand around my throat and squeezes just enough, pulling me to his lips. The kiss is sloppy and dirty and so fucking good. He sucks on my tongue and then pulls away before kissing down my jaw. I know where he’s headed, but I’m too deep in ecstasy to feel an ounce of nerves. All I feel is want. I want this so bad I can taste it.

“Mark me. I want the world to know whose I am,” I encourage through breathy pants.

Caught in the lusty haze, he doesn’t hesitate. When he bites my neck, breaking the skin, it stings sharply at first. But then, a wave of warmth spreads from the bite, through my body and straight to my clit. Along with the mix of pain and pleasure, a surge of energy courses through me. I gasp when I feel it. The mate bond flares to life for me for the first time, and I feel a line snap between us, like a primal connection.

“Oh my god,” I call out. “I feel it. I can feel the bond.”

This does him in, he flips us over until I’m on my back again and he pumps in me at a punishing pace. His teeth are still on the crook of my neck, flooding my body with warmth. He hits the perfect spot, deep inside me and I see stars.

I shatter around him, my orgasm crashing through me like a tidal wave. My cries fill the hut, mingling with his groans as he follows me over the edge, spilling into me. His thrusts slow and he takes his mouth off, giving the wound a soft lick. Then, he presses his forehead to mine as we ride out our climax together.

When he finally stills and both of our hearts slow just a bit, he moves his lips to mine

in a coppery kiss. Then he gingerly pulls out and rolls to the side, collapsing on the furs and immediately dragging me closer. His nose buries in my hair and we stay there for a long minute, our bodies entwined and our chests heaving in passionate rhythm.

He strokes a hand over my hip and murmurs into my hair, “Mine?”

“Yours.” My voice has quiet conviction and I press a kiss to his jaw. “Always.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:54 am

- kuvier -

“Ugh, my hair is so tangled now. That half-up half-down thing they made me wear yesterday was a nightmare. Now, the back of my head is one big knot.”

I watch my mate pull at her mane with her fingers in frustration from my spot lounged across our furs. Her bare back is to me and I enjoy watching the way her curves move and bend with every motion. The fire is stoked high, as I woke up before her to ensure the hut would not grow too cold. And I am grateful for my forethought. I should like my mate to remain naked for as long as possible.

“It may be inconvenient, but you were breathtaking,” I compliment my eyes trained on the mark on her neck that I can glimpse the edge of.

She turns around to look at me and smiles. “Thank Renata, she did the braids. Tiqii wanted to, but there was no way I was letting that woman near my hair.”

“Tiqii is difficult because she was my father’s mate and my mother bore a son to him before she could,” I tell her matter-of-factly.

She pauses, her eyes growing with recognition. “Wait, was the dude from yesterday, the one with the white and red fur, your brother?”

I scowl. “Kuvit is his name, and I do not consider him as such nor does he consider me, but we share the same father, yes.”

“No offense, but everybody in this tribe needs to work on their blame placement

because it is all off.” Her nose crinkles with disdain and I cannot help but smile at her sense of righteousness.

Her hands are still trying to carefully pull apart knots and tangles. I reach up and still them with my own.

“I wish to share something with you. It is about your mane.” She looks at me curiously, letting her hands fall away from her head.

“What is it?”

“A custom of my people.” Her face crumples slightly and I cannot help but grin. “A good one this time, I promise.”

She relaxes, hesitation being overtaken by curiosity. “Okay, I wanna know.”

“You know that mate bonds are important to the Lieq.” She nods her agreement. “It is customary that when a pairing completes the bond, a male will present his mate with his finest hunt as a gift. It shows that he is able to provide for her.”

She looks at me, her expression melting into curiosity. “You’ve already shown me you can hunt, Kuvier. What does that have to do with my hair?”

With a chuckle, I rise to my feet. “Wait.”

I move to the corner of the hut where a basket made of vifer stalks rests. Picking it up, I feel a strange sense of nervousness as I set it down in front of her and fold myself back to the ground. She looks at the basket and then back to me. I motion for her to look inside, and when she does, her face breaks into a smile that rivals the light of all three eyes.

“I have shown you that I can provide you with necessities, but what I want to prove is that I can sustain your wants as well.” I watch as she pulls my gifts from the basket. “I will never quite know what your life on Earth was like, but with everything I am, I will work to make sure that you want for nothing if I can give it to you.”

She lays each gift in front of her and peers at them with intensity in her eyes. I worked for many blinks of the eyes to make them in secret; each item something that she had asked for that I was not able to provide at the time. A comb that I made from bone and carved carefully with designs, a bowl made from the skull of the oftii we caught on the last day of our trip, and lastly, the hardest to make, a large stone basin. It took me hours of work to hollow out the perfect rock and make the inside deep enough.

“You did this all for me?” She looks up at me with a watery smile.

“Yes, ti khesi. I have made these things for you.” I feel a rush of nervousness and begin to chatter away an explanation. “I have been preparing these gifts for the moment you were ready to complete our bond. Some of the other females helped me to get the details right so they would be what you liked.”

She throws her arms around me, leaning over her gifts. “I don’t just like them, I love them and I love you.”

My whole body stills as warmth explodes through me. My mate loves me. She accepts me. She wants me.

“You are my very heartbeat,” I murmur into her neck as I hold her fast to me. Unable to stop myself I pull her across me until she straddles my lap, a position I have become incredibly favorable towards.

“I want you to comb my hair for me again, like you did before,” she tells me as she

pulls away slightly. But then, she cocks her head and a slow, sultry smile spreads over her lips. “But first, I want to show you how I care for you.”

She hungrily presses her lips to mine and my gifts are forgotten for now. Her kiss is fervent and filled with a passion that sends a shiver down my spine. My hands roam over her back in almost desperation, feeling the warmth of her skin beneath my touch. Sedona pulls back slightly and her breath mingles with mine.

Impatience rippling through, she does not wait or draw out the teasing. With sure movements, she sits up on her knees and reaches down to guide my cock to her entrance. She leans in to kiss me again, her lips soft and demanding against mine. Then, achingly slow, she lowers herself, taking me inch by agonizing inch.

“Sedona,” I groan, my hands gripping her hips as she envelops me in her warmth.

Her head falls forward onto my shoulder as she grinds against me with her clit rubbing over my nodules. Her hips rock in a slow, torturous rhythm. Our position exposes her mark to me and I press soft kisses to it as a surge of possessiveness floods through me.

“You feel so good,” she whispers into my neck, her voice breathless and filled with pleasure.

I can only respond with a growl, my hold on her tightening. She increases her pace, riding me harder, her nails digging into my shoulders. I thrust up to meet her so our bodies move in perfect synchronicity.

She lifts and puts her hands on my shoulders as her bounces become quicker and harder. Her teats move in my face and I reach forward and capture one in my mouth. Her fingers on my shoulder tighten in sync with her grip on my cock.

The feel of her around me makes me licentious and I lose my control completely. I put a hand behind her head to protect her. Holding her to me, I shift us until she is on her back with her legs still wrapped around me. I move to my knees and lift her hips to meet every pump of mine.

Reaching down, I rub her clit with sweet circles and she cries out, her body growing taut until she snaps. Shakes slide across her as her cunt pulses around me. Her hands move behind her head, futilely looking for something to grip as she rides her wave.

“That is right, ti khesi,” I snarl, still thrusting into her, “take this pleasure only your mate can give.”

Her squeezes around my cock begin to slow, but I am nowhere near finished with her yet. I pull out, sitting back on my heels. With hands on her hips, I flip her over and pull her plump ass into the air, her back now arching in a way that forces her chest to the floor. She rests on her elbows, her body now on all fours, and Great Mother , what a view it is.

I lean forward, unable to resist, and bite a cheek leaving my imprint on it. She groans and pushes her cunt backward seeking me out. Pressing my face to her core and licking her, her juices collect on my tongue. She gives a loud desperate mewl.

“So sweet as always,” I mutter before shifting on my knees.

I align my cock with her entrance and slowly push into her, absorbed in watching her swallow me. She makes needy noises in the back of her throat and starts to push back on me to let my length slide in and out of her.

“Yes, Kuvier,” she gasps as I begin meeting her thrust for thrust.

I lean over her, my chest pressing against her back as I drive into her harder. The

sound of our bodies slapping together fills the hut, with the scent of our arousal suffocating the air. Her body rocks back and forth in rhythm with mine. When I hit a particularly deep spot she arches down, her arms stretching out in front of her. My eyes follow the curve of her spine with heated intensity.

“You look so pretty with my cock filling you,” I grunt with my hands gripping her hips as I slam into her.

Her ass jiggles with each thrust and I watch it like a man possessed. When I reach around and make circles on her clit it only takes a few good rounds before her body starts to tremble and she comes completely undone. Her cunt squeezes me in a vice, and with a few more pumps, my cock twitches and my seed fills her to the brim.

Her body sags below me, still in that perfectly beautiful arch. I take a moment to catch my breath and then I carefully pull out, keeping my hands around her hips to support her. My seed drips out of her and I cannot help but use my clawless finger to push it back inside of her. Then, after helping her roll onto her back, she sprawls out in front of me. Her eyes are heavy with pleasure and she smiles at me before holding her arms open invitingly.

I move forward, laying on top of her but still carefully supporting the brunt of my weight. Her knees clench around my hips and I grunt when her wet warmth rubs against me again.

“Be careful, ti khesi,” I warn, placing soft kisses to her collarbone. “I am trying to give you a break.”

She gives a breathy laugh and then says, “Fuck breaks.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:54 am

- sedona -

It's probably around lunchtime that we finally make it out of the hut. Of course, I'm not thrilled about what I have to do next. And neither is Kuvier.

"I do not like this part of the plan," he murmurs to me in English as we move hand-in-hand through the village.

"I know, but you know that he won't listen if you're around," I counter, doing my best to ignore the harsh stares from the rest of the village.

I know exactly what they're staring at and they can keep staring for all I care. After I showed Kuvier my own version of care, he used my new comb to gently detangle my hair. I left Renata's intricate braids in but pulled the back into a low top knot. I did it on purpose to show off the raised and slightly scabbed bite mark in the crook of my neck.

"Are we sure that he will listen regardless?" Kuvier mutters banefully.

I sigh as we come within sight of Junq's hut. "No, not at all, but this is our best chance to do this in a way that won't end with an all-out war."

He pulls me to a stop before we've fully crossed the still-cleared pit. Completely uncaring of the eyes on us, he leans down and captures my lips with his. The kiss is slow, sensual, and entirely distracting.

And over way too soon.

“If you feel unsafe, just call for me. I will end them all.” His promise is chilling, and the hard look in his eyes tells me that he means every word.

“I know, and I will. Now, wait here.” Squeezing his hand, I steal myself and walk away, crossing the last few feet to stand outside of Junq’s hut. Time to play my first chess piece.

I knock the bone chimes that hang out of his door a few times, and finally, the covering over the hut moves to the side. In front of me stands Viquum, the other elder who tried to make my life more difficult than it needed to be.

I push a warm smile to my face and say in Lieq, “Hello, may I speak to the atan?”

He cocks an eyebrow but says nothing, simply stepping aside. I walk by him, doing my best not to physically lean as far away as possible. Junq’s hut is oppressively warm and full of vifer baskets and stone and bone decorations. It’s much bigger than any of the others I’ve seen, but that doesn’t shock me at all; he’s clearly over-compensating.

“Female, I am surprised to see you on this day,” Junq says from the fur he sits on. Tiqii sits next to him, sharing the same fur mat as he does.

Alright, Sedona, time to turn up the charm.

“Yes, my atan,” the words feel like powder in my mouth, “I have come to seek a request.”

His eyebrow arches and he seems intrigued, just as I knew he would be. I know this type of man well. My mother dated many of them, and right now, I’m going to use her tool kit for getting what she wanted out of them. Step one, make them think you need them so they feel they have power over you.

“State your request.” He waves his hand importantly and I settle myself to my knees, sitting back on my heels and doing my best to look demure.

Step two, make them feel that they are right. “My atan, I must apologize deeply. I fear that I have not been reasonable.”

“I would say, girl,” Tiqii cuts in, her voice hard. I pay her no mind, my pleading eyes on Junq and Junq alone.

“In what way?” Junq is curious, I can tell. It’s working, I just have to maintain my momentum.

“I have not been understanding of your customs and traditions.” I shake my head sadly as if ashamed of myself. “I have wished to be considered amongst your clan, but have not respected the laws you have put in place.”

“And of what customs do you speak?”

“The Rites, my atan. After watching them for myself yesterday, I have had a change of heart,” I declare, my voice dripping with ingenuine sincerity. “I did not like this before, but I see now how it can put a female at ease. It shows that I am able to be protected and provided for and I have shared this with the other human women.”

“I see,” he remarks, sharp eyes peering at me, “and why did this change of heart lead you to me?”

“Well, when I told the other women, they were very intrigued as well.” My voice is meek and it’s giving me the ick, but I continue, “They all wish to see tonight’s Rites for themselves.”

This seems to take him by surprise, but I can see him considering it carefully. I

scramble, thinking of something to say that would sway him more.

“As you know, we have traveled far and we were first very fearful of your customs.” I swallow thickly and add, “But after last night, we all crave the security that these customs provide. The others wish to see the unmated males for themselves and to present themselves properly so that they may sway the worthiest of males to fight when it is their Rites.”

Junq’s hand rubs at his jaw as every eye in the hut looks at him, waiting for an answer. “Very well, but when the Rites take place, I wish for you to give your apology to our entire clan. You have disregarded all of us, not just your atan.”

I bow my head subserviently, “Of course, my atan. My new clan deserves my utmost penance.”

He nods his head, a slimy smile playing over his lips. “Is there anything else?”

“If I may, would it be alright if I help Elder Tiqii prepare them as you did me?” I smile sheepishly. “The others wish to be as beautifully made as I was to attract more attention.”

He seems very pleased with this, though the thin line of Tiqii’s lips tells me she doesn’t feel the same.

“This will do.” He waves a hand dismissively. “If that is all, you may go to the hut now. Tiqii will be there soon to lead the preparations.”

I bow my head. “Thank you, my atan. You have been very kind.”

Keeping the triumph off my face, I rise to my feet and carefully leave the hut. Kuvier is by my side in a second, but I shake my head at him, indicating to stay silent. We

walk towards Tiqii's hut in silence. When we get there, Enikk is standing several yards away, his eyes trained on the structure as if it will blink out of existence in a minute. I tap Kuvier and gesture to the other man.

"I will go speak with him." Placing a kiss on the top of my head, he jogs over to Enikk, and I enter the hut.

Everyone is already up, sitting in a circle with their heads pressed together, whispering. They all freeze until they see it's me, then they relax. It doesn't take long for their eyes to land on the fresh mark on my neck, and I can see the opinions forming.

"Sedona, is that...?" Sabrina starts, her eyes wide. Their expressions range from disgust to fear to interest. The interest being in one pair of eyes only. Xiomara.

I touch the mark gently, feeling a mix of pride and embarrassment. "Yeah, it is," I admit sheepishly. "Kuvier marked me last night."

The girls exchange glances, worry crossing their faces. Renata steps forward, her brow furrowed. "Does this mean we're all expected to get marked now?"

I shake my head firmly. "No, absolutely not. I did this because I wanted to, and all of you will have the same choice if I have anything to say about it."

There's a sense of relief that settles over the women. I make my way to the circle and Samra and Amari move apart, making a space for me to sit. Folding my legs underneath me, I launch right into it, knowing Tiqii will be here any minute.

"The plan is a go, you guys," I tell them with a triumphant smile. "Junq fell for part one of our plan. He says that you can all come out to watch the Rites."

“I don’t super love the beginning of this plan,” Meghan speaks up honestly. “What if it goes wrong and we end up mated anyway?”

“You won’t, I promise. The way the bond works, according to Kuvier, is that the moment your mate smells you, his whole focus becomes making you happy.”

Amari speaks up, “I hate to admit it, but I agree. We all know Enikk would rather be up my butt all day, but he keeps his distance because it’s what I want.”

“Exactly, they will do anything to make their mate happy,” I confirm with confidence. “We just need to make sure they find you and hear what will make you happy.”

Meghan settles, though there is still some uncertainty in her eyes.

“What if the rest of us don’t have mates?” Xo asks with a hint of reserve in her voice.

“At least some of us have to. There’s no way that two of us do and nobody else.” I look at each of them. “The biggest thing we need to do is make sure they can smell you guys. Kuvier says the stronger your scent is, the easier it’ll be for them to pick it out of the crowd. So, y’all need to get up and start exercising.”

Jaws drop as they stare at me incredulously.

“Um, no offense, but this body is meant to lounge and look sexy, not do jumping jacks,” Sabrina counters, her face skeptical.

I laugh loudly. “First of all, you don’t have to do jumping jacks. Any exercise that will work up a sweat will do.” I look at them deadpan. “Be glad I came up with this. Kuvier said the best scent is arousal, but we were not about to have a masturbation orgy in here.”

“Okay, maybe I can do jumping jacks,” Sabrina concedes, raising her hands in surrender.

“Yeah, no way in hell I’m that comfy with y’all,” Meghan agrees, standing up and stretching out her body.

“If it’s for the plan, fine,” Samra says, getting to her feet. “But never ask this of me again.”

For the next several minutes, the girls are jogging in place, doing burpees—anything they can think of to get sweaty. By the time Tiqii comes back, we are all seated again, but they are each covered in a light sheen of sweat.

When Tiqii enters the hut, her nose crinkles. She turns to the two women beside her and says, “Are all human females this terrible smelling, or is it just these?”

A charmer that one.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:54 am

- sedona -

“I feel like a decorative display,” Renata says with barely concealed disgust as she flicks at the beads looped around her locs.

“I kinda like it to be honest,” Xo retorts, smoothing her hands over the leather and fur dress she wears.

Preparation for the Rites went fairly well. Tiqii and the other women pretty much just dropped everything and left, overpowered by the sheer funk in the hut. I won’t lie, that sweat smell is still stuck in my nostrils, but it’ll be worth it in the end.

“Just pretend you like it and remember to stay girly and weak until I give the signal.” We’re talking quietly, though no one but Kuvier and Enikk can understand us anyway.

As a part of our plan, Kuvier and I purposely have not seen each other all day. We have to walk a careful line here, and unfortunately, the bias towards him would mess up that tightrope walk.

Finally, Tiqii moves aside the hut’s front flap and barely pokes her head in. “Come. It is time.”

The flap closes behind her and we all share a look. It’s now or never. I lead the line out of the hut, with Amari directly behind me and everyone else following singlefile. There aren’t many other people out of their huts and I’m grateful for that. I appreciate the respite from harsh glares and wide-eyed stares.

When we reach the pit, it's mostly empty save for a few stragglers who are setting up small bone drums with ultra thin leather stretched over them. Tiqii points us to eight stones set up in a single line in front of Junq's hut and on the edge of the pit.

"Sit." She doesn't wait for us to follow directions, entering the hut without a backwards glance. We all sit on the hard makeshift seats.

From the corner of my eye I see movement, and when I look I'm relieved that it's Kuvier. Enikk is not with him, though I am not surprised. He must be preparing for Amari's Rite. We didn't include him in the plan, only because if it goes wrong, Kuvier didn't want him implicated.

Kuvier gives me a heated look and mouths our word, Mine . I mouth back, Always . And then the drumming picks up. The beats are heavy and stilted, and like sailors led by sirens, the clan begins to fill in the outskirts of the fighting pit.

My eyes are scanning the crowd, searching for signs that any males have caught the other women's scents. Besides hungry gazes from some and hesitant stares from others, I don't see anyone who looks how Kuvier or Enikk looked the first time they realized they had mates.

I hear movement behind us, and a second later, Junq moves around our place to enter the circle. Let the games begin.

Junq steps into the fighting pit, his presence commanding immediate silence. He stands as tall as he can, his eyes scanning the gathered clan.

"May the Great Mother see you," he intones, his voice carrying over the hushed crowd.

He launches into his monologue, and I feel a mix of anger and anxiety bubbling

inside me.

“As your atan,” Junq begins, “it is my duty to ensure that everyone in our clan is cared for, that our traditions are upheld, and that fairness prevails.”

His words feel hollow to me, especially after what happened yesterday.

“Yesterday’s Rite of Challenge left much to be desired,” he continues. “Today, the rules have changed. The fights will be conducted by two people at a time. The winner will then face a new challenger until there is only one man left standing.”

Of course.

Of course, he would come up with a way to make it harder. If this Rite took place, Enikk would be forced to face challenger after challenger, growing exhausted as each fresh-faced competitor took him on. And he’d have to do it all without Kuvier’s help. My eyes find Enikk in the crowd and the hard look on his face tells me he knows this too.

Junq continues his one-man show gesturing and going on some pompous tirade about the importance of customs. It’s not until he gets to the end of his speech that I realize he is setting up for my ‘apology.’

“...In light of this, our newest clan member wishes to speak with all of you.” He turns to me expectantly. “Female?”

I take a deep steadying breath and send up the first real prayer I’ve done in years. I don’t care who hears it, but hopefully, they do because I need all the luck I can get.

“Let’s do this,” I say to my girls as I rise to my feet. They follow suit and confusion flashes over Junq’s face briefly as he watches us all file towards him. And then we

continue straight past him, following the plan and getting closer to the clan.

At that moment, as if my prayer is being heard, a gust of wind blows from behind us, and I see the familiar shift in several faces as soon as our scents hit them. Nostrils flare, pupils dilate, and I notice several males instinctually take a step forward. It's go time.

I launch into my speech, influenced by Kuvier and polished with the help of Xio, my voice carrying over the crowd, "Today, many of you came here with the intention to fight for a chance at a mate. However, this is wrong—"

"Female!" Junq barks. I hear steps behind me, but Kuvier moves and I don't have to look to know that he has stepped in front of Junq, blocking his path to me.

"These Rites are meant to be used when the Great Mother has not already chosen; however, she has chosen. Some of you feel it, the call of your bond, and you know in your hearts that one of the other human women is meant to be with you."

There are angry shouts from some people in the crowd, but I catch sight of many of the males, the ones who stepped forward, listening and watching with bated breath.

"You are not a Lieq! How dare you bring the Great Mother into your treachery?" Tiqii calls, moving from the side of her son, whose eyes are trained on Renata as if he's seeing the world for the first time.

"I am not, and yet, I have more respect for her than you," I retort harshly. "These Rites spit in the face of the gifts she has given. If you have found your mate amongst these women, if her scent calls to you, step forward."

There is deadly silence. Then, Tiqii's son moves around her to the front of the crowd. She gasps and grabs at his arm, but he shakes her off, his eyes never leaving Renata.

One by one, four more men step forward. My eyebrows raise briefly in shock when I realize that all but one of us has a mate amongst the Lieq. I gather myself quickly to finish my speech.

“Your atan would have you fight and potentially lose the right to win your female’s heart because he cannot stand one of your clansmen,” I continue, my voice carrying. “Is that what you want? To potentially lose the right to your mate and be forced to watch her be given to another?”

My words have the intended effect as I hear snarls and growls from the six men who reverently listen to my speech, their eyes locked on each of their fated with devotion.

“This is preposterous!” Junq screams. I cock my head back and see him attempting to lean around Kuvier who stands like a wall between him and us.

None have moved to defend him, everyone watching this showdown with curiosity and intensity. I don’t let him get more words in.

“The human women will not participate in these challenges,” I declare firmly. “Instead, if your mate is amongst us, we offer you the chance to fight for her heart through care rather than violence. And as for the rest of you, ask yourselves this, is your atan working in favor of you and your Great Mother, or is he enacting revenge for his own perceived wrong-doings?”

There is silence at first and then Viquum says, “Junq is our atan, clansmen. Do not forsake him in the face of these strange creatures who have no respect for our customs.”

There are murmurs in the crowd, but when I look at all of the faces, not everyone seems so convinced of Viquum’s words. I turn and put a hand on Kuvier’s back. He looks over his shoulder at me and then moves aside, allowing Junq to move towards

the clan, but he still stands as a barrier between the two of us. Junq walks up to the clan, his eyes on me and hard as flint.

I make eye contact with Renata and she gets it immediately. She steps forward. Kuvit follows her with his eyes.

“I will speak to no man but the one that is my fated mate.” She says the words that we practiced with Xo in Lieq, and though they’re a bit stilted, they get the point across clearly.

One by one, the other girls step forward, echoing Renata, and I see the panic in the faces of the six who stepped forward for us. They will each have to work to prove their bonds.

“We are human,” I announce after staring Junq down daringly, “not Lieq, and therefore, we will not participate in a custom that we do not agree with.”

Junq sneers, “This clan is Lieq. If you cannot follow our customs, then maybe you should not be amongst us.”

He’s playing right into our hands right now, and I almost feel giddy at watching my plan unfold so well. Checkmate.

“Very well.” It’s Kuvier who speaks this time, his voice booming and controlled. “My mate and her human companions are no longer welcome amongst this clan, and therefore, I am not. We will leave this clan behind.”

Junq’s face alights with triumph, but the look is gone almost as quickly as it appeared when our final piece falls into place. Kuvier told me that surviving the dark season with only him and Enikk would be nearly impossible. But, surviving it with others? That we can do.

“I will follow my mate.” Enikk steps forward, coming to stand in front of Amari. “I renounce my place amongst my clan.”

There is a beat of quiet, and then once again, Kuvit is the first to step forward. “I renounce my place amongst my clan.”

A loud wail sounds from behind him, but he does not turn to look as his mother throws herself to the ground in sorrow. His announcement starts a chain and one by one the other men step forward. Each of them has the same general phenotypic makeup, the strange mix of goat, lion, and humanoid, but their colorings and sizes range. Yet, they all have the same look of awe and determination as they leave their home behind to follow their hearts.

What shocks everyone, including me, is when Vierqa, Kuvier’s mother, steps forward and declares in a shaky but loud voice. “I will not be without my son. I renounce my place amongst my clan.”

She moves to stand beside him, clutching at his hand tightly, a mix of fear and resolution on her face. Kuvier is shocked, but he holds onto his mother’s hand with one of his while keeping his other arm around me. Her words fall like a boulder in a pond and suddenly, more women, children, and men are stepping forward, following their sons and brothers on a path no one expected.

By the time everyone has stepped forward, we have added seventeen Lieq, including the six new males, to our group. Junq stares on with stony fury, his teeth clenched so hard I can see the muscles flexing in his temple.

“So be it,” he says coldly, addressing us all. “You are all exiled from our clan. You may not speak with us or rely on us. By the time the final eye is left in the sky, you must all take your things and be gone from this place. Do not come back when you realize that you cannot survive the dark season alone. There is no longer a place for

you here.”

- sedona -

There is absolute mayhem after Junq leaves. Families that are being split apart cry and howl against the change. Mothers sob and babies wail. But no one still in the clan makes a move to join their family with us. Their atan has spoken, and the ones who wish to remain amongst their clan slowly but surely trickle away. When it's only the twenty-seven of us fellow exiles left standing in the circle, Enikk speaks.

“Thank you, clansmen,” he says loudly, looking at each person with gratitude, “for standing with your mates in this. The Great Mother has already blessed us with these gifts, and I know that she will see us through the dark season, whether her eyes are open or not.”

“What do we do now?” A soft feminine voice calls from the small crowd, breaking the dam on a flood of questions.

“Where will we go?”

“Who will lead us?”

“What of the mate bonds?”

I look at Kuvier pleadingly and he calls over the crowd, garnering silence once more so I can speak. Every eye falls on me.

“I know that this change is daunting and you have a lot of questions, especially the men who can sense their mate bonds,” I begin, my voice steady despite the nervous

flutter in my stomach. “We have all made a big choice, and that decision means that we are now no longer Lieq and human, we are one clan. The human women are my responsibility, and I take their happiness seriously, as should you.”

I see understanding and agreement in some eyes, which gives me the confidence to continue. “Junq put all of you unbonded males at a disadvantage by creating an environment of fear and uncertainty. The human women are now worried that our rights and autonomy will not be respected. This is unacceptable and will most certainly lead to you being rejected by your mates.”

There is a ruckus at this and Kuvier has to growl loudly to silence everyone again so I can keep speaking. “The way Kuvier won my affections was through his care for me, without any expectation that I needed to reciprocate his feelings. He respected my space and my choices, showing me through his actions and words that he could be the mate I needed. This is why I am the first to complete the mate bond.”

I pause, letting my words sink in as some eyes snap to the mark on my neck and back to my eyes. “All of the women here will need their own special care. None of you are guaranteed a right to these women, and you need to remember that we don’t feel the bond as you do. But, there is hope where there is mutual respect. We must develop our own customs that blend both Lieq and human traditions, ensuring that everyone’s rights and autonomy are respected.”

My words hang heavy in the air and I regard every male seriously, pleased to see no visible signs of dissent.

Suddenly, someone from the crowd asks again, “Who will lead us?”

Before I or Kuvier can speak, Enikk steps forward, his voice strong and unwavering. “I swear my loyalty to one atan, Kuvier.”

Kuvier looks shocked, but before he can react, Kuvit steps forward as well. “I agree. He has proven himself. I will follow the leadership of Kuvier.”

This absolutely astounds Kuvier, especially when there are murmurs of agreement from the whole crowd. My eyes connect with Vierqa and we share a moment of pride. After all the mistreatment, Kuvier is finally being seen for the great man that he is.

The crowd turns to Kuvier, waiting for his response. He looks at me and I give him an encouraging smile. He turns back to the faces of our new clan, and steps forward, his expression resolute.

“I will protect this clan with my entire being,” Kuvier declares. “I will lead with humility and never vengeance. None will lack for anything as long as I am breathing. This includes the human females. Junq may not have given them a choice, but as atan of this clan, I will. I will protect these females with my life. If anyone tries to harm them, there will be consequences.”

One by one the Lieq men, both the unbonded and their male family members, clasp a fist over their chests. The women’s heads turn down and everyone grants him their respect and acceptance.

He turns to the men around us. “The time to leave dwindles. Go clansmen. Pack quickly. We will depart before the second eye starts to fall to ensure there are no problems. When you are packed, meet me at the edge of the village. We will discuss where we will go when we are away from prying ears.”

The crowd listens intently, then disperses to carry out his orders. The unbonded males steal lingering glances at their respective women, but everyone does as they are told and that gives me hope that this won’t be as hard as I thought.

“I am so proud of you, son,” Vierqa tells Kuvier as the numbers in the pit dwindle. She places a hand on his cheek with tears in her eyes. “You are becoming everything I knew you would be.”

“Thank you, mother.” Kuvier places a hand over hers and she looks at me next.

“And you, my dear, are more than what I ever could have hoped for him.” I can’t help it and I pull her into a hug. At first, she doesn’t move, but then, she enfolds me in a maternal embrace.

“Thank you for standing with him,” I whisper sincerely in her ear. She pulls away and flashes a smile.

“I have always wanted a daughter. Soon, we will spend more time together.” She squeezes my shoulders and then steps aside. “For now, I will go gather my things from our hut. I will see you both soon.”

She walks away and we all watch her for a moment before getting back to business. It’s only us humans, Enikk and Kuvier, and Kuvit, whose eyes still haven’t left Renata while he stands off to the side respectfully.

Kuvier turns to Kuvit and Enikk. “Kuvit, go with Enikk and the human females to gather their belongings from your mother’s hut. I do not trust that there will be no issues if they go alone.”

That party heads off and Kuvier and I are left alone.

“Well, my atan,” I say, emphasizing his new title with a wide smile, “it worked.”

“That it did, atana.” I cock my head at this. “Did you think that the mate of the atan had no title?”

Stepping into his arms, I set my chin against his chest with my eyes on his. “I suppose we both got a promotion today.”

“I do not know this pro-mo-sun you speak of, but I will say yes so that we may finish conversing and practice kissing.”

I throw my head back with a laugh. “We don’t need any more practice. You’re already great at it.”

He grins mischievously, leaning down until his lips are brushing against mine while he says, “I always want to be better for you.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:54 am

- amari -

I lie on my back, my eyes staring up at the black of the cave ceiling. Not for the first time since waking up here—actually since waking up on that damned ship—I ask myself how the hell I got here. What choices did I make to lay brick-by-brick the road that led me here?

Samra makes a soft grunting noise from her bed of furs next to me. I turn my head to look at her, checking to make sure she's still asleep. Thankfully she is because I need a bit more time to myself before I have to pretend to be okay for everyone.

After the fiasco with confronting the chief, our new little clan had set off immediately. With the number of new people, especially the number of kids, it's taking us twice as long as the first time to make it back to the valley. And, we have to stop at both hunter's caves on the way. We've already hit one, hence the cave that I'm currently lying in.

With twenty-seven people, not everyone can fit in the cave. Kuvier determined that unmated women, children, and any lone elders would sleep in the cave. Everyone else is sleeping in fur tepee-like tents outside.

I hear rustling and tilt my head ever so slightly to see Xo carefully standing, her cloak wrapped around her, tiptoeing out of the cave. I don't miss the quiet snuffle she gives before she disappears.

Xo is the one that ended up without a mate, which sucks really bad. She's the only one of us that actively wanted one. She tries not to show it, but I can tell it bothers

her. I wish she and I could switch places. She's older than Enikk for sure, but he would make a good mate to anybody.

Just not me.

I still don't know what to do about him, on that vein. I'm the only one vehemently fighting this whole mate thing, besides Krissy. But Krissy had a fiancé before the abduction, so that makes sense. No one really gets my reluctance. I can see the judgment in the eyes of the Lieq members whenever they notice me avoiding Enikk. Sometimes, the other women even judge me for it.

It's been two full days of travel, and so far, everyone but me and Krissy has fallen into some form of ease with their mates. No one else is jumping into bed with them, but they are friendly enough. Unlike me, they can smile and be polite and accept the gifts without feeling like they're going to crawl out of their skin.

After a while, I give up on my original plan to go back to sleep. As has been the case nearly every night since we all woke up here, I barely get any sleep. In fact, the last good sleep I had was in a stasis pod.

When it starts to brighten outside, I decide to just go ahead to the small communal fire outside. Maybe I can get a headstart on breakfast by chopping up some meat for Sedona to cook. She doesn't cook for the whole group—a whole clan of people who are mostly Lieq and eat three times what we do would be way too much. But, she still cooks for all us human women and some of the loner clan members.

After our original declaration, we'd only had the extra dudes with mates and a few of their family members. But, when we all met up at the edge of the clan, we ended up with quite a few members who had no familial attachments to the clan. Sedona had explained to us that after all the natural disasters and plagues, a lot of the clan had lost their entire families. Thus, most of the loners were older people and a few orphaned youths who were attempting to live off of Junq's mercy, which was subsistence at

best.

I'm careful as I step around sleeping bodies and gather up some frozen meat. My knife, a tool I made myself, is already strapped to my waist, under my tunic, so I make my way outside. It stays on me at all times, though no one knows about it. I'd secretly carved it in the first few days we were here, when everyone else was asleep. It can hardly be called a knife, just an elongated stone chipped to a harsh point, but it brings me some comfort and a semblance of safety at least.

Outside, the air is biting, but there's a small break in the snow. It snowed for the first full day of travel, making it incredibly difficult. I'd worried I'd never get the feeling back in my fingers. I head around Kuvier and Sedona's tent—they'd put it right at the mouth of the cave. Even though no one seems to have any bad intentions, Kuvier has been very serious about us unmated females being safe. Something I am especially appreciative of.

There are a few of the new clan members moving around, a couple pairs of mated Lieq caring for their children. I give small smiles to those that look at me, but mostly keep my head down as I move the few yards needed to get to the fire.

When I round a tent, I stop in my tracks. Enikk is already seated on the ground, his knees up in front of him, whittling at something. I pause, considering going back to the cave until there are more people to be a barrier between us. I don't get the chance to decide.

Without looking up from his project, he says, "If it would make you more comfortable, I will leave."

I immediately feel overrun with guilt. He really is a seemingly nice guy. If I were different, maybe we could have worked, but I can't erase my past, and he can't change that he's in love with a woman that's too damaged to love him back.

“Uh, no, it’s fine,” I squeak out, moving slowly towards the fire. He grunts in response but still doesn’t look at me.

I drag the large flat stone Sedona uses for chopping from its place close to Enikk and sit across from him, the blazing pit between us. I adjust my body, trying to make sure my cloak is a layer between me and the powdery snow beneath my butt. Once I’m settled in front of the cutting stone, I put the slab of meat down.

Surreptitiously checking to make sure he’s not looking, I reach under my tunic and pull out my knife. We sit in silence for a long while, me hacking away pieces of meat and him carving at whatever tool he’s making.

I can’t help but steal glances at him. His face is still cut up and his eye is swollen from the Rite of Challenge. I hate to admit it, but I was actually worried about him during the fight. He held his own, but it was still terrifying not to know what was going on.

No matter how many times I peek at him behind my lashes, he’s never looking at me. Enikk has put more and more distance between us, and I should be relieved about that, but I can’t tell if I am.

“May I garner some truth from you?” His eyes snap up to mine and my face heats at being caught looking.

I hesitate before I say, “Um, sure.”

“Is it just me that you do not want? Would you prefer a different male?”

My body seizes up and I swallow thickly. “What?” I say lamely.

“Would you want another male, a different one than me? Or is it that you want no male at all?” He speaks with so much calm, but inside I’m a chaotic mess. I didn’t

expect this conversation at this moment and I can't determine how much honesty I should give.

I grimace as I speak, "It's not just you. I don't want to be with anyone."

"Why?" The question isn't accusatory, just inquisitive.

I take a deep breath, struggling to find the words. "I just...I don't want to be tied to anyone."

"Is there something I did to make you uncomfortable?" Enikk's deep gaze stares into me. These guys really do have beautiful eyes. Enikk's are almost hazel. Not the same yellowish gold as Kuvier, but a bronzier version.

"No, I'm just not comfortable with the mating thing as a whole." I decide that it's best to just be honest. "I've never had great luck in relationships and I just don't want to try anymore."

His eyes leave my face while he considers my words, giving me a respite to the stare he bore into my soul.

When he brings his attention back to me, he asks, "You have a mate already? Or had one?"

"Not like this. Um, back where we're from, humans date a lot." I can see the confusion on his face. I scramble, trying to find a way to explain this concept to a man who comes from an entirely monogamous, marriage-based culture.

"Basically, humans do, like, trial matings. We test each other out to see if we're a good fit. Sometimes that turns into a forever mate, like Kuvier and Sedona, and sometimes you split up and try to find someone else."

“That sounds...sad,” he responds after a beat. I can’t help the bark of laughter out of my mouth.

“It’s sadder for some than others.” He cocks his head, measuring his next words.

“Your trial matings were sad for you.” He says it as a statement, not a question, but I answer anyway.

“Always.” I sigh deeply, putting my knife down. “My trial matings were sad and painful and they ruined all matings for me. Forever.”

“So because of these males that have not treated you correctly, you cannot give yourself to me?” I’m surprised that his tone isn’t angry or full of condescension. It’s understanding and gentle, and it makes me want to cry.

“I’m just broken now, Enikk, and I don’t know how to give myself to anyone else. I’m sorry you’re stuck with me.”

Enikk looks at me with a gentleness that makes my chest ache. “You are not broken, only lost. You have never had someone fight for you, only against you. I want to be that person who fights for you. But, do not be sorry. I do not have regrets about the Great Mother making you my mate. She has given you a patient male who is happy to wait for you to find your way. I know that I was meant for you as much as you were meant for me.”

I’m stunned into silence and my mouth opens and closes, unable to find any words to say to that. I don’t have to because he speaks again a second later.

“May I request just your friendship?” he questions, his expression open and vulnerable.

“I don’t know. I don’t want to...” I trail off, but finish the sentence in my head— I

don't want to give you hope.

"I promise I will not push your boundaries or try to make our friendship more." His forehead crinkles with emotion. "There is more than one way to get to know the mate of your soul. If I cannot be yours, I would like to at least be your friend."

I speak before I fully think it over, "Okay. I think I'd like that."

"Thank you for this kindness, Amari." He clasps his fist to his chest. "I will be a great friend to you, this I vow."

"Erm, thanks, I'll try to be a really good friend, too." He moves to his feet.

"For now, I must go." He walks around the fire and stops in front of me holding something out to me. "This will do far more damage."

I grasp the smooth handle and he walks away, leaving me holding a beautifully-carved red-stoned knife.

Thank you for reading Sedona and Kuvier's story. Still craving more of the "Sky People" and the Lieq? Prepare for Amari and Enikk's story, releasing January 1st, 2025!