



Naga Prince's Mate (Nagas of Nirum #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Some marriages start with a loving “I do.” Theirs starts with a lie.

When human Kleena is snatched off the streets of Jorvla and thrust into an auction, she expects to find herself at the mercy of her buyer, not rescued by a Naga prince—even if he is a warrior haunted by the ghosts of his own devastating legacy.

To keep her safe, they're forced to pose as newlyweds—an impossible feat when they don't even like each other. However, as days stretch into weeks, their forced proximity begins to feel a little less like punishment... and a lot more like a blessing.

Especially when one night changes everything.

But convinced he's destined to destroy anyone he loves, Naga Prince Erhan pushes Kleena away—and straight toward the Naga noblewoman who is supposedly Erhan's real fiancée.

With their love on the line, they're both forced to make a choice. Will they let the past define them...

Or find a future together?

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Kleena

Kleena trembled, her fists clenched.

The dull hum of transport vehicles whirring synthetically rang through the windows, which were themselves holograms now flickering at an inconsistent rate.

Is any of it real?

“Mmm,” the woman inside moaned as the ruggedly handsome man ran his finger over her slit. “God, I can’t wait. Please. ”

Kleena remembered when Jodin kissed her like that before he’d started pulling away from her. She longed to be loved like that again, wanting only to feel his passion.

And now he’s giving it freely to this whore.

She pushed herself out of sight, clinging to the wall and hiding behind the metal door, to continue peering into the living room. It was supposed to be her home, but as she stood outside, shivering slightly from the cool breeze that wafted over her, everything inside looked both familiar and terrifyingly different.

“You’re sure she’s not coming back?” the strange woman asked.

Kleena gripped the walls of her home, tears burning her eyes. The hard metal edges cut at her palm, the steel and hard nanofibers cold in her grip.

She wasn't sure what to do as she tried to fight back her sobs.

"Nah, she won't be back home for hours," Jodin assured the woman. "You don't need to worry about her."

A wry, silent chuckle vibrated in Kleena's throat as she peered inside. He doesn't even know I'm here . She sniffled quietly to herself, feeling a tear run down her cheek.

In truth, she could have left, pretending she'd seen nothing at all. Maybe she could warn Jodin away from this strange woman, ensuring they never saw each other again.

She'd just need to cut back at work so he would never leave her sight again.

But as Kleena looked at the woman, the dim neon lights pouring into the apartment from outside, two realizations sank into her, nearly bringing her to her knees.

She's prettier than I am , Kleena thought, noticing the woman's perfect complexion, her bright, pouty lips, her high cheekbones, and her large, opalescent eyes, which were bluer even than the room around her. Bluer than she imagined the oceans on other worlds.

A sense of inadequacy crept over Kleena. She wanted to curl up into the wall and merge with it. Aching to disappear forever.

She also realized that if she cut back her hours at her job, they would probably lose the apartment. She was, after all, the only one working.

After Jodin had been laid off from bounty work, he kept moving between small odd jobs, never bringing in anything substantial. Kleena always tried to be sympathetic and to love him regardless, but look where that had gotten her.

And now, Jodin's finger dug into the woman's core, the woman's hands sliding over the growing bulge in his pants.

And Kleena remained paralyzed.

Her eyes moved from the woman, currently undressing Jodin and sinking to her knees, to the side table.

A small picture frame rested behind the sofa, whirring over a series of images that brought a feeling of tainted nostalgia.

The first image on the display was a candid shot. On their first trip together, Jodin had insisted on getting a picture, wanting to show her off to his friends. They had traveled to a preserve, a place meant to represent the more positive aspects of life on other planets, where the worlds were more picturesque and less cold and devastated.

Holograms of trees decorated the imaginary landscape behind them, a bright gold sky paved in behind them. Even though Kleena had known none of it was real, it was just fun to pretend.

And as Jodin clung to her face, his lips wrapping around hers for the camera, Kleena had felt truly loved.

But it was all an act, she realized as another photo emerged on the frame, depicting them smiling together at home.

She wanted to wake up from this nightmare—wanted to join the world of the photo. But maybe that was the trap?

For a solid minute, Kleena stood immobile.

And as the woman in the living room tore open Jodin's pants, gripping onto his erection, Kleena's mind went blank, watching images of a life she thought she knew with a man she thought had loved her.

And something in her snapped.

"Eight years," she screamed, slamming open the door. "Eight years of my life, and you're nothing but a fucking snake !"

Immediately Jodin and his mistress recoiled, doubling back. They could see the severity in her eyes.

She wanted to crush them both, tear them apart. She could feel her anger commanding her, driving her toward unspeakable thoughts.

For as much as she had loved Jodin, and as long as they had worked together to build that love, Jodin was content to piss it all away.

I should kill him , she thought, irrationally.

But as she paused in the middle of the living room, Jodin zipped up his pants, his eyes wide in fear. Kleena wasn't pushing him onto the ground. She wasn't physically punishing him for his transgressions. Because while she stood there, thinking she held all the power, she realized she was helpless. She realized she could do nothing because she would never find the closure she deserved.

Kleena's eyes darted toward the baseball bat in the corner.

And as her fiancé sputtered out incoherently, trying to explain the unexplainable, and the woman looked like she wanted to be anywhere else but their living room, Kleena stormed toward the bat. She picked it up and twirled it in her hand, looking from

Jodin to the woman and back again.

“Please, honey,” Jodin begged. “Just calm down. We can talk this out.”

The woman sputtered in response. “You said she didn’t mean anything to you,” she yelled. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Too bad Kleena was done.

There are no more pieces to pick up, she thought. There’s no mending this.

Readying the bat to swing at her ex-lover and his mistress, Kleena instead stepped over to the table, preparing her follow-through.

“You knew what you did, you liar,” Kleena seethed.

The voice that came out of her mouth didn’t feel like her own. It felt like some unfamiliar monster—a beast ready to invoke the fury she could not.

The quiet, intimate scene was immediately interrupted. As transport vehicles sputtered by, and the intercom outside declared the weather forecast, Kleena swung.

Glass shattered. Electricity crackled out of the hollow frame.

Even as her bat collided with the display, she could feel its heat resonating, a device not ready to end its life. Like the home before her, it wanted to remain loved.

“Your woman’s a psycho!” the stranger screamed over the sounds of the bat repeatedly bludgeoning the table.

Kleena could see the silhouettes of ghosts scurrying out of the room in a panic,

neither of them people she cared to know.

Her audience was gone, clearly aware they'd wronged her. She knew that should have been enough. But as the table crashed to the ground, no longer fit to hold anything at all, she could feel power in the bat. She knew that as soon as she let go, she'd be helpless again.

Kleena bared her teeth, driving the bat into the furniture, into the kitchen table, and into the entertainment center. Her ears became accustomed to the sound of crashing furniture, and of ornaments toppling from the walls. Yet no matter how much she broke, smoking electronics becoming prevalent, the bat remained completely intact.

There was some beauty in that fact. Kleena liked the idea that anything could resist destruction. She wasn't even sure if she would weather this.

It used to be a home, filled with the sounds of their shared laughter. It was a place where they learned about themselves, discovering who they were alone as well as together. But he had ruined that. How could he have been so selfish? How hadn't she seen it sooner?

While Kleena broke her back for this place, working to build something in an almost unlivable world, Jodin sat on his ass, dreaming of days that would never come. He squandered their time together, taking advantage of her.

And for all the times he told her he loved her, Kleena realized he had always been lying through his teeth.

She realized her screams were joining the sounds of destruction, but she didn't care who heard.

She imagined her neighbors walking into the wreckage, perhaps to report her. Or

maybe they'd be more sympathetic, asking what happened.

But Kleena was as alone as she'd always been.

She could feel her energy leaving her.

She collapsed to the carpet, looking at the room around her as the bat thudded to the floor.

Tears filled her eyes. They had been there the entire time. As loudly as she had been yelling, her despair was far more pronounced.

But on seeing the wreckage of her life, reduced to literal shambles, Kleena sobbed uncontrollably. The scene before her had been a nightmare, something she wasn't convinced was real. She could still picture the woman with her hands wrapped around her fiancé.

However, the destruction was anything but dreamlike.

She couldn't just wake up from this and have her old life back.

Kleena wept, lying down on the floor as the lights in the room gradually died.

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Kleena

“How long have I been lying here?” Kleena asked the empty room.

The ground was cold, pieces of jagged debris digging into her side.

Part of her hoped that maybe Jodin might return after the fallout. Too bad the loudest part of her would have chased him out with a bat.

She pushed her palm against the ground, avoiding shards of glass, to heave herself to her feet. Her home wasn't safe anymore. It didn't represent the shelter she'd once known. She couldn't trust anything she'd built.

Or maybe I'm exaggerating .

An inkling of a thought crossed her mind... Maybe she should pick up this mess.

Or maybe that was a problem for another day.

She felt a shard of glass crush underfoot anyway, despite her best efforts, and then she made her way out the door, paranoid it might have gone through and cut her foot.

She didn't want to keep imagining the life she used to have in this place. She didn't want to remember herself in his arms.

She didn't know what she was doing or why she even bothered to do anything at all. She could have lain face down in that apartment for several more hours and been just

as happy.

Outside, the cool air stung her tear-stained cheeks.

God, I must look monstrous , she thought, trudging aimlessly forward as she shut and locked the apartment door behind her.

Whirring vehicles careened overhead.

She could feel the stares of frequent passersby in the crowded streets, their eyes studying her—judging her. Maybe she should have cleaned up a little before she left home. But the last thing on her mind was her appearance.

Mere hours ago, she would have cared about being out in the districts with smeared mascara. Such a thought would have been unfathomable to her.

After all, what would Jodin have thought?

She chuckled even though it hurt. His expectations were always lofty.

Even though it hurt, she knew their relationship had been crumbling for some time. That part of their relationship had always been hollow, and she might be better off.

Of course, that didn't make it any easier.

She passed by an arispote woman and a human man, her slight green hand holding his larger tanned one. Kleena had heard arispote reproduced through skin-on-skin contact, and that even something as innocuous as holding hands could lead to pregnancy.

Perhaps on the creature's home world, such a display would have been illicit. She

didn't know. She'd never truly met an arispote to ask.

Typically, she liked to think about these strange interactions and speculate on them. The darker parts of the capital city had formed a melting pot for alien species, making it easy to do.

"But not today," she told herself, tuning out the world around her as she walked aimlessly, never once registering the danger she might be putting herself in.

If they're going to come for me, let them come for me . What more do I have to lose?

She didn't notice the shadows that had started to gather around her as she moved from the bustling streets into an alleyway, stray rainwater dripping down from gutters. Smoke rose up from out of the grates, a neon scoreboard on the back of the bar depicting the results of the last Organ Bowl.

She lifted herself slightly from her trance. The blue moon poured light down from overhead, reflecting off of the collection pile.

It resembled the wreckage she'd be returning to. Several glass milk bottles lay broken into pieces along with a broken image display. The only difference was that they saw fit to dispose of it all rather than bothering to pick up the pieces.

Kleena rubbed her nose with her sleeve, wiping the tears from her eyes.

Next week would have been our anniversary , she realized, feeling a chasm of despair take hold.

She should have returned home. She never even realized the danger she was putting herself in by walking the streets late at night. Abduction stories were becoming far more common, though most were shared via word-of-mouth at bars and in the

hallways of her apartment complex.

The lost girls were nameless like her, nobodies in a cold and indifferent city.

She looked ahead at the alleyway, which narrowed as it extended.

She'd never been this far from home before, at least not on a walk. Some of her favorite businesses emptied out into this alley.

Fuck it , she thought, oblivious to the racket ahead of her. If I'm going to die tonight, why not make it an adventure?

"Curfew is meant to be obeyed for your own safety."

Kleena nearly jumped, hearing the woman's calming voice speak out over the citywide intercom.

"We respect and value your freedoms, but we're also here to protect you."

Feeling defiance rise in her, Kleena walked forward, almost having to turn to squeeze through the narrowing alley. She didn't want to think about what had brought her to this point. She didn't want to think about anything at all. She just needed to move forward.

The lights became dimmer the more she traveled until she was alone in the darkness, ignorant to the noises around her. The intercom insisting obedience and dictating protocol was muffled somehow, as though this realm existed in a bubble.

Even the noises of overhead traffic were silent, the hovering of vehicles no longer present.

Finally, I can hear myself think.

That's when the alleyway started to open up once more. The alleys were as unpredictable as the streets, which ages ago had served functional purposes but now remained as nothing more than reminders of a long-dead era.

As she moved, her hair fell down in front of her face, a tangled mess of its former self. She found herself constantly having to brush it aside, trying not to let her thoughts stray back to the apartment she'd left behind.

She could feel the dirt and residue from the buildings coating her face, making the remnants of makeup left on her cheeks almost granular.

"I'm pathetic," she murmured to herself, glad she no longer had to sidle through the alley passages. "But at least I'm alone."

She dusted off her dress, trying to liberate some shred of dignity.

But as she removed the debris, turning and shifting in place, Kleena's ears perked up. She suddenly realized she wasn't alone after all. Somehow, somebody else had found their way through this labyrinth of passages to join her in the alleyway.

And they sounded desperate.

No longer concerned for her own safety, Kleena moved urgently toward the noise, trying to follow the sound to the best of her ability.

"Seriously, I don't have a problem with you guys," a girl's voice called out as Kleena tiptoed through the back alleys.

The girl's voice was strained, as though she had also been crying mere moments

before. “Just let me go. I don’t want to cause you guys any—”

“Do we look like we’re the ones in trouble?” a gruff, raspy voice, whose intonations were familiarly prolonged, snarled. “Stop struggling.”

Kleena’s pace increased. She didn’t care about being spotted. She turned the corner to see a blonde girl, whose hair was far tidier than Kleena’s, huddled over on the pavement. On all sides, she was flanked by Jorvlens, their movements staggered and unnatural.

A very small part of Kleena wanted to run away. Perhaps that part of her mind thought there might still be something worth fighting for.

Perhaps it was just cowardly.

But as she charged forward, lunging at the alien creatures, who seemed to have been laughing at the girl’s misfortune, Kleena knew she at least had the element of surprise.

She tackled the biggest one to the ground.

“What the...”

She pulled her fist backward, and with every bit of fury she could muster, she started punching the Jorvlen in its face.

In her mind, the Jorvlen was Jodin back in the apartment. Every bit of damage she wanted to do to him was portrayed in her alleyway punches.

Yet it still wasn’t enough.

“You’re a really stupid slave. You know that?”

But the comment wasn’t addressed toward the stranger in the alley. It was meant for Kleena.

Kleena’s arm became enwrapped in a slimy filament, the Jorvlen gripping her tightly.

What was worse, the girl she had attempted to save, hoping to sacrifice herself toward that cause, was still cowering in the alley, afraid to move.

“Slave?” Kleena asked. “I’m no slave!”

The creatures around her—familiar, terrifying creatures that plagued the city with their presence—began to laugh again.

“You could have fooled me,” one of the Jorvlens said.

And before Kleena knew what was happening, her other arm was subdued too.

The girl looked pleadingly in her direction, as though hoping Kleena might still stand a chance.

However, they had begun dragging her by her feet, and they were tremendously brawny, their muscles naturally stronger than a human’s.

“Boss is gonna be really happy about this haul,” one of the monsters said.

Kleena could feel herself being pulled into darkness alongside the girl, dragged through the alleyway toward an unknown destination.

Her fight was gone.

She couldn't see much more point in resisting. What was left to fight for in this city?

Why was she even alive?

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Erhan

“Get out of the way!”

Erhan slithered around Devra, nearly mimicking a somersault as his tail led the rest of his body forward.

The room was a battleground.

Flurries of metal swung and twanged through the air, clanking and reverberating synthetically. High-pitched noises resounded, shaking the walls as the weapons collided unnaturally together, struggling to break apart as they fused in the air.

We really shouldn't have moved our training , Erhan thought. This room's far too cramped for our needs.

It wasn't as though they didn't have bigger rooms. Perhaps to handicap himself, Devra had decided to train under tighter conditions, mimicking the limitations of the outside world.

But he's going to take off somebody's head.

Already, they were embracing these archaic weapons to train their strength and mobility.

The tuners swung through the air haphazardly, threatening their recipients with sharp bludgeoning damage, and on collision with each other, sonic emissions.

What I'd give for a nice blaster. Or even a sword , Erhan thought, realizing his internal monologue was distracting him from combat.

The tuner harmlessly impacted his training armor, producing a small note.

Devra grinned widely.

"You didn't get me," Erhan said. "I just got a bit distracted is all."

For a brief moment, Erhan thought he might have agitated Devra. But as the room came to attention, concluding its sparring session, Devra slid forward and bowed.

"You always were a sore loser," Devra teased.

Erhan shook his head. "Is that any way to talk to your mentor?"

The door to the training room burst open, and one Naga, much larger than Erhan, careened forward across the hardwood floor.

Briefly, Erhan felt tempted to pick up his tuner and resume training, despite the insistent formality of Xekrin, their messenger.

Erhan looked out of the corner of his eye, inspecting the training weapon for imperfections and blemishes.

Xekrin coughed.

"Something I can help you with, Xekrin?" Erhan finally addressed the messenger. He peeled his eyes back toward the male, who was simply fulfilling his courtly duty.

"Uh, yeah," Xekrin stuttered. "You've got a message from the king."

Erhan smiled, flashing his pearlescent fangs. “Well, that’s not a very formal way to announce an official summons, is it?”

Erhan snaked past Xekrin, feeling the wood’s smooth and calming texture on his tail. Xekrin hesitated.

“Lighten up, Xekrin. I was only joking.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Erhan swore he saw Xekrin bow.

Erhan hated little more than being the recipient of a bow. He didn’t want to be seen as another prince to the throne. He was a capable warrior in his own right.

But as much as he hated being sucked up to, he realized that Xekrin was only doing his job.

So, wiping his brow of sweat, Erhan turned to Xekrin and gestured. “Lead the way.”

The royal messenger weaved his way forward slowly, ensuring he was being followed.

“I’ll be back,” Erhan called out to his guards. “Please don’t let yourselves become rusty in my absence.”

The sounds of high-pitched metal erupted behind him as he closed the door, following closely behind Xekrin.

He anticipated the turns toward the throne room: left, right, down the ramp, across the fields, farther down the corridors.

But Erhan was surprised when they did not turn left at the library, slithering toward

the courtyard instead.

Despite this, Xekrin's focus was unwavering. He did nothing to address the discrepancy in their destination.

"I thought I was going to see the king," Erhan objected, looking back at the long stone hallway.

He wasn't sure why royalty liked to linger centuries in the past, preferring stone halls and wood floors to the metal of the people. It had never been anything their history addressed. On other worlds far less civilized than this, other cultures lived in palaces of metal and screens, not rock.

"You are, my prince," Xekrin said, making Erhan wince at the phrase. "Your king will see you in the courtyard today."

Erhan furrowed his brow. The king only liked to linger in the courtyard on severe occasions. It was how he decompressed from stress, escaping the weight of his duties when they became particularly burdensome.

Erhan had been expecting a lecture on duty to the crown once more. Perhaps this was something else.

As they reached the courtyard, Xekrin moved to the side, allowing Erhan passage into the gardens. He was surprised to see the king stretched out near the flowerbeds, planting glowing red areth seeds in the green soil.

"Brother," Erhan said, realizing he still had not been sighted. "I keep telling you, you have servants for that type of task."

King Gravon sighed, cocking his head only slightly to acknowledge his brother's

arrival.

“I find it therapeutic,” Gravon informed him, not for the first time.

Erhan nodded, waiting for an elaboration that never came. “You always did like to dig in the soil.”

“Do you think I’m an effective king?”

Startled by the question, Erhan asked for clarification. “Pardon?”

Gravon dusted off his hands, green soil falling from the deep green tips.

“I summoned you here for insight, Erhan, but also because I’ve received some rather upsetting news.”

The brook of the courtyard babbled. Erhan knew that to be around nature was a gift. Some beings had never so much as seen a tree, living in the cruel world of cement, metal, and neon lights.

King Gravon began to slither from one side of the large courtyard to the other and back again. Erhan followed, ensuring he was not left behind so he didn’t miss any conversation.

“We do our best to protect and police the galaxy, ensuring the safety of our peoples,” Gravon reminded him. “I hope you haven’t considered me strict in those implementations.”

Erhan came to a sudden stop, careful not to bump into Gravon as he looked back, inspecting him. “Well, you know I’m hardly a prince...”

“Please cut the shit, brother,” Gravon drawled. “Just give it to me honestly.”

Erhan nodded. “I’ve heard that people consider you a bit strict,” Erhan paused for a moment and then continued, seeing the despair in his brother’s face. “But honestly, I don’t put much stock in those rumblings. You are a great ruler.”

Gravon inhaled deeply. “Right, well... that’s kind of why I called you here. Turns out I’m not doing as good of a job as I believed.”

The wind rushed over the courtyard.

Where was this vulnerability coming from? Ordinarily, King Gravon never admitted his mistakes. It was one of the best, and most infuriating, things about talking to him.

“People are dying, Erhan,” Gravon explained. “Humans, on planets outside of our proper jurisdiction. They’re being sold into slavery against their will.”

Erhan shook his head. “But the trade law,” Erhan countered. “Are they not enforcing it hard enough? Are we not policing public spaces?”

Gravon smiled wryly.

“I had hoped the law would work, too. We had plenty of people on other planets, watching. And though we’ve outlawed the sale of humans publicly, it hasn’t stopped private interests from moving quickly underground, out of our sight.”

Erhan’s jaw clenched at the thought. He couldn’t imagine being dragged out of the public eye like that, only to be held against his will like common cattle.

“The way we had slavery before was disgusting, and we needed it to be outlawed,” Gravon continued. “But there was some logic to the process. At least when slavery

was out in the open, we could safely regulate it.”

Erhan bared his fangs. “What are you saying, brother?”

Gravon resumed his meandering pacing of the courtyard, his arms tucked neatly behind his back. “You’ve been adamant about staying out of the courts, for the sake of training your guards,” Gravon said. “I think I resented you for that a little bit.”

Erhan raised his chin, ready for a confrontation.

“But we need you now, Erhan,” Gravon added. “Thanks to you, we have a strong military, full of capable warriors.” Gravon studied the dirt on his hands, which blended in with his scales. “They haven’t been listening, brother. I don’t know what to do anymore.”

Erhan’s nostrils flared, his shoulders hiked at attention.

“We need the best Niri out there on the ground, patrolling other planets,” Gravon informed him. “For too long, we’ve dwelled in our fortresses and our castles, hoping to help the problem from afar. But no more.” Gravon abruptly turned, his face mere inches away from Erhan’s. “So, what I’m saying is, we need to lead a strike force team to those planets that have betrayed their people,” Gravon stated. “We want to minimize casualties as much as possible, but we’ll do what is necessary.”

“Understood,” Erhan answered immediately. Partly, Erhan would be glad to leave the confines of the castle for a bit, where he was constantly reminded of a realm he wanted little part of.

But the bigger part of him felt sympathy for the humans and the alien races who lived their lives in squalor. He always hated stepping into those dirty, cold spaces, meeting the scorn of the commoners who saw him as detached from their interests, if they

even recognized him at all.

These were the people his family had pledged to preside over—to protect. Yet they conducted their lives, pretending royalty didn't exist, losing faith in the king.

“I expect you might meet some resistance, possibly even from the people you're trying to help,” Gravon sighed. “Just please be patient with them. I trust you to help them see the light.”

Erhan hardened his coil, already preparing himself for the mission that awaited him.

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Erhan

Erhan slithered into the dimly lit briefing room, a space that smelled like sweat, metal, and cleaning oils. His tactical team immediately coiled at attention, their faces solemn. Maps lay spread out on a long table in front of them.

He took his spot in front, taking the time to look each of them in the eye. “Is everyone ready?”

“Yes, sir.” Their voices rang out in the small room, the holograms displaying intel illuminating their serious faces.

He grinned, fangs glinting in the low light. “Tonight, our hard work and hours of research will pay off. We’ll rescue these women and remind everyone back home why we’re considered an elite tactical team.”

His teammates chuckled and nodded.

“Let’s go.” His voice was stern and commanding.

I can’t wait to take care of the slave-dealing scum. They’ll regret ever touching human females.

Disguised as wealthy off-world buyers, the team exited the room and effortlessly blended into the bustling crowd.

Satisfied that the darkness provided enough cover, Erhan overtly signaled his men to

follow him closely. He moved with the confidence of those with power and immense wealth, which wasn't far from the truth. Passersby didn't even think twice about his presence in the area. He looked like he belonged.

Erhan's eyes scanned the environment for any sign of the kidnapped women or slave traders. His eyes were sharp and well-trained, so even the smallest details didn't go unseen.

The crowd was thick and busy, making the task of blending in much easier.

As the team made their way deeper into the throng, the delicate, floral perfume of exotic flowers mingling with the citrusy tang of fresh fruit overwhelmed their senses.

"Bah, what an intense smell!" the tallest of the team exclaimed, his tongue flicking as if nervous.

"It'll pass. Or you'll get used to it. Either way, calm down, Mr. Sensitive Tongue."

They chuckled at the shorter team member's joke but quickly fell silent when Erhan gave them a stern glance.

He studied the faces of those passing him as he led his team ever forward, searching for any clues, no matter how subtle.

It's time to find out for good where the females are held. I'll rescue them and show those Jorvlens they're not to mess with the Niri.

As they slowly made their way toward the suspected location of the secret auction, the sound of the crowd began to fade, replaced by the distant hum of electricity and machinery. The occasional drip of water in the damp, narrow passageways broke the eerie silence. The walls, covered in grime, seemed to close in as he went deeper, the

oppressive atmosphere pressing down like a physical weight.

I can almost taste the desperation and pain in the air. Vile creatures. They turned an ordinary city into their disgusting little hellhole.

He knew his mask was perfect and that he appeared stoic and cold from the outside, but a simmering rage was warming him from the inside.

His hands clenched into fists as he silently vowed to put an end to the human trafficking blight.

A creature clad in dark brown robes bumped shoulders with Erhan and gave him a wicked grin. “You here for the auction, too? I can see you’re a man who knows how to spend his money.” The man rubbed his taloned hands together. “I’ve been told this auction’s got some great specimens. Looking forward to it!” He cackled and disappeared into the darkness before Erhan could question him about the auction’s location.

He glanced around, and when he was sure no one would see him, flicked out his tongue to find the man’s scent. He quickly picked it up and signaled his men to follow.

The team remained close to each other while simultaneously going their own directions, picking up on small clues and indicators that the auction was nearby.

Using years of training and innate skills, they pieced together the intelligence they needed from secretive whispers and rumors.

It didn’t take long for them to accurately pinpoint the building that would host the secret auction, and Erhan’s heart raced. His tongue flicked out in excitement.

They met up on the corner of an alley, heads low.

Erhan spoke softly but clearly. “Are we in agreement that the building with the yellow lighting is highly likely to be our target destination?”

The others nodded, glancing at the building. They looked disgusted by its mere existence.

A chill permeated the air, and the tension had built to an all-time high.

Erhan could sense his team’s anticipation and wariness. He appreciated how seriously they took the situation.

I trained with these males for so long... They’re making me proud tonight.

One of the men, the shortest of the group, spoke up. “This building is a nest for illegal dealings. Everything from slaves to minotaur body parts and the internal organs of demons can be traded here.”

Another male spat on the ground. “What a filthy place. I would have burned it to the ground if I could.”

Erhan nodded, frowning. “That would be most satisfying indeed. But we’re here on covert operations, so none of that tonight, I’m afraid.”

A moment of silence enveloped them as they stared at the building.

“I’ll go in and gather intel to make sure we’ve got the right place.” Erhan adjusted his robes, making sure to cover his face and shroud his identity in darkness. “The last thing we want is to swoop into the wrong place.”

The team looked at each other with doubt at this risky idea but dared not say anything. He gave them a final nod before slithering into the alley in the direction of the secret auction. As he neared the building, he could see it was an old warehouse with small windows at the very top. There was no hope of peeking through them, but that wasn't necessary. He could detect the smell of the man who bumped into him earlier.

He also picked up another smell—blood. There was no doubt in his mind now. This was the target location. He entered the building with ease, noting that no guards were protecting the entrance.

Perhaps that would have made it too obvious, and the guards are located inside. That's what I would do if I was a slimy slave trader.

He glanced up and wasn't surprised to see small cameras monitoring the entrance and hallway.

Fortunately, I'm wearing an effective disguise.

Erhan navigated a maze of crates and shadows, searching for evidence or captives. His heart rate was steady despite the imminent danger. Going in alone was risky, suicidal, even. He knew he could get into trouble for his actions, but he didn't want to put his team in danger. It was quicker, too, heading in solo when things were unknown.

His mind was focused as he smoothly glided along, his tongue occasionally peeking out to get a sense of his surroundings.

The air was tinged with the acrid scent of sweat and fear, mingling with the metallic tangs of rust and blood. He rounded a corner when a guard walked toward him, studying a small hologram floating above his hand.

Erhan quickly darted back, but judging by the surprised noise coming from the guard, he'd been spotted.

With a sigh, he rushed forward, grabbing the still-surprised guard by the neck. The sheer power of his grip prevented the guard from making a sound.

He subdued the creature, calling on his training to swiftly and noiselessly take out the threat before fading into the darkness once more.

He silently disposed of the limp body in a small utility room before continuing down the hallway, thanking the god Atia that there were no cameras in this area to catch his actions.

He paused at the end of the hallway, listening intently. His tongue flicked out to taste the air. From his left, he could hear parts of a conversation and he closed his eyes, straining his ears to hear better.

“...later tonight. They've got to be scrubbed clean now...”

“Yes, I know... They're not fighting back, at least most of them aren't...”

“...beat them... submissive and docile but alive...”

He spun and slithered back the way he came just in time. Behind him, he could hear the footsteps of at least a dozen aliens coming his way.

He hastened his pace and narrowly escaped, slipping out of the warehouse undetected. With a triumphant smile, he returned to his team silently waiting in the shadows of the alley across from the warehouse.

Ehran dropped his voice and spoke. “That's the place, undoubtedly.”

They looked at each other, their faces mirroring each other's resolve to carry out their task with success.

“It's time. Finally.” He turned to the building and gave the signal.

The rescue mission had begun.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Kleena

Kleena rubbed her hands together. She wasn't cold but longed to do something. Anything was better than sitting around waiting for a miracle.

Or the end.

It had been two days since she got kidnapped and thrown into a musty warehouse, but it felt like she'd been there for months.

She knew exactly how many rows of bricks were below the high windows that promised escape but were just out of reach. Of course, this number varied, depending on how many times she started over counting.

She'd come to understand the various grunts her kidnappers used to communicate. Short ones meant it was time to change guard shifts, and longer ones meant it was time to feed the women.

Not that the gruel given to them could be called food. Kleena refused to eat, afraid that the so-called food may contain drugs to keep the women docile.

Suddenly, the warehouse burst into life. Agitated guards were running around barking orders at each other as women cried fearfully.

"What the hell's going on now?" she asked no one in particular.

A younger girl to her right shuffled closer. "They're panicking. Something about the

warehouse being compromised.” She sniffed and looked around wearily.

“Compromised? As in someone infiltrated it?” Kleena was instantly interested, but the girl was unable to give her more information.

She was about to ask the other women if they knew more when the door to their room was slammed open.

Guards started grabbing women, forcing them out of the warehouse in a hurry.

“Come on! Get out! We don’t have time to waddle around! Out! ”

Kleena steeled herself. She had come to know just how brutal these creatures could get when they were in a hurry.

Still, when one grabbed her upper arm, the pain and discomfort made her inhale sharply. She bit back the insult that threatened to jump out of her mouth, knowing now was not the time.

Once she was herded out of the warehouse, she and the rows of other women were forced to hurry toward a spaceship waiting in the distance.

Kleena stared at the metallic ship with its many blinking white lights. The closer she got, the more it dawned on her just how big it was. She couldn’t help but wonder how her kidnappers got away with having such a mode of transport near the capital city.

As she stepped onto the spaceship, the cold metal walls and the sterile smell made her head spin. Fear coiled in her stomach. This was the furthest she’d been into the unknown in her life, and she was about to be forced even further.

The engines hummed to life and she could feel the power coursing through the

spaceship with lights flickering.

Her kidnappers instructed her and the other women to keep walking in rows until they were guided into their new cells.

She listened with half an ear, thinking about the distance growing between her and the life she once knew. At one time, she had hope for a good future, had dreams of a family and a happy life. Although those hopes and dreams were crushed by her former friend and lover, she still had aspirations for herself.

Perhaps she could have found a small cabin in the woods and lived there on her own, rediscovering who she was. Or she could have pursued new hobbies, filling her days with creative explorations and discoveries.

Now, all she could see for herself was misery and a joyless life of servitude.

Kleena watched what was happening around her while she walked. Women were being examined and thrown into specific cells. From her perspective, it seemed like they were being sorted by hair color.

“How original.” She rolled her eyes, an act that would have earned her a beating had any of the guards noticed. She looked up at the guard sorting the women when she reached him, hoping to make him uncomfortable with her hate-filled glare.

He barely noticed her and indicated to his colleague that she would go to the cells to their right.

She avoided the second guard’s touch by ducking out of reach and walking to the cell on her own. Every time one of them touched her, she felt like a little piece of her died.

He snarled but let her be.

Despite her apparent meek obedience, Kleena was fervently glancing around, searching for any kind of escape.

She couldn't see any.

Corralled into a cramped cell, she heard the door locking behind her with a haunting finality while women around her cried softly, clutching each other while their hopes of getting away dashed.

Kleena's eyes burned. She felt like crying too but refused to show that kind of emotion, lest her kidnappers see it and take joy in her pain.

A guard's menacing voice filtered through the cell, silencing all the women instantly.

"Cheer up, human females!" He cackled before speaking again. "You'll live amazing lives once you've been bought. Only the wealthy and powerful can buy slaves, so you'll live lives of opulence as prizes for the highest bidders!"

His gleeful laughter echoed in the room. "Most of you will end up as pretty little breeders, spending the majority of your time on your backs, so enjoy your idle time while you have it."

His words of fake encouragement fell flat because the sarcasm in his voice was unmistakable.

"Shut up!" Kleena snarled, surprising a few of the women around her as well as herself. "I will not be some asshole's breeding machine!"

A fire deep within her soul burned with more ferocity. Embers became flames, and

she refused to bow down to a life designed by her captors.

The guard who found their situation so amusing opened the door and rushed over to her while another stood sentinel outside the door. It slammed shut with a bone-chilling loud thud.

He stalked over to Kleena, who defiantly stared him down. “You won’t dictate what happens to me!”

A sharp slap echoed through the cell, a stinging punctuation that silenced her momentarily.

For a beat, she simply stared at him, too shocked to properly react.

He sneered, looking down at her. “You may have been an unintended addition to the merchandise, but you’ll still be profitable. I’m sure your buyer will enjoy breaking you.” His words dripped with contempt.

He grabbed her by her hair, lifting her a few inches off her feet. She yelped in pain, despite her best attempt not to show emotion. He laughed, his face mere inches from hers. Kleena shut her eyes tightly, refusing to look at him while his breath made her shudder in disgust.

When he saw her reaction to his closeness, he threw her to the ground and gave her a swift kick in the ribs.

She grabbed her side, coughing and moaning in pain.

“You’re nothing but merchandise. Don’t forget that, filthy human.” His eyes fell on the snake tattoo on her back, visible through the torn clothes she wore. “Prepare yourself. Your new master will cover that with his own branding.”

He laughed loudly at his own joke, and Kleena saw her one and only opportunity. Seizing the unguarded moment, she lunged for the cell door. Her desire to be free and pure determination fueled her attempt to pry it open, and by some miracle, she succeeded.

The door opened just enough for her to squeeze out of it, and she hurriedly forced her body through, grimacing with pain and discomfort. She broke out of the cell and ran a few steps before she was captured by the other guards.

They grabbed her by her arms, lifted her off the ground, and simply walked back to the cell with her hanging between them.

Her brave attempt at escape was met with defeat.

Kleena screamed with frustration. This couldn't be how her life ended. She couldn't become a slave or a baby machine for some monstrous alien out there.

She just couldn't .

Her head hung, and she felt defeated. The security protocols were impenetrable. She likely wasn't the first woman to try and break free. They were prepared for this kind of behavior.

The guards unceremoniously threw her back into the cell, snickering as they closed the door once more.

The reality of her captivity finally set in, and Kleena's heart sank even further. She retreated to the back of the cell, her mind racing as she tried to think of another way out.

Then the sound of more engines turning on reverberated through the cell, and she felt

the spaceship take off.

It was too late for her now.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Erhan

Erhan sauntered into the auction house. He knew his elaborate disguise was working well; several other noble-looking visitors greeted him with a friendly nod.

He smugly smiled to himself. The disguise was impeccable, and he was pleased his choice of clothing paid off so well.

He moved through the crowd with the demeanor of an eager, wealthy outsider. He knew if he wanted to succeed at his mission, he had to look like the bastards around him.

Slowly slithering around as if he had all the time in the world, he studied the faces of the auctioneers. He would make a point of chasing down every last one of them when the time came.

This building was relatively unfamiliar to him and his team, but they were all experts at improvisation, so their plan would go off without a hitch, no matter what.

He tugged at his robes in frustration, remembering his earlier attempt at infiltrating the auction. Somehow, despite his best efforts, he still managed to alert the auctioneers, and they immediately took off, postponing their rescue attempt for days as he and his team ascertained the new location.

This auction was in a remote area, far less accessible than the city he'd studied with his team before taking action.

He looked around. It seemed like the guards were more alert too, which would make things more difficult once he and his team struck.

Erhan took a position near the front of the stage where the auction items and slaves would be paraded. His team was fanned out behind him, each in a strategic position, ready to attack at his command.

The stage lit up with different colors, illuminated from behind, and a tall auctioneer stepped to the center. After a brief speech, he announced that bidding would begin, the first items coming from raided treasuries from all over the galaxy.

This didn't interest him in the least, but it was time to establish his faux nouveau riche persona, so Erhan feigned excitement.

He began to bid with calculated nonchalance, throwing large sums at trivial items and acting disappointed if he lost a bidding. The other participants murmured among each other, discussing Erhan and his very generous purse.

Once again, he smiled smugly to himself. His plan was falling neatly into place.

The auction drew on, anticipation in the room mounting. Erhan and all the other visitors knew that the auctioneers were saving the "best" for last. The live merchandise would soon be put on stage for these shameless animals to bid upon.

He pretended to watch the current bidding on a large, oval-shaped silver object from a planet he'd never heard of. In reality, he was keenly observing his surroundings, taking mental notes of all the guards, the exits, and any potential threats.

His ability to quickly size up a situation and craft effective strategies on the spot made him the favored military man he'd become. He had already formed a few backup plans should things go wrong when he decided to strike at the auctioneers.

There were three exits, and he had a plan on how to make the most of each of them should the situation demand it.

He was only faintly aware of a new item being auctioned, but when he heard the words “demon heart,” he focused on the stage once more.

“Surely not...” he murmured to himself, his arms crossed in front of him.

The crowd cheered.

A demon heart was on auction and the bids were going increasingly higher. Apparently, it was in high demand in these crowds.

Erhan lost interest once more, going over his plan for the umpteenth time in his head. He had to ensure everything went smoothly or the entire operation could be a bust.

The auctioneer watched as the final item was wheeled off the stage before he dramatically cleared his throat.

Finally, the moment Eهران had been waiting for had arrived.

He straightened his back, unease spreading through his body, causing him to feel slightly stiff.

The auctioneer smiled mischievously. “My dear bidders and esteemed patrons, it is time for something a little more... exciting.” He looked over the crowd with a big grin. “We are about to start taking bids on our most illicit items. Many of you have been waiting days for this.”

The crowd came to life, now much more excited than just a few moments ago.

“Let us begin!” The auctioneer clapped his many hands, and the lighting changed to a deep red, bathing the stage in dramatic ambiance.

Erhan could feel the atmosphere become more electric as six human females were herded on stage.

They stood awkwardly, clearly afraid, as every pair of eyes in the crowd studied them.

He noticed that one of the women, a feisty-looking one with light brown shoulder-length, curly hair glared into the crowd. She was beautiful, her skin soft-looking and pale against the harsh red lights. Even her scowl of fury couldn't hide the delicate features underneath. He found himself drawn to her above all others.

Eyebrows raised, he shook his head. He was willing to bet she'd get a high price. The men here loved a bit of challenge from their slaves, at least initially. He had heard that “breaking” slaves was almost like a sport for them.

Erhan glanced around him, disgusted by the ravenous gazes of those transfixed by the poor females.

He covertly glanced around, making eye contact with his team members. Every one of them silently told him what he wanted to know. They were ready and waiting for his command to attack. The bidding started, and Erhan was almost surprised by the ludicrous amounts bidders were offering for the females.

They looked like hungry animals eyeing their prey, and in a sense, they were exactly that.

A shiver of revulsion ran down his spine. He could not stand these wealthy, selfish bastards who wanted to control other beings.

Tension in the room reached a fever pitch, and Erhan sensed it was the right moment to launch the operation.

Desperate bids were screamed out, and a bidder was ready to rush to the stage in an attempt to win one of the females for himself.

Erhan gave the imperceptible signal, and his well-rehearsed plan sprang into action.

His warriors, once shrouded as bystanders, revealed themselves with impressively swift precision. They disarmed the surprised guards and managed to create a perfect distraction for Erhan.

He leaped into the fray, his movements a blur to anyone who tried to watch. He unsheathed his sword without a sound and cut through the mayhem with deadly accuracy.

The auction dissolved into pure chaos, the once-orderly procession of greed now nothing but a battleground for justice and freedom.

Erhan laughed as he cut through the guards and auctioneers, reveling in the fear and surprise in their eyes.

“You expected me, and I still managed to catch you by surprise!” He gloated as he slashed open the chest of a guard.

Another approached him from behind, but he smelled him from a mile away, and his counterattack was precise and deadly.

He gave the guard’s head a final stomp and looked around, searching for more of them. He had counted at least a dozen and knew more were behind the scenes.

Erhan spotted more of his foes near one of the exits. He rushed in their direction, his determination to take them out fueling his attack.

The auctioneers ran back and desperately hid behind the guards, shaking with fear.

“What do you think you’re doing? You won’t get away with this!” a burly guard yelled at Erhan before raising a massive axe, intending to embed it in his head.

Erhan was too quick, and he darted out of the way, twisting his body and slashing the guard’s neck with one precise movement.

Clutching at the wound, the guard fell to the ground. Erhan swiped him in the ribs and brought down his sword once more, this time nearly cutting the guard’s head off.

The auctioneers screamed in fear and shock, scrambling to get away from their serpentine attacker. He hissed at them, chasing them down and slithering in front of them with awe-inspiring speed. They froze in their tracks, eyes wide. One of them lifted his hands in surrender and gave Erhan a submissive smile. This didn’t go down well with him, and he lashed out, cutting both of them at once.

“Did you show mercy to the humans you kidnapped and planned to sell here tonight?”

He slashed again, now slicing open the throat of one auctioneer while the other grabbed their arm, screaming.

“I didn’t think so.” With that, he ended the second auctioneer’s life with a flick of his powerful wrist.

He glanced back at the crowd and saw that his team was having as much success as he was. He grinned, his tongue flicking excitedly. So far, everything was going

according to plan.

Perfect.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Kleena

Kleena stood in shock as the auction suddenly dissolved into a chaotic battle and fights for survival. She realized the disarray was just the thing she needed—the perfect cover for a smart slave to escape.

Looking around to find the exits, she spotted something that made her heart sing with newfound hope. The key to her shackles had been carelessly dropped by a guard fending off his attackers.

She bit her lower lip in concentration to avoid being noticed and rushed over, deftly unfastening the chains binding her. As they fell off, her mind started to churn, keeping her focused on fleeing and not looking too hard at the chaos she left behind.

She ducked and swerved, narrowly avoiding the guards or their attackers bumping into her.

Kleena briefly noticed that the attackers were snake-like and then realized they were Niri. She didn't stop to wonder why they were attacking the auction house. She was too busy escaping to worry about Niri motivations.

Swiftly taking advantage of the commotion, she slipped through the crowd and mayhem like a shadow, intent on getting away at all costs. She neared the exit closest to her when a fellow captive's desperate voice made her stop in her tracks.

“Please, take me with you!”

Quickly glancing back, Kleena saw it was the younger girl from earlier, the one who had told her about the infiltration.

Her heart sank. She couldn't just leave the poor thing like that to fend for herself. Her resolve to get out no matter what wavered, and her compassion won. She rushed back and unlocked the girl's shackles with her key, which she had held so tightly in her hand, it had started to bleed.

Once the shackles were off, Kleena grabbed the girl's hand, and together they ran for the exit.

"Thank you!" The girl was crying, but her voice harbored hope.

They were only a few steps away from the door when a Niri warrior intercepted them. He grabbed the girl, his grip on her ironclad and impossible to break.

Kleena pulled as hard as she could but only managed to hurt the young woman. Torn between rescuing the girl or surviving, she stared into the girl's eyes.

Her heart ached because she knew there was no way they would get out together now. Kleena had no hopes of fighting off a Niri warrior.

With a heavy heart, she realized she couldn't free the girl on her own, and she let go of her hand.

"No, please! Don't leave me!" the girl screamed and cried.

Kleena felt the guilt immediately eat away at her insides.

The cries echoed in her ears as Kleena yanked open the door and ran down the hallway.

“I’m sorry!” she whispered as she continued to make a desperate escape, the din of the fight still loud enough to make her worry about being caught.

Turning a corner, Kleena nearly collided with one of the auctioneers. She swerved out of the way, but he grabbed her arm, his intent clear in the malicious grin on his face.

“Just where do you think you’re going, filthy little human?” He pulled her closer to him but she desperately squirmed, managing to worm herself out of his grip. “Nah-ah, not so fast!” He grabbed for her, but Kleena dodged, his fingertips just grazing her skin.

A look of frustration settled on his face as the auctioneer grabbed for her again, this time aiming for her neck.

Once again, she weaved herself out of his grasp, quickly stepping back to remain out of reach. Her back collided with the wall, and she stared at him, fear once more coiling in the pit of her stomach. Certain of his victory, the auctioneer walked up to her, looming over her and doing his best to look intimidating. He didn’t have to try too hard. Kleena was much smaller than him and couldn’t hope to actually fight him.

He pinned her to the wall, his hands at the sides of her head.

She breathed fast, her heart threatening to burst out of her chest. He lowered himself so they were eye to eye.

“Thought you could escape, huh?” He snickered in her face. “Not gonna happen.”

She lifted her knee with all the might she could muster, slamming it into his groin. He doubled over in pain, clutching his wounded flesh.

He hissed something at her that she couldn't understand, but she didn't want to stick around for a translation.

Sprinting off in the direction she'd initially been going, she didn't look back.

Kleena had run a total of six steps when something grabbed her from behind, pulling her back by her clothes. The pull was so powerful that she fell on her back, the wind knocked out of her lungs.

Gasping for air, she stumbled to her feet, her vision blurry. She looked back and made eye contact with the auctioneer, who was already so close, she could smell him.

"No!" She tried to run away, but he grabbed her by her hair, pulling her to the ground once more.

A scream of pain burst from her mouth, but she quickly went quiet again, resolved not to show her opponent that he was winning their fight. Sheer determination helped her jump up once more, not stopping to dust herself off or check for injuries.

She would fight back with everything in her, even if she was fighting a losing battle.

The auctioneer growled angrily. "Enough of these silly attempts. Just give in already and let me shackle you for good!"

Kleena bent down and grabbed some of the dirt off the ground. "Never!" She threw it in his face, and he tried to block it with his arms.

Some of the dirt got in his eyes, but it wasn't enough to make him give up or let her go. Instead, he blocked her path, standing in front of her with his arms held out to grab her. She attempted to run past him by making herself as small as possible and managed to squeeze past him. He let out a growl and grabbed her wrist, his grip tight

enough to leave a nasty bruise. With a triumphant sneer, he pulled back, dragging Kleena to his side.

A primal scream tore from her throat as she fought back, bashing his hand where he held her with her fist repeatedly. She refused to be subdued, her spirit unyielding, and her eyes filled with the fire burning in her as her desire for survival set her soul ablaze.

She continued to hit his hand with all her might, but this only made him clasp her even tighter. Another scream erupted from her and she started kicking the auctioneer anywhere she could reach. He laughed at her attempt to overpower him.

Hearing his taunting laughter fueled her and she started throwing punches at his face. A few of her hits connected, causing him to loosen his grip a little. When she tried to pull her wrist free, he tightened his hold once more.

“It’s going to take a lot more than your feeble punches to bring me down!” He sneered at her, and Kleena felt her hope start to fade away.

She groaned, refusing to allow him to deny her hope. “I don’t care! I’ll fight you until death. Yours or mine!”

“Well, it’s not going to be my death, I can assure you.” He chuckled and looked into her eyes, pinning her with a hateful glare.

Despite her brave words, Kleena knew she couldn’t win or escape. It was hopeless. No matter how many times she tried to get away, fate somehow always made sure she couldn’t.

Tears of frustration stung her eyes, and she was overcome with a feeling of hopelessness.

The auctioneer's grip suddenly went slack, and she watched as he fell to the ground with a loud thud. She looked up and spied a Niri warrior standing over the limp body.

Fear tightened its hand around her very soul, making it difficult for her to breathe.

Her eyes met the warrior's, and her heart thudded. She couldn't put her finger on the reason, but she sensed that this Niri was different.

He was startlingly handsome, for one thing. And he looked down at her not with malice but concern. His eyes softened from the warrior's gaze to something she almost thought might be worry.

Kleena shook her head. She couldn't get sucked into false hope now. She was so close to her freedom! No way would a seasoned warrior like him hesitate to claim her as his trophy: alive or dead.

She could feel the bloodthirst and power emanating from him, almost creating a visible aura, but something inside her spurred her not to give up now.

With a quick glance down, she noticed the blade next to the unmoving auctioneer. She bent down and picked it up, pointing the weapon at the serpentine warrior in front of her. "Stay away! I'm not afraid to use this!"

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Erhan

Erhan studied the human female in front of him for a second before he offered her his hand. She didn't even glance at it but instead gripped the knife tighter.

"I told you to stay away! I'll kill you!"

He had to hold back his laughter. She was no match for him, and a fact they both knew. He had to admire her tenacity, though.

She picked up on the mirth in his eyes and let out a soft growl. She lunged forward with the blade extended, aiming for his neck.

Erhan didn't expect the attack but his reflexes were far sharper than the blade she so clumsily wielded. His warrior instincts took over, and he deftly caught her wrist, preventing the blade from going anywhere near its mark.

He looked into her eyes, feeling far less friendly toward her now.

"I mean you no harm, human." Frustration and anger mixed in his voice, which made him sound harsher than he intended.

She continued to glare at him while trying to free herself from his grip.

He let go of her wrist and eased back, holding up his arms to show he wouldn't attack her. "I'm Prince Erhan from the planet Nirum and the leader of a tactical team. I've been sent on a mission to save human females from slavery."

She looked into his eyes, searching for the truth.

Erhan could see that she didn't quite believe him, and he sighed. He knew it wouldn't be easy to convince the females to trust him, but he got the feeling this one was going to be more challenging.

He frowned, suddenly recognizing her. She was the one who had glared at the bidding crowd, the feisty one.

He chuckled, but there was no happiness in the sound. "Just my luck." He pinned the woman with a stern look. "What's your name?"

She hesitated for a few moments. "Kleena."

"I'm not your enemy, Kleena. I'm here to free you." Erhan held out his hand again, trying to look unimposing and friendly.

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"Well, if I wanted to kill you, I would have done so when you attacked me. Or any time since killing that guard."

"That doesn't mean—" Her voice was cut off by the urgent beeping of a detonator, which was shortly followed by the sound of an explosion on the other side of the auction house.

The shock of the explosion rattled the walls, and soft debris rained down on Erhan and Kleena. They briefly made eye contact as the walls started to crack.

Erhan jerked his head toward their left and started rapidly slithering down the hall. Kleena followed him without a word.

They rushed through the corridors, the lights flickering in the aftermath of the explosion.

Erhan glanced behind them, but all he saw were clouds of dust. He led them through the maze of corridors, his jaw clenched tightly.

As they made their way toward an exit, Erhan's mind was focused on two thoughts—his mission and his team.

He knew his team would be okay. They had the skills and capabilities to survive this turn of events. He had no doubt. He just hoped they could rescue as many females as possible.

He glanced at Kleena, who was surprisingly keeping up with him as he slithered as fast as he could.

She was his main mission now, and he would do whatever it took to ensure her safety.

A part of the ceiling fell just as they ran under it, but Erhan's reflexes were quick enough to handle the situation. He used his sword to cut the falling piece of debris in such small pieces they no longer posed a threat.

Kleena stared in awe, her eyes wide.

He felt a rush of satisfaction at the way she admired his skill but quickly shook his head to regain focus. "Come, we must hurry!"

He led them further, quickly maneuvering through the debris and danger to ensure he steered Kleena to safety.

As they rounded a corner, a group of auctioneers and guards spotted them.

“There! Capture that woman and kill the thieving Niri!” Three guards stormed toward them, and Kleena froze, panicked.

“Get behind me!” Erhan gestured for her to hide behind his bulk.

She obeyed but lifted the blade she still clutched, her eyes focused on their attackers.

The guards filed into the narrow hallway, forming a row that was eager to kill Erhan. They growled menacingly at him, their weapons drawn.

He sized up the first guard and quickly pinpointed his weak point. He rushed to meet the attacker head-on, using his sword’s pommel to knock him out with a powerful blow to the temple.

When the guard fell heavily to the ground, Erhan was already on top of the next one, slicing through his leather armor with such precision that he cut every artery in the sword’s path.

The third guard halted, looking down at his fallen comrades. Though they were both still alive, he obviously didn’t like how quickly this Naga-like alien had disposed of them.

Erhan grinned at the guard. “You’re next, whether you like it or not.”

Before the guard could respond, Erhan had slithered around him and sliced his neck with his sword, killing him instantly.

The prince turned to Kleena. “Sorry, I didn’t want you to see that.”

She shook her head, grinning widely as her curls bounced. “No, that was fantastic. I wish I could do that!”

Erhan felt his insides grow warm at her praise. He was used to compliments, but this was different. He wasn't sure how to respond, so instead he returned his focus to the remainder of the group before them.

The two auctioneers held up their hands.

One of them looked like he was about to throw up. “We were just following orders! We're innocent!”

Erhan growled in anger. “The only innocents in this building are the females you stole from their homelands, you cowards!”

He rushed at them, hissing and fangs bared, venom dripping from the tips.

With just a few slashes, he took care of the auctioneers, who fell to the ground loudly. They didn't even have time to scream or fight back. Erhan looked back at the unconscious guards, his tongue flicking angrily, keen to end their lives as well.

The building shook again, urging the pair on. He sighed and turned away. On instinct, he chose a direction that felt right to him and led the way once more.

Kleena jumped over and between the bodies, not even flinching when she almost stepped in the blood of the fallen auctioneers.

He gave her a small smile, hoping it would encourage her to keep moving. She smiled back, nodding as she followed him without question.

They moved faster, the rumbling of the walls around them encouraging them to get

out as soon as possible. The pair emerged from the wreckage after finally finding an exit, and they stood outside the door, breathing fast. The night air stinging their lungs as they tried to recover.

After a few seconds of rest, Erhan pulled on Kleena's arm, practically dragging her after him.

"We can't remain here. We must leave this area immediately." She didn't argue but he could tell from her sluggish movements that she was growing tired.

He stopped and studied her. She was covered in dust, her hair tangled, with small cuts and scrapes all over her body. Her breaths were shallow and rapid. This wouldn't do. Erhan knew she would slow them down, so he scooped her up and slithered away from the auction house at a blinding speed.

Kleena let out a little yelp and clung to him, her arms tightly wrapped around his neck. She buried her face in his chest, her eyes shut tightly.

He rushed away from the building, leaving behind a ruined auction and many pissed-off auctioneers and slavers, if any were still alive.

Erhan looked down at Kleena, something about the vulnerable way she clung to him stirring emotions he didn't understand.

He couldn't explain it, but some primal feelings deep within him seemed to awaken. A desire to keep Kleena and every other human female safe and out of the hands of slavers burned in his heart.

It was like he found new determination for his mission. More than he ever had before. It was no longer only about his honor and the honor of his kind. It started to feel like his mission had become far more personal.

He looked around in the alley he was rushing through, focusing on his surroundings with renewed fervor.

Protectively holding the woman closer to him, Erhan silently made a personal oath to protect all human females from now on.

He slithered into the darkness, effectively disappearing into the night.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Kleena

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Kleena hissed in a hushed whisper, still trying to keep a small barrier between her and her savior’s embrace.

She knew she shouldn’t trust him, especially when he seemed to be trying so hard to cop a feel, but she had no choice. It was either run by his side or risk immediate recapture. She wasn’t sure what was going on with this city, but as long as she was isolated, she was at risk.

The flames of the explosion lingered in her mind. She could still feel its heat, and remember her temporary relief upon escaping the rubble. But she still had nothing to return to and no knowledge of which direction she was going.

Behind her was the threat of her potential captors. The mere idea that one of them might have escaped the explosion to restart the operation scared her. In front of her was this new snake-like Niri that resembled the Naga of human folk tales. One whose alien appearance somewhat revolted her, in spite of how handsome his more humanlike features were. She knew he was different somehow without being able to articulate why. But that didn’t mean she could blindly trust him with her fate.

“Am I sure what’s a good idea?” the Niri questioned her. “Liberating you from the auction house? Blowing up the slave quarters?” Kleena pursed her lips, trying to find the words when he spoke again. “Because as far as I can tell, both of those things are well and truly behind us. So, I don’t know what I have left to apologize for.”

He again gripped her hand to keep her moving in the right direction, but she pulled

away, stopping their movement completely.

“We have to keep moving,” the muscular figure pushed her.

She was somewhat impressed that his slithering tail could keep up with her human legs. She’d always been under the impression that Nagas were slower than humans, if only by a little bit. She figured they had less endurance, and she could use that against them in the future.

But as she heaved and gasped for air, the strange male hardly seemed winded.

Kleena heard footsteps coming from the streets nearby. And as the Naga looked from left to right cautiously, he pushed Kleena further into the alley, obstructing her view.

“What are you doing?”

The creature gripped onto her sleeves, trying to tug off her scant shirt.

Was she about to be violated here in the middle of this alley?

“Shh,” he hissed, before moving his hands carefully away. “If you’re running around in slave’s clothing, there’s no way you’re fitting in. We need to get you something more appropriate.”

She looked down at her shirt, noticing for the first time the soot and dirt that covered the already ragged apparel.

The Naga turned around nervously, breaking open a shop window.

Alarms rang out.

This was a spectacularly bad idea, Kleena thought. I'm going to move from slavery right to prison!

She looked from side to side, expecting a surveillance droid or an enforcer to appear.

"These should do."

The alarms stopped and the Naga appeared, pushing open the broken door. Shards of glass fell off of the metal as the frame swung out. He held the most nondescript shirt she had ever seen.

"What was your plan if you didn't have the shirt?" she cocked an eyebrow.

She gestured, and he immediately stepped aside as she walked into the old shop. Casually, and looking over her shoulder the entire time, she lifted the rags off, putting on the hooded clothing he'd stolen. She hated to admit it, but compared to the scraps, it was a good deal more comfortable.

"Oh please," the Naga said behind her, as she walked out fully dressed. "You're hardly my type anyway."

She smirked at this in spite of herself. "Hardly your type?"

"Yeah," he said. "You have no meat on your bones. You're all scrawny and underfed."

And without fully knowing why, Kleena brandished her hand and slapped the Naga. The collision rang out over the alley. For a moment, the creature processed the impact. Then a subdued smile appeared on his face, almost mocking her.

"You've got some venom," he said, unable to hide his admiration. "Where we're

going, though, you'd better keep that to yourself."

Rubbing dirt on his face, he rounded the corner, guiding her around the narrow and incomprehensible alley toward a commotion.

In the market sector, throngs of people had gathered, well past curfew, in between buildings and around neon lights. Kleena wondered how they weren't concerned by the nearby break-in.

"Just keep your head down," the Naga whispered in a gruff voice. "We'll fit right in."

"This is an outrage!"

Kleena's heart leapt out of her chest. She turned in an attempt to make out the voice. Had she been discovered?

But the Naga just squeezed her hand, as if to say, "If they found us out, we'd be dead anyway." His hand was warm despite his reptilian nature, and his grip on her hand was somehow soothing. She found herself at ease like this, and hoped he'd have reason to keep his hand on her like this for a while.

"You really want to upsell me on human femurs? We're in the midst of a slave boom!"

Strange alien creatures she didn't recognize haggled, hidden away from the public eye in dim corners of the market.

"My wares are exotic, and I can charge a fair price for them," a curt voice replied. "If you'd like to try your luck elsewhere, be my guest."

She could hear the jingling of coins and a soft grumbling.

This was what the city had tried to protect them from. She knew the darker corners had grown far more violent and contentious in recent months, but she never imagined this.

She felt a tug on her sleeve, and turned suddenly.

“We gotta go,” the gruff rescuer said.

Before them, a number of Naga slithered among the crowd, clearly looking for something—their pace frantic.

“I thought you said it was all behind us,” Kleena whispered, trying to duck away inconspicuously.

“If I thought it was behind us, would I really be telling you to blend in? Just—”

Kleena felt another tug on her sleeve and faced the Naga in confusion. But when her sleeve received another tug, this one far more insistent, she lowered her gaze, noticing a human child. As soon as her gaze met the young boy’s, the child began moving frenetically, rushing among the crowd.

She looked to the Naga for reassurance but only received a shrug in response. “I guess we follow?”

But she knew she had to move quickly, her eyes barely tracking the movement of the young boy, who had also garbed himself in brown cloth. In a mere moment, the child would be impossible to locate.

“Careful,” the Naga urged her.

Thankfully, the boy seemed to be leading them away from the authorities, into the

smoky and dim alleyways they'd just escaped from. Only as Kleena followed, not sure if she had gone mad, she noticed the boy moved among the walls with a deftness and familiarity.

He wanted me to follow him. Didn't he?

There was something in the boy's eyes. It was momentary. Perhaps she'd only hallucinated it. It felt like a sense of understanding.

"You sure you're not leading us into a trap," the Naga beside her wondered.

Shifting quickly to avoid scraping herself against a metal wall, she looked up at her rescuer in confusion.

"You mean you don't know who this kid is, either?" she hissed.

"I just figured you probably knew what you were doing." For being a stranger, he was surprisingly trusting.

The more the pair moved and ducked, navigating between buildings and over puddles of rainwater, the more sporadic the child's movement became. If she didn't know better, she'd swear that the complicated trail was meant to shake them, not to guide them. But Kleena kept her faith, pursuing the child even when it seemed likely that she had just been imagining everything.

Finally, among the dark and nonsensically winding alleyways, Kleena glimpsed the orange light of a torch just ahead. Turning the corner, she found a small abode built into the back of a shop, the door unpainted and the windows dusty.

"Mom, we got another one! Two this time!"

Kleena froze.

Clearly, the Naga had been right. Mistaking the child for a helpful guide, Kleena must have trusted a demon. She imagined that soon they'd be losing their organs, left for corpses in an alleyway somewhere. Her sense of panic was unmistakable as she stared into the Naga's eyes for reassurance.

But he wasn't rushing them away from the situation, neither attacking or dodging back into the dark alleys.

Had he planned this all along? Had she fallen out of one bad situation only to find herself in an even darker place?

A well-complexioned woman, whose face was covered in sun blemishes, appeared in the doorway before Kleena could flee. She looked uneasily over the threshold.

"Were you followed?" she asked the child in an uneasy and urgent voice.

The boy shook his head in response.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" the woman demanded of Kleena and the Naga. "It's not safe! Come inside before they find you!"

Erhan

“Nice home you’ve got here,” Erhan acknowledged, hoping to convey sincerity that wasn’t forced.

Deep down, though, he hardly felt at home here. For though it looked like the woman had made an honest effort to maintain it, there was scarcely a hint of wood in the metallic building, and cobwebs dotted the unpolished ceiling corners. It felt precious to Erhan in a way the endless sprawling corridors of his castle did not.

These people were struggling to get by.

“Thanks,” the woman replied, not hiding her own lack of sincerity.

She was a gracious host, but part of him still wondered if he really belonged here, on the grounds of the city. He had a mission. He wasn’t about to forget that. And now that he had seen the suffering of these humans, he couldn’t just return home as if he was ignorant of their plight.

Feeling the tension in the air, Kleena, who had not ventured off to sleep, collapsing in a bed as she’d said she would, interjected.

“Thank you so much for your help,” Kleena said, as the door shut behind them. “What did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t.” The woman’s reply was curt and terse. She might have done them a major favor, but she didn’t trust them—not yet.

“Ah.”

Erhan didn't know what to say in this context. He almost wanted to jump in and help Kleena to save her from the awkwardness of the moment.

Outside, Erhan saw moving neon lights, a sign that the same people who captured her were still seeking to get their hands on her once more. He was sure that moving this far out, routing through so many detours, would shake the district's slave traders and bounty hunters. It was almost disturbing that they could weave their way through networks, finding them wherever they went.

He held his breath, feeling immense relief when they passed.

To their eyes, it was probably an unassuming hovel, too unremarkable to be a potential hiding place.

“I'm sorry for my mother,” the child offered.

Erhan had nearly forgotten the young boy was still there. He could see the mother holding her tongue.

But rather than scolding the child, the mother extended a hand to Erhan. “I'm Calla,” she said. “And this is my son, Marcus.”

The expression on the woman's face was tired, but she maintained an intentional hospitality.

Erhan took Calla's hand, returning the kindness. He could feel Kleena's eyes burrowing into him.

“It's good to meet you, Calla,” he said before turning to Marcus. “And Marcus.”

An unspoken sense of tension still hung in the room. In the morning, when the lights were out and the district quieted, perhaps everything would return to normal. But as far as the darkness of the city was concerned, when the law slept and the underbelly took hold, Kleena was a fugitive.

“Marcus has a good heart,” Calla said, “but we’ve been burned before.”

Erhan’s eyes darted to the back door, the entrance that presumably faced the street, and found it charred in places with boards covering it. An altercation had happened there, perhaps recently.

“I understand,” Erhan said.

“Thank you for your kindness, genuinely,” Kleena offered. She had a hoarseness in her voice Erhan hadn’t noticed before.

“You sound like you could use some water, dear,” Calla announced.

And though Erhan could see Kleena’s instinct to reject every form of hospitality trying to overtake her, Calla walked off without another word, bringing a large metal bucket to the table. With a metal glass in hand, Calla pushed the spigot button, and clean water slowly filled the cup.

The mechanism’s cleaning filter whirred, as though strained and overused. A light smoke filled the room, emanating from the machine.

Erhan had forgotten that in parts of the city, clean water was a luxury.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Kleena assured her, upset at the inconvenience she’d clearly caused.

But Calla shook her head, running her fingers through her graying hair. “Ah, nonsense,” Calla said. “It’s hardly a problem.”

Erhan knew how expensive clean water filters were, and he could tell the filtration system was on its way out.

“We were actually just about to eat dinner,” Calla added. “Would you like something to eat?”

Erhan really hated the trouble they’d caused the family. He wished resources were as plentiful everywhere as they were in his castle.

But though Calla offered every bit of protest, he knew Kleena needed to take care of herself. For the past several hours, he had heard her stomach quietly gurgling as they ran through the city. His priority then had been to get her out of harm’s way, though.

Now, they could rest and recuperate.

Kleena and Erhan sat at the table, their plates stacked high with meat. Salted borca decorated the sides of the metal plates, topped with bacon, garlic, kiln, and udoff cheese. Lechen filled their mugs, still frothing.

Conspicuously, though, Marcus and Calla had no plates in front of them.

Erhan would have liked to inquire further, but before he could utter a single word, Kleena had forgotten all hesitation.

“We do have silverware, you know,” Calla interjected, watching Kleena force dripping and greasy meat into her mouth without a thought.

It really was like watching a starving animal devouring its prey.

“Mmm okay,” Kleena said with a smile, a piece of crispy meat lodged in between her front teeth.

What was wrong with Erhan that he found her more attractive this way?

“You might slow down a bit,” Erhan protested. “If you don’t, you might choke.”

“I have several questions, by the way,” Calla quipped, sitting down beside them, despite the lack of food.

Kleena smiled, swallowing her food with a satisfied gulp.

“Oh, sorry,” Kleena said. “I haven’t eaten in a while.”

Erhan rubbed his temple as Calla took a deep breath.

“I know we don’t know each other,” Calla said. “But if I’m going to keep you safe, I do need to know what I’m in for.”

Erhan looked at Kleena, who shrugged, scarfing down a fistful of the green cheese.

“I’m still figuring out parts of it, but this one was unlawfully sequestered and held captive,” Erhan told Calla.

Calla nodded. “Right, I figured that much out. I’m mostly interested in why a prince is out wandering the deadly streets of Jorvla’s capital in the middle of the night rather than gallivanting up in his palace.”

Erhan furrowed his eyebrows.

“Oh, honey,” Calla said. “I’ve seen worlds you couldn’t dream of. You can’t hide

anything from me, not even in that tactical clothing.” She laughed. “To think that I’d never seen a Niri before. Hilarious.”

Erhan’s expression grew deeply serious, his facade broken. “Most people haven’t,” he replied earnestly.

And he dropped the bravado, explaining everything. He was surprised when, for a moment, Kleena stopped stuffing her face to just watch in fascination.

“You’ve never mentioned any of that,” she murmured.

“We didn’t exactly have time to talk.” He nodded, looking down at the table. He wondered why he had no appetite. Such delicious food should be making him salivate.

“I think, given the circumstances, you two only have one option if you want to get off the planet alive,” Calla said, having heard Erhan’s full account.

A silence overtook the table. Erhan did not expect that Marcus would be privy to such serious conversations, but his youthful appearance belied a deep precociousness.

He was a child, not much older than eight or nine. But he had seen a lot.

“Jorvla is a melting pot,” she continued. “But our neighbors are very nosy. You’ve lived on this planet, Kleena.” She turned her attention to Kleena, who wiped her mouth clean with her forearm but remained silent. “You know how people are.”

Kleena nodded. Erhan was still not sure where this conversation was going.

“You’ll need to blend in more, ‘Prince Erhan of the Niri,’” she mocked. “But if they think you two are married, I don’t believe they’ll suspect a thing.”

Erhan inhaled, watching the passing neon torches. How long would it be before they gave up the search?

Kleena's eyes darted around the table, looking for clarification. Loudly and insistently, she laughed.

Erhan's serious eyes turned toward Kleena, and he grimaced.

"That's hilarious," Kleena hiccuped. "You're funny, Calla."

Marcus stood up from the table, walking away without excusing himself.

"Thank you very much, but it's no joke," Calla replied.

Kleena bit her lip and then looked at Erhan. "But no, that's ridiculous." She stared intently at Erhan, hoping for support. "We barely know each other. I. Don't. Know. You."

Erhan nodded.

"How are we going to convince all of Jorvla I'm married to you," Kleena protested. "I know people on this planet!"

"I know it's hard to take, but Calla is making some sense," Erhan said. "Given that you're practically a fugitive, this might be the best way to hide you for now."

He reached for her hand, hoping to comfort her. She looked uncertainly down at him as he took her fingers in his.

Erhan's eyes went wide, feeling an electricity unlike anything he'd ever felt. Her grip relaxed in his, and he reveled in the softness of her palm. Her warmth radiated

through his hand, making his blood pump faster. He swore, for a brief moment, he caught a glimpse of something bright and hopeful in her eyes.

“We can wait and see what we decide in the morning,” Calla said, oblivious to their interaction.

Erhan looked into Kleena’s eyes for reassurance. Had she felt what he had? In her face, he only saw confusion. Confusion, and a strange sense of ecstasy. “I still think it might be our best hope.”

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Kleena

What an outrageous proposition , Kleena thought as they moved down the bustling street.

Ehran's hand was smooth and calming, despite feeling so alien to her.

It had been such a strange suggestion that Kleena still had trouble processing it, her head still in a whirlwind. Erhan had been very accommodating to her, of course. And it wasn't as though he was repulsive, despite being a completely different species.

But he was a stranger. And in actuality, Kleena wasn't sure if she could trust him.

"Four-hundred for the purifier," Erhan suggested, jangling a bag of coins on his belt holster.

In the crowded market, Erhan had stopped suddenly at an inconspicuous booth, his eyes transfixed. There, Erhan found the opportunity to replace Calla's water purifier.

The man was an alien race Kleena didn't recognize. He had two heads and suction cups for hands, his four eyes almost gemlike.

"Are you daft or something," the alien asked, its other head scowling. "I'd need at least seven hundred for the purifier, and even that's a bargain."

"I understand," Erhan said, before feeling around in his waistcoat pockets.

Kleena had to suppress a laugh, watching him work. She knew he had been an operative, but then she also knew he was royalty on some far-off planet she'd never visited. It was almost ironic, watching him haggle with these vendors as though he were cut from their same cloth.

He could probably buy this whole market if he wanted to , Kleena admitted to herself, knowing how wealthy he probably was. Seven hundred should be a trivial sum of money for somebody as well-connected as him.

"I'll tell you what," Erhan reached into his pocket and pulled out a remote. "I've got this extra communicator. I thought it would do me a lot better than it has, but maybe you can use it?"

This time, the other head spoke. Its voice was far more off-pitch and whiny than the other one.

"And what, pray tell, would I do with something so pointless and stupid?" the alien asked. "Why would I ever need a communicator?"

Erhan shook his head. "Maybe you don't need it," he proposed gingerly. "But I'd bet somebody else might?"

The alien thought over the offer. And right when Erhan knew the vendor was going to disagree, he interjected again.

"I don't know if you're familiar with the inner workings of remotes," he began. "But this communicator is a 39-B9G model. They have some rare and expensive parts."

She briefly hoped Erhan wasn't selling their only way off of the planet. He had said this was an "extra" communicator, but Kleena wondered why he'd have two on him.

But it didn't matter. Because as valiantly as he had tried, the vendor wasn't budging. He wasn't about to consider Erhan's offer. Not when he had so little to gain.

"You seem knowledgeable," one of the alien heads said while the other clearly showed its disinterest. "So, tell me how these parts could possibly help me, and I might take you up on your offer."

Kleena almost did a double-take. As Erhan conveyed technical information she thought below royalty—and she almost wondered if he was making some of it up—she watched him sway the alien to his favor.

"Fine," one of the vendor's heads said. "You've convinced me. I'll sell the purifier to you for three hundred thirty, plus the communicator."

It was even lower than Erhan had suggested.

"But only if you tell me where I can find a good engineer, or if you remove the valuable parts for me."

They walked away from the booth with a purifier in their hands, having parted with the, hopefully, spare communicator. Somehow, Kleena couldn't help feeling impressed. She wondered how he was so handy, even outside of his cushioned lifestyle.

"When you're a soldier like me, you learn to adapt," he suggested, noting her surprise. "That was nothing."

She could still hear the coins jangling in his waist pouch, noting he still had plenty to his name.

"I don't get it," Kleena said. "You could have afforded to pay more. So why didn't

you?”

Erhan nodded and then sighed. “These markets like to take advantage of people, even in daylight,” he replied. “So maybe I felt like if I set a precedent, I might make things a little cheaper for the people who can’t afford the extortion.”

She shook her head in disbelief.

It was an impressive display. She couldn’t deny that.

But as they returned to their temporary home, leaving their shoes at Calla’s door, a part of his humility still vexed her. She couldn’t help feeling that it was some kind of act. Was this man—this alien—truly a prince? Or had he come here to fool her?

“Sorry,” Erhan said, carrying the jug into the dwelling. “It’s heavier than it looks.”

Calla nearly dropped everything, a spatula falling off of the oven unit as she dashed over to help.

“What did you do?”

“We felt bad about the imposition, so we figured we’d help you replace your purifier,” he replied. “Hope we weren’t out of line.”

“Out of line? My god. You nearly saved us with that stunt.”

Calla was so grateful that night she made them a special meal. But as the similar meat platter appeared in front of her that night, Kleena was starving. So despite the side glances she received from Erhan, she stuffed her face, wanting as little barrier between the food and her stomach as possible.

“Okay,” Erhan said. “I laid off you last night because I knew you were starving. But today?”

Kleena could feel her rage building.

“Our host has made us a special meal, again,” Erhan said. “If you’re gonna eat, use a fork. Or any of the other utensils provided for us.”

“Can you please fucking lay off?” Kleena snapped.

She was tired of following his customs. Tired of changing the way she lived just because of some vague, pretend connection she barely agreed to.

But as he grew silent, she found herself feeling guilty.

He had intruded himself on her life, not the opposite. She didn’t need to punish herself for not groveling to him like some kind of simpleton.

The meal was unsatisfying, despite how delicious it was. Halfway through, she found herself using a utensil, even though her manners seemed not to bother Calla.

“Hey, where’s Marcus?” Kleena asked, wiping her face with a napkin.

Calla shook her head. “I keep telling him it’s dangerous, but he and his friends stay out a little late sometimes,” Calla replied. “I’m sure he’ll be here any min—”

The backdoor burst open, and Marcus stumbled in, gripping his side. “Ow.”

Kleena worried immediately, but Calla seemed to scold him more than anything.

“Oh, Marcus... Did you ruin the front fence again ?” Her emphasis on the word

“again” seemed to suggest this was a common occurrence.

“I’m sorry, Mom. It’s a bad place for a fence.”

Without another word, Erhan stood up, walking to the front door.

“I’ll take care of it,” he said.

“You sit back down and finish eating,” Calla exclaimed. “I can’t have you being so nice. We can’t depend on you like this.”

But Erhan gave a slight smile in response. “Just consider it my way of thanking you for the delicious meal and your hospitality.”

This set off a vast array of calculations in Calla’s mind.

“But no,” she said. “I... made you that meal as thanks for the purifier you bought me. You can’t—”

He was already out the door.

Kleena stood there awkwardly, not knowing anything to say in response.

“Your husband is damn stubborn,” Calla jested.

Kleena smiled but bolted out the door all the same.

The “fence” out front was barely noticeable and served little purpose. If Marcus hadn’t told them he had destroyed it, Kleena wasn’t sure she would have recognized it at all.

Still, it was a humble display, and it warmed Kleena's heart.

"In all that rush to get outside, did you ever once think of grabbing tools?" Kleena asked.

But Erhan just smiled.

"Don't need them," he said. "Not when I have this."

Pressing a button on his glove, Erhan's finger extended several feet.

Kleena couldn't hide her confusion.

"It's a fing-longer. It gives me more range of motion," Erhan explained. "With it, I can stabilize absolutely anything, including this fence."

Kleena shook her head. "I'm going to go get tools from inside now."

In spite of his immense haggling skills, his repair skills still left something to be desired. Kleena helped him as best she could, atomically gluing the fence back together and ensuring it stood firmly in the dirt.

The little things made it worthwhile. As she handed him tools, they often brushed up against each other.

In spite of how strange and bullish he could be, he was still a good being. She'd never met anybody so kind or so capable in her life.

Maybe this arrangement isn't so bad after all, she thought, noticing how he humored a guilty Marcus, who had stumbled outside, still gripping his side.

“In the old days, we would have had to get new wood for this fence,” Erhan said.
“But now we can just glue it back together. In four hours, it’ll be as if the fence never broke at all.”

“Wow!”

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Erhan

The village square was a modest and quaint area with children running around chasing Gallus and being scolded by their mothers.

Villagers walked around, having private conversations loudly enough for everyone to hear, effectively spreading gossip and rumors.

Erhan glided along slowly, allowing Kleena to keep up with him. Normally, he'd be moving much faster, but his current situation had forced him to consider her frustrating speed limitations. He sighed softly, his tongue flicking out to taste the air. He couldn't sense any immediate danger, but his eyes noted every entry and exit point.

He offered his arm to Kleena, who gave him a bright smile that he knew was fake. He smiled back, fully aware of the eyes on them.

A pair of women walked past them, and he heard a snippet of their conversation.

“An odd couple but clearly very in love... so cute...”

He smiled, satisfied.

Kleena leaned in and whispered, “I’m not seeing anyone suspicious. Are you sensing anything out of the ordinary?”

Erhan shook his head, his eyes scanning the village square. He kept his voice low.

“Don’t let that make you complacent. They could be hiding in plain sight for all we know.”

She nodded and rested her head against his shoulder, looking the part of a happy wife.

“The fresh air is so invigorating. We should go on walks every day, honey.” She spoke loudly enough to be heard by the strangers around them.

Erhan nodded. “You’re right. And the sun on your skin makes you look like you’re glowing. A true sight for sore eyes.”

Despite knowing the compliment was fake, Kleena blushed a little, eliciting a slight smile from him. She smacked his shoulder, her eyes telling him to shut up.

After an hour of subtly patrolling the village, Erhan guided them back to Calla’s home. Erhan held the door open for her. She nodded her thanks and entered with him following behind.

He found his eyes drawn to the sway of her hips. What a hypnotizing manner of walking...

Frowning, he quickly shook his head. He had no time for such thoughts.

Kleena helped Calla clean up after another hearty meal while Marcus discussed his day’s adventures with Erhan.

“We found a whole group of brox near the pond and chased them around for hours! I almost caught one, but it slipped right out of my fingers.”

Erhan listened, amused. He remembered his own childhood escapades and

misadventures. “If you remain focused, you’ll catch one soon enough. Don’t give up.”

Marcus gave him a toothy grin and nodded enthusiastically. “I won’t!”

Erhan excused himself, eager to clean off the day’s dust. He entered the room he shared with Kleena and saw her relaxing on the bed. “Enjoy that while you still can. Tonight’s my turn on the bed.”

She raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. “No, it’s my turn.”

His face flushed red. “It definitely is not your turn. We agreed on me taking the bed tonight.”

Kleena jumped off the bed, stomping over to him. She glared at him, ignoring the fact that she had to look up to do so.

“I don’t think so. I’m taking the bed tonight. End of story.”

He gritted his teeth. This woman and her stubborn streak will be the death of me!

“I will take the bed tonight, and you will sleep on the floor. You can have the bed tomorrow night.”

“Argh! You’re just a spoiled bratty prince who always has to have his way. Aren’t you? Privileged and obnoxious!”

Erhan’s blood started to bubble. If she didn’t submit soon, he knew his blood would be boiling sooner rather than later. “You know nothing of my life! Don’t pretend to even have an idea of who I am!” He had worked hard to become the proud warrior he was, and he’d be damned if some female was going to call him a brat of all things.

She stood on her tiptoes, a shit-eating grin on her face. “What’s the matter? The prince can’t handle a little criticism?”

His tongue flicked out, angrily flicking from side to side. She took a step back, unsure what his reaction meant.

Erhan stared down at her, his heart beating fast. The way she refused to back down was admirable but exasperated him to no end.

Her vibrant spirit and tenacity are impossible to ignore. I’ve never met a human like her. She would make a great soldier in our military if not for her lack of brute power.

He took a deep breath and turned away.

“Fine. Take the damnable bed.”

Kleena made a noise of satisfaction. “Don’t expect me to thank you.” He could hear a triumphant grin in her voice.

Grateful that she couldn’t see the smile on his face, Erhan glided to the door. “It’s our turn to collect water tonight. Come.”

Kleena joined him outside, and they headed off in silence.

As they approached the well, an unspoken tension filled the air. Without a word, they fell into a rhythm, their movements mirroring each other with an effortless grace.

He handed her the bucket, and their fingers brushed lightly, sending a jolt through both of them.

She lowered the bucket into the well, and he took hold of the rope, their hands

aligning perfectly. As they drew the water together, the rope sliding through their hands seamlessly, they found themselves moving as one.

Neither of them spoke, but words felt unnecessary.

Their eyes met over the rim of the bucket, and for a brief moment, the world around them faded.

As they lifted the bucket together, their hands brushed again, lingering longer this time. The electric connection was undeniable, and they both felt it, a palpable spark that made their hearts race.

Erhan quickly took the bucket and started gliding home. Kleena quietly walked next to him, her face flushed.

Marcus met them outside, running to Kleena. He handed her a wildflower. "For you. It looks pretty, like your eyes."

She blushed and gingerly took the delicate little flower. "Thank you so much, Marcus." She sniffed it and closed her eyes, the smell clearly pleasing her.

Marcus glanced at Erhan before looking at Kleena again. "I wanted to give him a flower too, but Mom said he might not like that very much."

Kleena's laughter rang through the night, clear and beautiful. Erhan found himself softly laughing too, the infectious sound making it hard for him to remain expressionless.

For a few moments, Erhan watched her interaction with the young boy. Marcus had clearly grown fond of her in the little time they spent together.

A sudden surge of warmth toward her took him by surprise, his eyes shining brightly.

She would make a perfect mother. I could see myself with her and our own child, creating the most wonderful memories.

He coughed, hoping the act would clear these thoughts from his mind.

Get a hold of yourself, Erhan. This is no place for such daydreaming.

Marcus entertained them with more stories of his exploits with his friends until his mother called him to wash his socks.

The sun had fully set by now and Erhan's gaze traveled up to the sky glittering with stars. He sat down on the grass, taking in the beautiful sight.

Kleena joined him, sitting close to him. His tail covertly curled behind her back.

"I've never bothered to learn about all the different constellations, but I still think stars are very pretty."

He glanced at her. "Do you want to learn?"

She laughed, waving a hand. "Nah, I'd just forget them all again. I'll just admire their beauty. That's enough for me."

He chuckled softly and shook his head, watching her as she looked up at the sky. The moonlight gave her an almost ethereal glow, highlighting the beauty of her eyes.

"They really are stunning," he murmured, lost in the moment.

Kleena didn't look at him, her focus on the stars.

He followed her gaze. “Were you a good student? Back at home, I mean.”

She turned to look at him, surprised by the sudden interest. “I was okay. Not the smartest, but I did well enough. How about you, Your Highness?”

He grimaced. “Please, don’t call me that. I was at the top of my class. I had to be. It was expected of me.”

“That must have sucked. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m proud of my achievements.” Erhan told her more about his childhood, and Kleena shared stories of how she grew up.

He often glanced at her, his eyes going softer. He felt a genuine connection with her in those moments, something that went beyond their pretense.

They talked for hours, getting to know each other a bit better.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Kleena

Kleena adjusted her headscarf to mirror the way the other women in the village wore theirs. She walked next to Erhan, the two of them sticking close together as a married couple should.

Their hands brushed against each other, deliberate and planned moves to paint a picture of two people in love.

Her thoughts flashed back to the night they collected water at the well. It had been a week since, but she still occasionally found herself remembering the exciting jolt she felt when their hands had briefly touched.

They arrived at Calla's stall where she had already started setting up her homegrown herbs to sell.

"I'm glad you're here, I appreciate your help." She smiled brightly at the couple.

When the sun sat at its highest peak in the sky, Calla instructed Kleena to go and eat something.

Kleena instantly agreed, feeling quite hungry, and walked over to Erhan where he was admiring a large sword. She grabbed his hand and dragged him away from the blacksmith's weapon display.

They sat next to each other with a view of the village, Erhan's hand casually resting on her back. It was a convincing act of intimacy, but the affection never reached his

eyes.

The meal was pleasant and the perfect opportunity for them to act like they were crazy about each other, feeding each other bites of food and holding hands.

Somewhere between the fake touches and smiles, Kleena couldn't help but wonder what a real romantic dinner with Erhan would be like.

Would he caress my hand and kiss it? Would he stare lovingly into my eyes and show me a softer side of himself?

Erhan's voice pulled her out of her musing. "Kleena? Can we go, or do you want something else?"

She shook her head. "We can leave."

A short, frumpy woman quickly approached them as they stood up. Her smile was wide and made her eyes narrow into small half-moons.

"I'm so sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if you'd help me. I'm Atilda, and in charge of decorating the village hall for an upcoming festival. I wanted to hang some streamers but I just couldn't reach the ceiling. You're a tall gentleman. Maybe you can reach that high?"

They were silent as the woman rambled, speaking nonstop until she'd asked her question.

Kleena looked up at Erhan. "This would be a nice way to get to know more of the village's people..."

He nodded. "I'd be happy to help."

The trio arrived at the village hall a few moments later, its exterior decorated with bright flowers and greenery.

Upbeat music was coming from inside the building, creating a happy atmosphere.

The inside was mostly empty with chairs and tables stacked in a corner. A group of women were standing around the only table that was set up and pushed against a wall.

“Ladies! I brought someone to help with our little problem.” Atilda sounded very proud of herself.

The women hurried over to them and happily greeted them with wide smiles. Erhan deftly got onto the table, Kleena watching with faked admiration. He picked up some streamers and started stringing them up, but Atilda voiced her displeasure.

“That’s not quite high enough, dear. Can you go higher?”

Erhan called Kleena over. “Honey, I’ll need your help.”

She got on the table and took the streamers from him. “What do I do?”

“Just hang them, I’ll lift you high enough.”

He swiftly and effortlessly picked her up by her hips as she let out a little yelp.

“Wait, Erhan... that tickles.”

“What?”

She squirmed, moving around to shift his hands on her sides while giggling loudly.

“Please, it tickles!”

Erhan began to lower her, but it was too late, and her squirming threw him off balance.

He strained, using his powerful tail to keep him upright, but his grip on Kleena made her squirm even more. Now laughing so hard that tears were rolling down her cheeks, they tumbled off the table and onto the floor. Erhan used his tail to cushion her fall and landed on the ground with a huff.

“Oh no! Are you all right?” Kleena stopped laughing, checking him for injuries.

Her hands stilled when she saw that he was shaking with laughter. She started laughing again too, falling back onto his tail.

He turned his head to look at her. “I can’t remember the last time I actually fell...”

They eventually got the streamers up, but it took much longer than intended because Kleena would giggle and squirm through the entire process.

Kleena smiled as they returned to Calla’s stall, still thinking about their tumble earlier.

“Are you two truly together? You’re such an odd couple...” A nasal voice disrupted the peaceful quiet between them.

“Excuse me?” Erhan’s voice was low, and his tongue flicked out, tasting the air between them and the sour-faced older woman.

“Well, I’m just saying... you’re not even the same species. How are you married?”

Erhan’s lips curled in disgust, but he remained silent.

Kleena reached up to smooth a nonexistent crease on his shirt, smiling and playing the attentive wife.

He looked down at her, and she held her breath as the intensity in his eyes made her heart shake to the core.

What is this look in his eyes? Wow, it's so intense!

"... never mind." The woman hurried away, clearly convinced by the moment the couple just shared that their relationship was the real deal.

Erhan cleared his throat and broke eye contact with Kleena, who exhaled slowly, still shaken. They returned home hand-in-hand, careful not to cause suspicion in anyone else. Once they were back at Calla's house, Kleena sat at the dinner table, chewing on her lower lip.

"Erhan, it's been a week. Don't you think it's safe yet? There's been no sign of—"

"No. You're being impatient. We can't just assume the slavers are gone because we haven't seen them recently."

"But—"

"No buts. I'm a trained soldier, and I know more about how they operate than you."

Kleena grunted in annoyance. "That doesn't mean you're right. I'm not an idiot, and it doesn't make sense that we haven't gotten even a single piece of evidence to indicate their presence."

"I am right to be cautious."

“You’re being paranoid.”

Erhan simply looked at her, his eyes shining with confidence and Kleena defiantly met his gaze.

The two of them fell into a sullen silence that continued the rest of the day.

That evening, Kleena sat outside on a rock, the wind softly blowing through her hair.

Erhan slithered over to her. At first, he said nothing. Then, after a few moments of awkward silence, he spoke. “Zeethra.”

She looked up at him. “What?”

“It means ‘sky.’ In my language, the word represents freedom and the unreachable. It’s often used in poetry and song.”

“Oh.”

Erhan moved closer to her, lowering himself until they were at eye level. “I want you to be free, and to do that I must protect you. Do you understand?”

She slowly nodded and sighed. “Teach me some Niri words.”

Erhan’s eyes brightened. “Zeethrak means ‘dream’ and can be a literal dream or an aspirational vision. Essaru means ‘home.’”

“Such a beautiful language...essaru...” She thought of her own essaru, or at least what it once was. There was nothing for her in that so-called “home” now. But maybe there’s an essaru for me with...

Kleena cut off the thought before it could finish and simply listened to Erhan speak for the next several hours.

A few days later, Kleena tended to a minor cut on Erhan's arm. He had gotten hurt while fixing another part of Calla's fence.

Her touch was gentle as she cleaned the cut with water and a sponge. As her fingers traced the intricate patterns of his scales, she couldn't help but marvel at their smooth, cool texture.

She looked up to find that he was already staring at her. Erhan watched her intently, his eyes reflecting both curiosity and something deeper.

Her heart hammered.

She looked back down as her fingers strayed from cleaning his cut. She traced invisible lines with her fingers, going down his chest.

When she reached the juncture where his torso blended seamlessly into his serpentine lower body, he let out a low, involuntary moan.

She froze, her eyes widening.

"I'm sorry, did I hurt you?" she asked, her voice filled with genuine worry.

He shook his head, a faint smile playing at the corners of his lips. "No, it's just... that part is very sensitive."

Kleena's cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "I didn't know," she whispered.

Where else is he sensitive? What makes him moan?

Her heart was racing like crazy, and she quickly withdrew her hand.

I shouldn't be thinking these thoughts. I can't and shouldn't entertain such ideas.

Erhan continued to watch her, his expression unreadable.

She stepped back. "All done. Your cut should heal nicely."

"Thank you."

"Anytime." She smiled and avoided his gaze.

I'm not falling for him. No. Nh-uh. Nope.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Kleena

Kleena hung her clothes to dry, her arms tired from scrubbing them so vigorously. The entire morning had been dedicated to cleaning Calla's home and her own clothes.

She noticed Erhan a small distance away, shirtless and doing push-ups. From where she stood, she could see a thin layer of sweat on his muscled upper body.

Damn, now that's a nice sight. I've always liked a man who takes care of his body. And he clearly takes good care of his.

She refocused when she heard Marcus rushing past her, making a beeline for Erhan.

"That looks so cool!" He jumped on his tiptoes. "Will you teach me to fight?"

Erhan stretched his arms, looking down at the boy. "Why do you want to fight?"

Marcus thought for a moment, scratched his leg, and thinned his lips with determination. "I want to protect my mom and the other villagers."

Erhan nodded, seemingly satisfied with the child's answer. Picking up a sturdy stick from the ground, he handed it to Marcus and then took one for himself.

"First, you must learn balance," he said. "Without it, you cannot fight well."

To demonstrate, he uncoiled part of his tail and raised himself higher, keeping the upper half of his body perfectly still.

His tail moved gracefully, displaying both strength and control.

Marcus watched in awe, realizing that balance wasn't just about standing on two feet; it was about finding your center, no matter your form.

Kleena sat down on a rock closer to them to watch the pair.

“Your balance comes from here,” Erhan said, tapping his midsection. “Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart and bend your knees slightly. Feel the ground beneath you, steady and firm.”

The boy enthusiastically tried to mimic his instructor, wobbling precariously before falling to the ground.

“It's all right,” Erhan said with a rare smile. “It takes practice. Try again.”

After several attempts, Marcus managed to stay balanced for a few moments. Erhan nodded approvingly.

“Good. Now, grip your stick like this,” he instructed, showing the boy how to hold it firmly but not too tightly. “A weapon is an extension of your body. Feel its weight. Understand its movement.”

He demonstrated a few basic stances and simple strikes, his movements fluid and powerful. His tail provided an added layer of stability and grace, something the boy watched with fascination.

Kleena found stealing glances at Erhan.

She admired the way his muscled body moved with effortless grace and power, each movement fluid and controlled.

His broad shoulders and strong arms flexed as he demonstrated various techniques to Marcus, the sunlight catching on his tanned skin and highlighting the contours of his physique.

Her eyes traced the lines of his body, noting how his muscles shifted beneath his armor with each motion. His chest, broad and powerful, rose and fell steadily with his breath.

It wasn't just his upper body that captivated her. Erhan's lower half, the serpentine tail that coiled and uncoiled with hypnotic grace, was equally fascinating.

His tail moved with a fluidity that seemed almost magical, providing both balance and an unexpected elegance to his movements.

The scales glistened in the light, their intricate patterns adding an exotic allure to his already imposing presence.

Kleena, calm yourself. These thoughts aren't going to get you anywhere!

Marcus swung the stick awkwardly at first, but under the warrior's patient guidance, his movements grew more fluid.

"Remember..." Erhan pinned the boy with a serious expression. "It's not just about strength. It's about timing and precision. Watch your opponent. Anticipate their moves."

He showed Marcus a few basic stances and simple strikes, correcting his form gently but firmly. As they practiced, Marcus's confidence grew.

Despite her best efforts, Kleena found it hard to hide her admiration for the Niri who saved her life.

He really is an amazing fighter, and his teaching skills are impressive too. He must have spent hours training to become so agile and strong.

“Lastly,” Erhan said, “you must have the heart of a warrior. Strength and skill mean nothing without the will to use them wisely. Never fight out of anger or pride. Fight to protect, to defend, to uphold what is right.”

Marcus looked up at him, his eyes wide with admiration and understanding. “I will. I promise.”

Erhan nodded, clapping the boy’s shoulder. “Good. Remember these lessons, and you’ll be well on your way.”

The boy beamed, clutching his stick as if it were a mighty sword.

Kleena walked over to Erhan, smiling.

“You’re a natural with him,” she commented, her voice warm with admiration. “You’ll probably make a great father one day.”

An irrational part of me wishes I could be by your side when you become a father. But that’s just crazy. Right?

Erhan’s eyes flickered with surprise at her words. He glanced at Marcus, who was absorbed in his practice, and then back at Kleena. “That’s not something I’ve been told before.”

Her smile widened, a hint of teasing in her eyes. “I can see it in the way you teach him. You’re patient, encouraging... it suits you.”

His gaze softened ever so slightly as he looked at her. “And you, Kleena,” he said

quietly. “Have you ever noticed your own maternal qualities? The way you care for everyone around you, always looking out for their well-being...”

He noticed something like that about me? Does this mean he sees me as possibly more than a friend? Surely not... right?

Kleena blinked, caught off guard by his observation. A rush of warmth spread across her cheeks, the unexpected compliment lingering in the air between them.

She opened her mouth to reply but found herself momentarily at a loss for words.

Marcus ran over to them, eager to receive more training from Erhan, who happily obliged. The training session grew more animated, laughter and shouts filling the air.

Kleena found herself drawn into the playful bout, her own laughter joining the chorus of Marcus’s excited cheers.

Erhan, with his calm yet engaging demeanor, encouraged the boy’s enthusiasm, making the practice feel more like a game than a lesson.

“Watch your footwork, Marcus.”

Kleena, mimicking Marcus’s determined strikes, couldn’t help but laugh as she stumbled through the motions, her attempts more spirited than skilled.

Marcus’s grin was infectious, and soon they were all lost in the joy of the moment.

In the midst of their fun, Marcus misstepped, his small body tumbling forward into Kleena.

She tried to catch him, but the unexpected momentum sent her crashing into Erhan.

Instinctively, Erhan's arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her close to steady her. His tail, strong and sure, coiled gently around her legs to balance them both.

For a heartbeat, their laughter ceased, the world narrowing to the space between them.

Kleena felt an electrifying current where Erhan's arm held her, his touch both protective and unexpectedly intimate.

Her breath hitched, her senses overwhelmed by his closeness. She could feel his heartbeat, steady and strong, contrasting the frantic rhythm of her own.

He's so close, I can smell the sweat on his skin, and it smells amazing. I need to calm down!

Their gazes locked, the charged moment amplifying the feelings she had been struggling to ignore.

Erhan's eyes, deep and intense, seemed to draw her in, and she found herself leaning toward him, her heart pounding.

Oh, this is it. A kiss is inevitable. This closeness demands it. And I really want it!

Just as her lips parted in anticipation, Erhan's eyes flashed with an unknown emotion. With a swift, smooth movement, he released her, easing back with a grace that belied his powerful form.

She blinked, the sudden absence of his touch leaving her feeling unsteady. She tried to calm her breath, her heart still racing.

Wait, what? Why didn't he... Does he not like me that way? Oh, no. Did I misread

the moment?

Erhan cleared his throat, his expression carefully composed. “Be careful, Marcus,” he said, his voice steady despite the tension that had just passed between him and Kleena. “We don’t want any more accidents.”

Marcus, oblivious to the undercurrents between the adults, nodded eagerly, his cheeks flushed from the excitement of their play.

Kleena managed a smile, her eyes lingering on Erhan’s for a fraction longer than necessary.

“That’s enough for today,” Erhan said as he pulled on his shirt. “I need to go wash up.”

Kleena stood quietly, her hand on her heart.

Oh, heart. You’re confusing me. Falling for the prince of a distant planet isn’t the wisest decision right now.

She watched Erhan slip away, the space he left behind a cold contrast to the warmth of his touch.

Erhan

Erhan retreated to a secluded spot near Calla's house, his back pressed against the cool stone wall. The rough texture of the stone grounded him as he wrestled with the turmoil inside.

He had fled the training session, unable to face the confusing emotions that Kleena stirred within him.

Frowning, he clenched his fists. His actions contradicted his internal resolve to maintain distance from her. "What was I thinking?" he grumbled.

You slipped up, Erhan! The kind of protectiveness you just displayed is a dangerous road you don't want to travel. Keep things professional.

His heart pounded, a rebellious drumbeat that he desperately tried to silence.

He took several deep breaths, willing his racing heart to calm and return to the steady, controlled rhythm he had always relied on.

Kleena's voice, a sound that soothed his soul and ignited a fire somewhere deep within him, reached his ears.

From his hidden vantage point, he watched her through a half-open window. She moved with a natural grace, her laughter gently mingling with Marcus's exuberant shouts.

The tenderness she displayed with the boy was like a soothing balm, yet it tore at Erhan's resolve. He knew he must not indulge in such sentiments and could not allow himself to be drawn into the warmth she offered.

He caught fragments of a conversation between Kleena and Calla, their voices carrying through the still air.

"I long for a family," Kleena admitted softly, her words echoing in his mind. "I've been hurt before, but there's still hope in my stubborn heart."

Her words were a sharp reminder of what he could never provide.

He was not the mating kind of Niri, especially not with a human female. The concept of a loving partnership, the kind Kleena deserved, was something he believed to be out of reach for him.

Emotions clashed within him as he contemplated his desires. He knew he would one day want a surrogate so he may sire young, but he wasn't looking for a mate. It wasn't something he deserved. He also knew he couldn't offer the human concept of a loving partnership.

His gaze drifted back to Kleena, her soft laughter ringing out, her hope for love and family still intact despite her past heartaches and a pang of longing pierced his heart.

I long to be the one to fulfill her dreams, to be the source of her happiness. But I can't.

His past loomed large, a shadow that whispered he was unworthy of such joy. Erhan had been told all his life, not by his family but by others, that he was a dam-killer.

The words had been seared into his soul, convincing him that he didn't deserve

happiness because he would only destroy it. The guilt and self-loathing had become a part of him, a barrier between him and the possibility of love.

A memory played in his mind, reminding him about the pain and guilt he carried around deep inside his heart.

It wasn't until he was older that Erhan learned the truth—that his dam had died giving birth to his egg, her life slipping away even as he began his final gestation outside her womb.

The revelation struck him like a blow to the chest, filling him with a sense of guilt and sorrow that he couldn't shake.

He had never known his dam, never felt the warmth of her embrace or heard the sound of her voice, yet her absence loomed large in his life, a void that could never be filled.

But what hurt the most were the whispers—the rumors that spread like wildfire through the castle halls, accusing him of being responsible for her death.

“He’s cursed,” they would say. “Nothing but sorrow and misfortune follow him.”

He tried to ignore their words, to block out the accusations that followed him like a shadow, but deep down, he couldn't shake the feeling that they were right—that he was somehow to blame for the pain and loss that had befallen his family.

Those days were difficult and fueled his fire to focus on becoming stronger. He would never be the reason for someone else's death again.

As he grew older, he also promised himself he would not mate and partake in romantic endeavors. He did not deserve that kind of happiness.

Erhan watched Kleena, her face illuminated by the setting sun and her smile a beacon of warmth and hope. The desire to reach out, to hold her and promise her the family she longed for, was almost overwhelming. But he knew he couldn't. Happiness, he had been taught, was something he could never grasp.

With a heavy heart, Erhan turned away from the window, the stone wall pressing against his back a reminder of the barriers he had built around his heart.

He glided away, the sounds of Kleena's laughter fading behind him, a bittersweet echo of what could never be.

"It's for the best," he reminded himself.

Maintaining distance is the only way to protect her from the darkness within me.

But as he disappeared into the twilight, the longing in his heart refused to be eased. Memories of his time with her flooded his mind, ushered into his thoughts by the beat of his heart.

He remembered seeing her at the auction house, so fierce and resolved to choose her own fate. Every day after that had shown him more of her, and everything he saw left an impression on his chilled heart.

If they had met in another life, he would have battled the earth and sky for her.

Erhan slipped away from the house, his body and tail feeling heavy with the burden of his next decision.

Despite the growing connection he felt with Kleena, he knew he had to reinforce the walls around his heart.

I cannot let these new feelings break my resolve. Love, or anything like it, isn't destined for someone like me. I'd just end up hurting her.

Every movement felt like a lead weight, the emotional turmoil dragging him down.

Finding a secluded spot under the vast, star-studded sky, Erhan unsheathed his wooden practice sword.

A weak replacement for my real sword. That night at the secret auction house saw me lose my treasured weapon and find a different kind of treasure.

He gripped the makeshift weapon tightly, the rough wood familiar yet foreign in his hand.

No! I shouldn't think of her or our time together like that. I'm on a mission, nothing more.

Alone in the quiet night, he began to practice his sword forms, each movement an attempt to cut away the feelings that threatened to break his discipline. With each whisper of wood through the air, Erhan reaffirmed his duty.

I'm a warrior. I have no emotional attachments, and that will remain unchanged.

The swish and thud of his practice formed a rhythmic mantra: focus on the mission, protect Kleena, do not pursue her, and do not fall for her. His muscles moved with precision, but his mind struggled to follow. The image of Kleena's smile, the sound of her laughter, and her smell intruded upon his concentration, making every stroke feel heavier, every movement more labored.

As he swung the practice sword in a wide arc, he forced himself to think of his duty.

I'm bound by my promise to protect those under my care, especially Kleena. I can't be derailed by frivolous feelings.

Erhan took a deep breath, pausing his practice to look up at the stars. The weight of his loneliness was palpable, a heavy cloak that wrapped around his soul. The vastness of the night sky seemed to mock his isolation, each star a distant reminder of the love he knew was unattainable. He was haunted by a future he dared not embrace, a life bound by duty and shadowed by a past that told him he did not deserve happiness.

As the night grew colder, Erhan's resolve hardened. He had to stay strong and keep his emotions in check.

For Kleena's sake, and for the sake of my own fractured heart, I need to maintain my distance.

The stars above provided no comfort, only a silent witness to his inner struggle.

Erhan resumed his practice, each swing of the wooden sword a reaffirmation of his resolve.

The feelings that swirled within him would be contained, locked away behind the walls he had spent a lifetime building.

As he moved through the familiar forms, the warmth of Kleena's presence lingered in his mind, a bittersweet reminder of what could never be.

Under the cold, indifferent stars, Erhan fought the hardest battle of his life—one against his own heart.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Erhan

Erhan slithered through the nearby forest, every movement carrying him further from the village and deeper toward the remote site where he had stealthily landed their spaceship.

His heart was heavy with the responsibility of their current plight, the weight of his decisions pressing down on him.

He had been avoiding Kleena for two days now, trying to make himself busy with any task he could find. He knew he had to leave this place as soon as possible before he lost control of himself.

“What if she sees right through me?” he wondered aloud. “What if she realizes how much she affects me?”

The trees parted to reveal the clearing where their spaceship should have been.

Scouring the area, Erhan found nothing but disturbed soil and the residual energy signatures of a ship long gone.

His worst suspicions were confirmed. Their only means of escape had been commandeered by the enemy.

The soil bore the marks of recent activity, and the faint traces of campfires told a grim story. Their enemies had camped here, waiting, watching. If he had come back for the ship right after they escaped, it would have been the end of them.

We never had a chance. Every plan I make falls apart. How can I protect her if I can't even keep a ship safe?

Clenching his fists, Erhan felt a surge of frustration and helplessness.

He wanted to scream, to vent his anger at the unfairness of it all, but he knew that wouldn't help. He had to stay strong and focused.

Why can't I just let these feelings go? Why now, of all times?

He chastised himself silently, knowing that his emotions were a liability he couldn't afford.

He took a deep breath, trying to calm the storm within him. He couldn't let his emotions get the better of him, not now.

As he turned back toward the village, his thoughts inevitably drifted to Kleena.

He'd been avoiding her, not because he didn't want to see her but because he couldn't trust himself around her. The feelings she stirred in him were too strong, too dangerous.

I must protect her, but how can I do that when she is my greatest weakness?

As he slithered back, his mind once again replayed the moments they had shared: the warmth of her smile, the sound of her laughter, and the way her eyes seemed to see right through him. He wanted to be close to her, to protect her, but he knew that giving in to those feelings would only put her in more danger.

Returning to the village, Erhan's facade remained unbroken, but inside, the storm brewed. The reality of their extended stay loomed before him with all its

complications. He had to find a way to keep them safe, to find another means of escaping the planet.

On top of that, he had to find a way to keep his emotions in check, to protect Kleena from the turmoil within him as much as from the enemies that surrounded them.

What if I fail her? What if she sees me as the monster everyone else does?

He caught sight of her as he entered the village, her presence a beacon of warmth and light in the midst of his dark thoughts.

She looked up and met his gaze, a question in her eyes, but he quickly looked away, unable to face her.

I can't let her in. I can't let her know that I care. It would only make things worse.

As Erhan slithered, he was greeted by the bustling preparations for the annual couple's blessings. The air was filled with the sounds of laughter and music, the villagers' cheerful voices creating a stark contrast to the turmoil churning within. He tried to blend into the background, hoping to avoid any attention, but it was not to be.

"Erhan! Kleena!" a villager called out, waving them over with a wide smile. "You must join us for the couple's blessings! It's an honor for newcomers to participate."

Erhan's heart sank. From Calla's exciting chatter the previous night, he had learned the annual festivity was one of the most significant cultural events in the village, a celebration of fertility and unity among couples.

He glanced at Kleena, her expression mirroring his own discomfort.

They had been carefully avoiding each other because of how awkward he made

things, and now, they were being thrust into a situation that demanded closeness and feigned affection.

This is the last thing I need right now. How am I supposed to keep my distance when everyone expects us to act like a couple?

Despite their mutual reluctance, it was impossible to refuse the invitation without raising suspicions. The villagers' warm, expectant faces left them with little choice.

Erhan nodded, forcing a smile as he agreed to participate. Kleena did the same, their silent glances communicating their shared discomfort.

How do we get through this without tearing down the walls I've worked so hard to build?

The festivities began with a series of rituals, each of them symbolizing aspects of unity and partnership.

Erhan felt the weight of every gesture, every touch, as if the cultural significance of the ritual was pressing down on him, reminding him of the boundaries he had fought to uphold.

Every act of feigned devotion felt like a betrayal of his resolve, scattering the lines he had drawn in his heart.

As they stood before the village elder, Erhan reached for Kleena's hand, the contact sending an unwelcome jolt through his body.

Her hand felt warm and soft in his, a stark reminder of the feelings he struggled so desperately to suppress. He glanced at her, their eyes locking for a moment that felt like an eternity.

Stay focused. This is just a role we're playing. It doesn't mean anything.

But despite his attempts to rationalize, he couldn't deny the growing connection between them. Every forced smile and every shared look only deepened the bond he fought to avoid.

The villagers surrounded them, clapping and cheering, their joy amplifying Erhan's inner conflict. The ritual continued, requiring them to speak words of affirmation to each other. Erhan hesitated, searching for the right words that wouldn't betray his true feelings. He looked into Kleena's eyes, seeing a mix of hope and confusion.

"I... appreciate your strength and resilience," he said finally, his voice steady despite the turmoil inside. "You've been a true partner in these difficult times."

Kleena's eyes softened, and she nodded, her own words echoing his sentiment. "And I appreciate your unwavering dedication to our safety. I couldn't ask for a better protector."

Their exchange, though brief, felt charged with unspoken emotions. Erhan struggled to maintain his composure, his mind racing with conflicting thoughts.

How long can I keep pretending? How long before these walls come crashing down?

The ritual ended with a symbolic gesture of unity, a dance that required them to move in sync, their gestures mirroring the harmony expected of a true couple.

Erhan's heart pounded as they danced, their bodies moving together in perfect rhythm. He felt every movement, every touch, acutely aware of the growing intimacy.

By the time the festivities drew to a close, Erhan was exhausted—not from the physical exertion, but from the emotional strain.

As the villagers dispersed, he released Kleena's hand, the absence of her touch leaving a strange emptiness in his heart.

He needed to get away, to find a place where he could think clearly. He nodded to Kleena, muttering an excuse about needing fresh air, and glided briskly toward the outskirts of the village.

I can't let this continue. I need to find a way out of this situation before it's too late.

Erhan found a secluded spot, his back against a tree as he allowed his tail to coil and sank to the ground, his head in his hands.

He replayed the events of the evening in his mind, the weight of his decisions pressing down on him.

I have to protect her, but I can't let my guard down. I can't afford to let these feelings get in the way.

He took a deep breath, the cool night air filling his lungs, trying to calm the storm within. Erhan knew he had to find a way to reinforce the walls around his heart, to keep his emotions in check.

For Kleena's sake, and for his own, he had to stay strong. Even if it meant continuing this painful charade, even if it meant sacrificing his own happiness, he would do whatever it took to keep her safe.

That was his duty, and he could not fail her. Not again.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Kleena

Breathe, Kleena. And relax. You can do this.

Kleena stood rigidly as Calla draped the ritual robe over her shoulders. The fabric was heavy, not just with its physical weight but with the scent of tradition and a history she didn't know anything about. She felt out of place, a foreigner in this village with customs that were not her own.

Frowning, she tried to steady her breathing, focusing on the soft murmurs of the village elder as he explained the significance of the ceremony.

"This ceremony is mostly symbolic," Calla reassured her, sensing her unease. "It's about unity and community, a celebration of togetherness."

Kleena nodded, but her nerves continued to tingle with the anticipation of the intimate dance she must perform with Erhan.

The thought of being so close to him, of having to act like a loving couple, filled her with a mix of excitement and dread.

Her mind was a whirl of confusion and trepidation. Erhan had been avoiding her lately, his once attentive demeanor replaced by a cold distance that left her bewildered and hurt.

Why is he acting like this? What have I done wrong? And why does it hurt so much?

As she stepped out to join the festivities, Kleena caught sight of Erhan in his own ceremonial garb.

His bearing was regal, his presence commanding, and her heart skipped a beat despite her resolve.

He looked every inch the prince he was, a stark reminder of the world he came from—a world so different from her own.

I shouldn't feel this way. He's a prince, and I'm... just a human girl he saved from slavery.

They were pulled into the dance, and the villagers' expectant faces left them no room to refuse.

Kleena's hand found Erhan's with an ease that spoke to the time they had spent together.

The connection was unsettling in its naturalness, as if their bodies remembered a bond their minds were trying to deny.

Why does this feel so right? How can I keep my distance when everything about him draws me in?

The dance began with a slow, measured movement, their bodies moving in perfect sync.

With every guided move and shared rhythm, the space between Kleena and Erhan grew smaller.

Their movements were a dance of unspoken emotions, bringing them closer, each

turn blurring the boundaries she had tried so hard to maintain.

She could feel his warmth, the steady beat of his heart, and it both comforted and frightened her.

I can't fall for him. I can't. It's too dangerous, too uncertain.

The villagers cheered around them, but Kleena barely heard them. Her focus was entirely on Erhan, on the way his eyes seemed to bore into hers, searching for something she wasn't sure she knew how to give. His touch was gentle, almost reverent, and it sent a shiver down her spine.

Does he feel the same way? Is that why he's been avoiding me?

As the dance intensified, Kleena found herself lost in the moment. The warmth of Erhan's hand on her waist, the closeness of their bodies, stirred feelings she was reluctant to name. She tried to focus on the ritual, on the symbolic nature of their movements, but her mind kept drifting to the man in front of her.

What if I can't stop myself from falling for him? What if it's already too late?

The ritual was supposed to be a celebration of unity and community, but to her, it felt like so much more. It was a glimpse into what could be, a tantalizing vision of a future she dared not hope for.

He's been so distant, so cold. What does he really want?

The ritual dictated that they move closer, a symbolic gesture that ignited a fire within Kleena. The heat of his presence clouded her mind, making it hard to think clearly. The villagers' eyes were on them, seeing them as a loving couple, and Kleena's performance became less of an act and more a confession of her growing desire.

Am I really just pretending? Or is this how I truly feel?

As the dance reached its climax, they were required to hold a final, intimate pose. Erhan's face was so close to hers that she could feel his breath on her skin. As the dance concluded, and they held the final pose, Kleena stared into his eyes. The question of their relationship hung heavily in the charged silence between them. She saw a flicker of something in his gaze—confusion, longing, fear?—and it mirrored her own turbulent emotions.

What are we, Erhan? What do you want us to be?

The applause of the villagers broke the spell, and they moved apart. The moment shattered, but the feelings lingered. Her heart was racing, her mind a whirlwind of thoughts. She had been saved from a life of slavery by this man, this prince from another world, and now she found herself caught in a web of emotions she didn't fully understand.

Can we really be together? Or am I just dreaming of something that can never be?

After the dance, the couples were guided to special secluded spots, chosen for privacy and serenity.

Kleena and Erhan were led to a small, tranquil grove, the canopy of leaves above filtering the moonlight into soft, dappled patterns on the ground. The air was filled with the sweet scent of blooming flowers and the gentle hum of nocturnal insects. Her heart pounded as they reached their spot. The ritual robe felt heavier than ever, a reminder of the intimacy and tradition they were about to partake in. She stole a glance at Erhan, who seemed calm but distant, his face a mask of controlled emotions.

A low table was set with a single pink fruit, already cut into pieces, its vibrant flesh

gleaming in the soft light. The fruit was a symbol of unity, meant to be shared between the couple as a gesture of mutual trust and closeness.

“This is part of the ritual,” Erhan said quietly, his voice breaking the silence. “We share the fruit as a symbol of our bond.”

Kleena nodded, trying to steady her nerves. She took a deep breath and sat down on the soft grass. He sat across from her, his tail coiling under the small table between them. The closeness was both comforting and unnerving, amplifying the emotions she had tried to keep at bay.

I can do this. It’s just a ritual. Nothing more.

With a trembling hand, Kleena picked up a piece of the fruit and offered it to him. He accepted it, their fingers brushing briefly, sending a jolt of electricity through her.

She tried to hide her reaction, focusing instead on the ritual and its meaning.

“This is for unity,” she said softly, echoing the words Calla had taught her.

Erhan nodded and took a bite, his eyes never leaving hers. The intensity of his gaze made her feel exposed, as if he could see right through her defenses.

He picked up another piece and offered it to her. She took it, their fingers touching again, and she felt a warmth spread through her. As she took a bite, the sweetness of the fruit mingled with the bittersweet emotions swirling inside her.

“This is for trust,” he said, his voice low and steady.

Her heart ached at his words, knowing that trust was something she desperately wanted to build between them. But how could she when he kept himself so guarded?

The ritual continued, every piece of fruit they shared a step deeper into their connection. Kleena found herself drawn to Erhan's presence, the closeness breaking down the walls she had built around her heart.

"This is for companionship," he murmured, his voice barely audible over the night sounds.

Companionship.

The word resonated deeply within her. She had been alone for so long, and now, here was someone who had saved her, who stood by her, yet kept a distance she couldn't bridge.

As they finished the last piece, the final part of the ritual, they were required to hold hands and share a moment of silence, reflecting on their bond.

Kleena's hand fit perfectly in Erhan's, and the warmth of his skin against hers made her feel more connected to him than ever.

What does this mean for us? Can we really be more than just companions?

The silence stretched on, the air thick with unspoken words. Kleena's mind raced with thoughts of their future, of what she wanted and feared.

As they prepared to return to the village, Kleena felt a mix of hope and despair.

She wanted to reach out to him, to bridge the gap that had formed between them, but the walls he had built around himself seemed impenetrable.

Erhan

Erhan tore his gaze away from Kleena's hazel eyes, willing himself not to look back. Despite his greatest efforts, the dance overwhelmed him and that final glance... it threatened to unravel the carefully built facade he'd constructed around himself.

His hands, though, didn't follow suit and by the time he realized he was still clasping Kleena's fingers in his own, the crowd was jostling them.

"I think it's time we—" Erhan began, dropping Kleena's hands a little too quickly and attempting a not-too-conspicuous retreat.

But before either of them could escape their embarrassment, the villagers spoke up.

"Don't worry. It's not over yet!" called a young woman beside them. She had her hand hooked in the arm of a handsome young man who Erhan took to be her husband.

"That's right," the man said with a knowing smile. "The next part of the ceremony is personally my favorite."

He shot Erhan a wink before he and his wife dissolved into giggles. Erhan, however, wasn't amused. His heart was pounding at the thought of yet another part to the couples' ritual.

Beside him, Kleena managed a smile, but he could see that it didn't quite reach her eyes. She was as nervous as he was, it seemed, and even when Erhan glanced in her

direction, she made sure to avoid eye contact.

She must hate this, Erhan thought, a stab of guilt shooting through his chest.

For a moment, Erhan glanced around as if hoping for some sort of escape, but he knew it was impossible without drawing attention to their charade. As the crowd of couples moved forward, though, Erhan almost stopped dead in his tracks.

He'd just caught sight of what lay in store, and it almost threatened to give him dead away.

"Just choose any bungalow!" the young man behind them cried as his wife pulled him away. "And have fun!"

He gave Erhan and Kleena another wink before disappearing through the wooden door.

This time when Erhan tried to catch Kleena's eye, she looked back.

"I guess we should..." she trailed off, gesturing toward the nearest building.

"Right," Erhan replied, his tongue flickering nervously as he spoke.

With a nod of mutual understanding, Erhan allowed his hand to find the small of Kleena's back as he guided her toward the door. Around them, the remaining villagers cheered, sending them and the other couples off with a round of well-wishes that made Erhan's heart pound.

Inside, the place was remarkably beautiful. Though it didn't exactly compare with the lavish decor of the royal palace, it had its own romantic charm and it was clear the villagers had taken pride in their work.

The small room was hung with garlands of fresh flowers in deep hues of red and gold. The bare wooden walls had been covered with strips of dark fabric, which transformed the bungalow into a cozy boudoir. The entire room was lit by the warm flicker of candlelight, and the air was thick with the smell of incense.

Against one wall was a bed, dressed with soft sheets and mountains of pillows. And in the center of the room, a small round table sat laden with food.

It was obvious to Erhan what this part of the ritual was intended for.

He was painfully aware of Kleena's presence beside him, but as soon as they closed the door, she stepped away from his touch. In just a few seconds, she'd placed herself on the other side of the small room, as if eager to put space between them.

On the one hand, it left him oddly longing for her. On the other hand, the distance was probably for the best.

"Well," he began, aching to fill the awkward silence that stretched between them now that they were alone. "We might have to stay here a while."

Kleena bit her lip slightly in worry, but the sight of it sent a dangerous thrill through him. He forced himself to maintain composure, but in spite of his efforts, he felt something stir beneath his scales.

"Mmm," Kleena replied noncommittally. She nodded slowly, though, as if resigning herself to the idea.

As if to solidify the thought, the giggles of villagers outside came drifting through the door. There was a good chance, Erhan realized, that they would be eavesdropping.

Kleena must have realized the same thing because she closed the space between

them.

“I guess we could at least pretend to get along,” she told him now that she was close. Her voice was low, and Erhan could just catch the sweet scent of her breath. It made his heart jump involuntarily into his throat.

“Then, after you my dear.”

The feigned affection somehow succeeded in pushing down his growing desire as he pulled a chair out for Kleena. She seemed surprised but managed a small smile as she accepted and allowed him to settle her.

Taking the seat beside her, Erhan kept up the facade. He never thought he'd be thankful for his years of royal training, but tonight, it was coming in handy.

“Have you ever tried zylan?” he asked politely, taking a heaping spoonful of the golden puree and placing it delicately on Kleena's plate.

She shook her head, eyeing the dish and taking a deep breath.

“Oh wow, it smells delicious.”

Erhan watched as she took a tentative first bite. Immediately her eyes fluttered closed as if in ecstasy, and she uttered a low moan at the flavor. The sound of it made his tail twitch in a way that made him grateful she wasn't one of his kind. Any female Niri would have known its real meaning...

“And how about gostin?” he said hurriedly, tearing his eyes away from his companion.

“Nope,” Kleena replied, blissfully unaware of the heat rising in Erhan's body. “But if

it's anything like the zylan, count me in."

If it's anything like the zylan, Erhan thought as he doled out a serving of the deep purple meat and its accompanying cream sauce. I'm done for.

He tried not to stare as Kleena cut herself a piece and brought the fork up to her mouth. She slipped the morsel between her lips, leaving the slightest sheen of cream on her bottom lip as she chewed.

"Oh my god," she groaned, closing her eyes again. As she chewed, she threw her head back a little, exposing the sleek outline of her neck.

Erhan felt his lower jaw drop ever so slightly as he watched her, his snakelike tongue darting in and out of his mouth and tasting the air. Kleena's own tongue broached her lips for just a moment, licking up the cream that still lingered there.

When she opened her eyes, Erhan suddenly shot back in his seat. Without realizing it, he'd been leaning forward slightly, and now he felt like he'd been caught in the act. The act of what, exactly, he couldn't bring himself to admit.

"Are you okay?" Kleena asked, shooting him a strange look. Her words weren't biting, though. In fact, they seemed to convey some genuine feeling, and for a moment, Erhan allowed himself to slightly drop his guard.

"Fine," he assured her. "It's just nice not to be fighting with you for once."

Without thinking, he reached forward, placing his hand on hers. The heat of her skin sent a wave of pleasure through him, and when he looked down, he was surprised by how much he loved the sight of her pale, fragile skin against the black of his scales.

When he looked back up, though, Kleena was gazing intently at him. For a second, he

was afraid he'd overstepped by touching her like that, and he was about to pull his hand back when he saw something else in her eyes. It wasn't rejection, as he'd feared. It was something he hardly dared put a name to.

As the silence lengthened between them, their hands still clasped together, Erhan couldn't keep denying it.

It was desire that he saw.

Kleena's hazel eyes were growing dark, and she seemed to be leaning forward ever so slightly. Even over the aroma of the incense, he could smell her, the heat of her and... could it really be... the wetness of her.

This was the final straw. As if in a daze, Erhan leaned forward, and Kleena met him there, their lips finding each other in a kiss that could no longer be resisted.

Erhan's other hand came up to cup Kleena's cheek, and her lips parted, welcoming his tongue into her mouth. As his tongue snaked into her mouth, the taste of her appealed to his deepest longing. Beneath his scales, his twin cocks grew hard, wanting to feel what he could smell so strongly now.

Any facade of resistance had crumbled away. Only a wave of undeniable and inevitable desire remained.

Kleena

Kleena's heart raced after the surprise of the unexpected kiss from Erhan. As she looked into his eyes, she was shocked to see the mirroring of her own desires reflected back at her.

But he was so different from her. Would it even work? What was this attraction?

"We can't," Kleena rasped, lying to herself as her body did the work. But Kleena couldn't fight this strange pull any longer.

Kleena approached as they moved closer to each other, their hands tentatively exploring each other. The boundaries between them were small in comparison to their needs.

Erhan pulled her close, his strong hands roaming along her curves. She couldn't help the way her body arched into him, inviting him closer. It was biology.

Their tongues tangled together as she gripped the front of his shirt, wanting to shred it from his form.

Kleena's eyes fluttered shut as Erhan's lips continued to devour hers, her back arching off the couch in response.

She could feel his warm breath against her mouth, and the softness of his lips pressing against hers sent shivers down her spine. His tongue traced the seam of her lips, begging entrance, and she eagerly opened up for him.

Their tongues danced together, tasting each other for the first time. He pulled away slightly, giving her a chance to catch her breath before diving back in again with even more passion.

Kleena moaned into the kiss, her eyes heavy-lidded as she writhed against him. His hands traveled down her sides, stopping at the hem of her shirt. Slowly, he lifted it up over her head, revealing her dark bra that just barely contained her breasts.

Erhan slipped his fingers beneath the fabric, tracing circles around her nipples before pulling it down to expose them fully. She gasped as he cupped one breast in his large hand, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger while continuing to kiss her deeply. Her nipple hardened under his touch, standing tall against his palm as they moved together in sync.

His tongue plunged back into her mouth, exploring every corner and crevice while his hand teased her other nipple through the fabric of her bra. The sensation was almost too much for her to bear. It felt so good to be wanted like this.

Their lips parted, and she let out a soft moan, feeling the cool air brush against her skin. Erhan looked at her with lust-filled eyes, his chest heaving from their passionate exchange.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered between kisses down her neck and collarbone before reaching down to unbutton her pants. Kleena helped him by lifting herself up slightly so he could slide them off easily.

He didn’t waste any time dipping his fingers inside her silken folds, finding her wet from their earlier interactions.

His touch was electric, sending shockwaves through every inch of her being. She gasped at the sensation as he found her sweet spot and rubbed circles around it

expertly, making her gasp and purr with pleasure.

As Erhan continued to work his magic between her legs, Kleena reached down and undid his belt buckle, freeing his hardened lengths from his covering. She ran her hand up his exposed flesh, feeling the warmth of his skin against hers and appreciating its strange texture. He was hot to the touch, which sent shivers down her spine, yet there was a coolness to him, too.

Erhan felt the warmth of her hand on one of his swollen shafts as she slid her fingers down to wrap around him, her nails raking lightly against his skin. He let out a low groan, his hips bucking up involuntarily at the sensation. With a gentle nudge, he urged her to lie down on the couch and followed suit, slowly sliding inside of her with his larger cock, inch by slow inch.

Their bodies met with a slick, wet sound that echoed through the room. Erhan's eyes were half-closed in bliss as he stared down at Kleena beneath him, taking in the way she looked spread out before him, legs trembling and lips parted in a silent moan of pleasure. He watched as their hips began to move together in rhythm, his primary cock sliding in and out of her tight heat with each thrust. The friction was intense but oh-so-good and they groaned in unison.

Kleena's fingers dug into the cushions beneath her, her nails leaving little indents as she arched her back in delight. She gasped for breath between moans, her chest rising and falling rapidly underneath him. The scent of their sweat mixed with the sweet incense filled his nostrils—intoxicating him. He leaned down to capture one of her nipples between his teeth, eliciting a loud moan.

Kleena's breath caught in her throat as Erhan's skin and scales rubbed against her. She shuddered under his touch, feeling every inch of his thick hardness inside her.

He slowly began to move, thrusting deeper and deeper with each stroke. His hips

slapped against her ass cheeks with each forceful push, filling her completely.

She moaned loudly, feeling the wall vibrate with the sound.

Erhan's hands gripped her waist tightly, his fingers digging into her flesh as he took control.

His rhythm was unmatched; it felt like they were dancing together in a sensual tango underneath the moonlit sky.

The air was thick with desire and sweat as they moved together in perfect sync.

Kleena could feel the heat emanating from his body, radiating outward like a furnace ready to explode.

She wrapped her legs around him tighter, pulling him closer as if there were any distance left between them.

His musky scent filled her nose, sending shivers down her spine.

Erhan nipped at her earlobe playfully, causing goosebumps to break out on her skin and a low growl to escape his throat.

With each thrust, he groaned deeply, lost in the sensation of being deep inside Kleena's warmth.

Their bodies slid against each other effortlessly, creating music only they could hear—grunts and moans mingling into one.

“Never stop! More!”

Ehran grunted and withdrew. “I will give you all of me, my essaru .”

She opened her mouth to cry out at his retreat only to groan as he slid home once more, thicker and larger than before. Had he pushed both of his cocks inside her? Then he was stroking in and out and she didn’t care if he had filled her with “all” of him.

Kleena could hear herself screaming out, overtaken by lust. She had completely given herself over to him. Not a single thought registered in her mind about how wrong it was, or how different they were.

With every thrust, Erhan’s hips pounded into Kleena’s body like a drumbeat of passion, his heavy breath mingling with hers as their chests rose and fell in unison. Her tight pussy clamped down around him with every push, milking him for everything he was worth, while her breasts swayed hypnotically from side to side. Her fingers raked his back lightly, drawing circles along each vertebra of his spine until they reached the nape of his neck where she dug in slightly harder. Every time he drove into her deeper, she cried out louder, her toes curling inside her sneakers.

Kleena moaned again as Erhan leaned down and took her left nipple into his mouth. His free hand slid underneath them, tracing lazy circles over her stomach before reaching between their joined bodies to find her clit once again.

His thumb pressed firmly against it as he rubbed in perfect time with the thrusts of his hips, driving her crazy with pleasure. She threw her head back against the couch cushions, gasping for air as she felt herself getting closer and closer to the edge.

She didn’t know how this could get any better, but every moment challenged her limits. He was somehow better than human. Probably because he wasn’t human.

Erhan’s hips quickened, his pace picking up speed. Kleena’s breath hitched as she felt

the edge of her orgasm approaching. She could taste Erhan on her tongue—salty and sweet all at once—and it only fueled her desire.

He groaned deeply into their kiss, feeling her muscles clench around him. It was all too much for him to bear; he pulled back from their kiss with a heavy breath, his eyes locked on to hers as he watched her face contort in ecstasy.

The sight was enough to drive him wild; he couldn't contain himself anymore. With a low growl, he buried himself deep inside her. His hips bucked violently against hers as he emptied himself inside her, filling her with a groan that sent shivers down her spine and she could feel him pulsing against the opening of her womb, he was so deep.

They clung to each other in the aftermath, their chests heaving as the intensity of their lovemaking settled within them.

Erhan

The thin blue light of dawn made Erhan stir. For a moment, he forgot where he was. The bed felt unfamiliar, the window was in the wrong place, and the ceiling was darker than the roof of Calla's hut. As he blinked away the sleep from his eyes, he noticed the walls were the wrong color, the dark fabrics draped around him momentarily unfamiliar.

But as the bungalow started to take shape around him, memories of the previous night came suddenly rushing back. The taste of Kleena's skin, the sound of her moans, the look in her eyes when she...

The thought of it was suddenly overwhelming, and when he turned his head, he saw just what he had hoped and feared to see—Kleena sleeping soundly beside him, the blankets half-draped across her naked form.

"Feck ," he whispered involuntarily.

Kleena's eyelids fluttered ever so slightly at the sound, and Erhan's heart pounded. For a moment he was afraid the sound of his racing pulse was louder even than that of his accidental cursing. He was certain its thunderous rhythm would wake her and then...

And then what? What would happen once they saw each other in the light of day? When their lustful, passionate night together was made to stand trial?

Erhan stared, waiting for that trial to commence, but it took only a second for Kleena

to settle again, easing into an easy sleep. Erhan felt a flash of relief, followed by envy. No way would he be falling back to sleep now.

He couldn't tear his eyes away from her, and now that he was fully awake, he felt as if every sense was heightened. His eyes took in every curve and freckle of her face—a face he could finally admit to himself he found intensely beautiful. His ears heard the soft rhythm of her breathing, like a melody he could get lost in.

Most of all, though, his already keen sense of smell had been brought to new heights. He breathed in the scent of her skin—a smell that he had been trying to resist since the moment he met her. It was intoxicatingly sweet and musky. The slight smell of her sweat mingled with something that reminded him of flowers. And then there was her sex...

He had drunk in that scent last night, savored her wetness and her heat. And now, in the aftermath of their lovemaking, her smell was mingled with his into an irresistible perfume. The scent of cum and sex and reckless abandon made his cocks throb again with desire.

The feeling almost threatened to overtake him entirely, but something about the stark light of day held him back. The brief thought crossed his mind that the events of last night may have been just that—confined to last night.

Lying still, he let his mind touch the memories again. Images of Kleena's naked body lying open to him, the sound of her voice as she said his name, and the sudden passion that had passed between them all flickered through his thoughts, sending a thrill through him. His tail twitched at the end of the bed in response, and almost without his permission, it curled upward, snaking its way toward Kleena's sleeping form.

He could feel the heat of her, even before he touched her, his scales rippling at the

promise of her soft, warm skin. The closer he got, though, the faster his heart raced because something else was lying beneath these blissful memories and throbbing temptation.

Erhan could only describe it as dread.

His tail stopped, midair, hovering just inches from Kleena's naked waist. He had never been this close to anyone before, which was by design. Over the course of his life, the thought of gaining someone's affection was far outweighed by the fear of losing them. Of causing them harm the way he had lost his mother, though, "lost" wasn't the right word.

Steeling himself, he admitted the truth—the way he had killed her.

A surge of sudden panic rose up in Erhan, and in an instant, his tail was back at the end of the bed without ever having touched his sleeping lover.

Lover. Is that what she is?

The term both thrilled and sickened him, but the dread won out in the end. He remembered the taunts, the jeers, the looks of disgust, and hatred that had been cast upon him ever since he was a child. Ever since his hatching, in fact. Before he'd even known what it meant, he'd been labeled as a "mother-killer."

The wound ran much deeper than this fleeting intimacy with a human woman.

With a painful glance toward Kleena, Erhan slowly and quietly slipped from the bed. Though his mind told him he had to leave, his body remained reluctant. Even as he glided onto the floor, his tail reached out behind him, as if hoping for one last brush of her skin.

Once again, though, Erhan willed his tail to resist, and when it finally joined him, it was without the warmth of Kleena's touch.

His heart ached at the act, and he turned back to see what he was leaving behind.

Kleena's pale skin looked almost ethereal in the early dawn light, as if imbued with a heavenly glow. Her curves, rising up from beneath the covers, tantalized him. Her dark eyelashes fluttered softly as she slept while her full lips, softly parted, brought back memories of their fervent kisses from the night before.

Her mess of curly brown hair spread across the pillow, and Erhan was suddenly struck by the overwhelming urge to run his fingers through it, to feel it caressing his scales.

His heart ached at the sight of her, at the knowledge that he had allowed her to infiltrate his defenses so easily.

But how? What about this woman had caused his walls to crumble?

Erhan let out a heavy sigh, shaking his head slightly as he kept his eyes on Kleena. There was something real between them, and it absolutely terrified him. Which was why he had to leave.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. What was really a gentle utterance sounded loud in the silence of the bungalow.

Half of him hoped his words would wake her, that she would look at him with those warm hazel eyes and beg him to come back to bed. He knew that if she did, he would no longer be able to resist the pull between them. He would fall back by her side and be lost, utterly and irrevocably.

But the other half of him dreaded the thought.

He waited, holding his breath and gazing intently at Kleena, his eyes searching for any signs of wakefulness. But the seconds passed and her breathing remained steady, her eyes closed but for the occasional flutter that signaled the flash of a dream.

Finally, Erhan let out his breath, not knowing if he was relieved or disappointed. It was a strange mix of emotions—one he'd never had to endure. Among other things, it made him deeply uncomfortable.

He knew he needed to leave, and with great effort, he forced himself to slither toward the bungalow's door. As his hand grasped the handle, he hoped he wouldn't come to regret his decision.

Outside, the village was still sleeping, evidence of the fertility celebration still strewn across the village square. Erhan's path left a snaking trail in the carpet of flower petals, revealing only dusty cobblestones beneath.

He tried not to look back at the bungalow, and he was almost out of its sight when he suddenly turned back. He felt a pang of deep longing and knew, undoubtedly, that he was not the same Niri he once was. Kleena had changed him, had broken through the armor he'd spent a lifetime strengthening.

But that was not the plan. That had never been the plan.

As much as he wanted to glide back toward the bungalow, throw open the door, and spend the day making love to that beautiful human woman, the risks were just too great.

He was a soldier, a prince. He knew better.

Over the rawness of his aching heart, Erhan pulled close the all-too-familiar armor.

“There’s no way,” he muttered, setting his brow and frowning slightly.

His eyes remained fixed on the bungalow’s closed door until he felt his resolve harden again. Finally, he turned away, knowing the door would remain closed from now on.

Forever.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Kleena

Kleena woke with a start, the early morning light filtering through the window.

She reached out instinctively, her fingers brushing against the cool, empty space beside her. The absence of Erhan's warmth sent a pang of confusion and hurt through her heart.

Where had he gone?

Why isn't he here? Did last night mean nothing to him?

She got up and washed before leaving the bungalow. She made her way back to the hut and met Calla, who was just about to leave.

"Have you seen Erhan?"

Calla smiled. "He was back early, taking care of chores. He's such a good being."

Kleena nodded absentmindedly, a strange feeling in her gut making her uncomfortable. Determined to find him, she changed clothes quickly and stepped outside, hoping to clear her mind with a walk through the village.

The sun was just beginning to rise, casting a golden glow over the bustling community.

As she wandered through the village, she couldn't help but notice the other couples

around her, their happiness a stark contrast to the turmoil she felt inside her heart.

Near the well, a young couple laughed as they filled their water jars, their heads bent close together in a shared moment of intimacy.

Kleena's heart ached at the sight, a reminder of the bond she longed for but that seemed to elude her.

Will we ever have that? Or was it just a fleeting moment?

Further along, an older couple worked side by side in their garden, their movements synchronized in a dance of familiarity and love.

The woman paused to wipe the sweat from her husband's brow, a tender gesture that spoke volumes of their deep connection.

Kleena felt a pang of longing as she watched them, wishing she could experience that kind of enduring love.

Can Erhan and I ever reach that level of understanding and closeness?

Children played nearby, their laughter echoing through the village square. A pair of parents watched fondly, their hands intertwined as they shared a proud smile.

The sight of such unguarded affection made Kleena's heart ache even more, highlighting the distance that seemed to have grown between her and Erhan since their night together.

Is it too much to hope for something like this with him? Or am I chasing an impossible dream?

Her thoughts drifted to her past, to the painful memories of her former fiancé's betrayal. The heartbreak had left her wary of opening up again, yet with Erhan, she had felt something genuine, something worth risking her heart.

As the day unfolded, the answer to her heart's question became painfully clear. Erhan was deliberately keeping his distance, his interactions with her minimal and evasive.

Every time she tried to approach him, he found a reason to slither away and busy himself with some task that required his immediate attention.

The villagers, oblivious to the tension between them, went about their day, leaving Kleena to wrestle with her growing frustration and confusion.

Why is he doing this? We shared something special last night. What changed?

The ache in her chest intensified as she watched Erhan avoid her. His retreat felt unnecessary and cowardly. She had never asked for promises of commitment, only honesty.

Hellbent on getting to the bottom of his behavior, she sought him out, her resolve hardening with each passing moment.

She found him alone by the well, his posture tense, as if bracing for a confrontation.

"Erhan," she called out, her voice firm despite the tremor she felt inside.

He turned to face her, his expression unreadable. "Kleena," he acknowledged curtly.

The coldness in his tone stung, but she pressed on. "We need to talk."

He sighed, his eyes darting away from hers. "There's nothing to talk about."

Frustration flared within her, and she stepped closer, her hands clenched at her sides. “Why are you avoiding me? After what happened last night, I deserve an explanation.”

Erhan’s jaw tightened, his eyes finally meeting hers with a flash of anger. “It was a mistake, Kleena. A moment of weakness that shouldn’t have happened.”

His words were like a slap to her face, the harshness cutting deep. “A mistake?” she repeated, her voice breaking. “Is that all it was to you?”

“Yes,” he said, the word bitter on her soul. “And it can’t happen again.”

Kleena felt the sharp bite of rejection, her heart shattering at his words. “Why are you doing this? Why are you pushing me away?”

Erhan’s eyes blazed with a mix of pain and fury. “Because it’s better this way. You deserve someone who can give you what you need, someone who isn’t... broken.”

Tears welled in her eyes, but she fought them back, her voice trembling with emotion. “You’re not broken, Erhan. You just don’t want to believe you deserve happiness.”

His expression hardened, the walls around his heart fortified against her words. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know you’re scared,” she murmured, her voice softening. “But I’m here, Erhan. I’m not asking for promises or guarantees. Just don’t shut me out.”

Why can’t he see that I care for him, flaws and all?

Erhan shook his head, the conflict within him tearing him apart. “You don’t

understand, Kleena. I can't .”

“Can’t or won’t?” she demanded, her voice rising. “There’s a difference, Erhan. One means you’re scared, and the other means you don’t care.”

He whirled away from her, his hands clenched into fists. “It doesn’t matter. Either way, it’s not going to work.”

“Why are you so determined to sabotage this?” Kleena cried, stepping in front of him to force him to look at her. “I thought we had something real.”

Erhan’s eyes flashed with anguish. “You don’t get it. My past... it’s not something I can escape from. I’m not the person you think I am.”

Kleena’s heart ached at the pain in his voice. “Then help me understand, Erhan. Let me in. We can face it together.”

“I don’t need your pity,” he snapped, his words laced with bitterness. “I’ve lived my entire life being told I don’t deserve happiness. I won’t drag you into that.”

“I’m not offering pity,” Kleena whispered, her eyes searching his. “I’m offering love. But you have to let me in.”

For a second, it looked like Erhan’s resolve wavered, the vulnerability in her eyes perhaps breaking through his defenses.

But he quickly shook his head and the mask returned. “I’m sorry, Kleena.” His voice cracked. “I can’t give you what you want.”

The finality in his tone shattered her resolve, and she felt the sting of tears blurring her vision. With her heart in her throat, she turned and fled from his presence, the

weight of his rejection crushing her spirit. She ran blindly through the village, salty tears blurring the world around her as she sought solace in the depths of the forest.

Her breath came in ragged gasps as she stumbled to a stop, the trees around her a blur of green and brown.

She sank to the ground, her body shaking with sobs as the emotional turmoil of Erhan's rejection deepened the wound left by her former fiancé.

Why does it always end like this? Why do I keep letting myself hope?

Kleena buried her face in her hands, the ache in her chest growing unbearable. She had believed, if only for a moment, that she and Erhan could find a way to be together.

She had dared to let her heart lead her, let it spin dreams and weave hope that fooled her soul into thinking it could be healed by the touch of another.

Now, that hope seemed like a cruel joke, withering under the harshness of his words.

Am I destined to always be alone? Is something wrong with me?

She was left questioning everything that had transpired between them, the intimacy they had shared now a source of pain and confusion.

Thinking back on the previous night, she couldn't help but feel betrayed. Every touch, every hushed word, every lingering kiss felt so real, so raw, and so intense.

Their time together didn't feel like just sex for the sake of it. It felt like they were sealing their connection in the most profound and beautiful way.

She sighed, running a hand through her messy hair.

Maybe she really was a fool who read too much into what happened between them. It clearly meant nothing to him. It had just been a night of pleasure that carried no emotional attachments.

As she sat there, alone in the forest, she wondered if she would ever be able to trust her heart again.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Erhan

Erhan gazed toward the horizon, watching as the sun slowly edged its way downward. The first hints of orange had found their way into the light, and with each passing moment, his chest constricted a little more.

He still didn't know where Kleena was.

"Come on," he muttered under his breath.

In spite of himself, he had been thinking of her all day, willing her to come back after their fight by the well. But she hadn't returned, and although he didn't like to admit it, he was worried for her.

He glanced behind him at the door to Calla's home, wondering if he should simply go inside and wait for her. Calla had already begun to prepare dinner, and Erhan didn't want to believe that anything but a normal meal would take place.

But he knew that even if Kleena did return soon, it would be a tense affair.

I shouldn't have been so harsh with her, he thought, gritting his pointed teeth. She didn't deserve my temper.

But his concern about an awkward meal grew smaller and smaller as the minutes ticked by. There was still no sign of Kleena, and by now, it was approaching sunset. Erhan was wrestling with the prospect of going to look for her when a sudden, deafening noise from overhead broke his concentration.

It took only a split second to recognize the Jorvlen ship, and Erhan slipped behind a nearby tree, out of sight from the village square where the vessel was landing.

As soon as it did, though, chaos broke out. Villagers who, moments before, had been playing with their children or tending their gardens, suddenly scattered. Their cries mingled with the shouts of the Jorvlen thugs who emerged from the ship with menacing scowls and even more menacing weapons.

A small herd of caseen scattered, their hooves kicking up dust in their wake. A young woman screamed and fell to her knees as one Jorvlen caught her by the wrist and began to threaten her.

Erhan's heart raced as he watched the scene unfold, but he already knew what he had to do. The villagers had been nothing but kind and helpful to him and Kleena. They didn't deserve to suffer.

"Let go of her, you scum!" Erhan shouted, stepping out from behind the tree. "Come and get what you really came for!"

The Jorvlen suddenly dropped the woman, who scrambled to the safety of the nearest hut. Erhan had succeeded in catching his enemies' attention. Now he only had to outpace them long enough to hide.

With one last look of challenge, Erhan turned, slithering swiftly toward the open fields and away from the village. He could hear the heavy crash of boots on cobblestones, turning to dense thuds as they met the open earth. It told him the Jorvlen were following close behind and that, at the very least, he'd managed to draw attention away from the villagers.

Bowing low to the ground, Erhan picked up his pace, slithering through the tall fields of grain as the Jorvlen struggled to keep up. He wanted to give them just enough of a

glimpse of him to keep them on his tail but not enough that they might try to fire at him.

It didn't take long for him to cross the fields, and soon, Erhan was leading them into the forest. As he went, he thought of Kleena. If she had made it back to the village by now, she would be safe. He was sure no Jorvlens had lingered behind. It was clear they'd need all their forces if they wanted to capture him.

If Kleena had made it back, Erhan was certain Calla and Marcus would swiftly keep her out of sight until the threat had blown over.

And if she hadn't...

Erhan tried to push the thought from his mind as he slithered into the cool air of the forest. Behind him, he heard the Jorvlens shouting as they hurried to keep up. Then a crack pierced the air.

One of the Jorvlens had hurled a massive hammer toward him, and it had struck a nearby tree. The weapon had been thrown with such force that the trunk split and splintered.

Erhan hesitated for a second, shocked by the sudden attack, but that was a mistake. Two of the Jorvlen were upon him while the others hurried to catch up.

Instinctively, Erhan hissed and showed his fangs. He could taste the venom beginning to drip from their points already and his hood flared in a show of warning.

The Jorvlens backed off momentarily, which gave Erhan just enough time to snatch a large branch that had been knocked off the tree when the hammer struck. With a cry, he swung it wildly, fending off the two Jorvlens and almost knocking the weapon from one of their hands. Another swing had them stepping back again.

However, it was only a few moments before the rest of them caught up, and when they did, Erhan knew he couldn't fight them. Not without a real weapon. Instead, he hissed a warning at them again, taking off while he still had them at a distance.

The sound of sticks and leaves crunching underfoot followed him as he slithered deeper and deeper into the forest. The only thought that kept him going was the knowledge that he had spared the villagers—and Kleena—from their wrath.

Suddenly though, another sound pierced the forest—one that made him question whether he had really done what he'd thought.

“Let me go!”

It stopped Erhan in an instant, even though he knew the enemy was just behind him. But the voice was unmistakable. It was Kleena.

With renewed vigor, he sprang forward, following the voice, but even before he reached her, he knew what he was stumbling into. He heard other voices too—deep male voices, speaking with the clipped guttural tones of the Jorvlen.

“Giving orders doesn't suit you,” one of them grunted while the others laughed. “You'll have to learn your place all over again.”

Erhan heard a small cry, and when he made his way through the trees, he saw her.

Kleena was in the clutches of two huge Jorvlen guards, her hands held back in such a way that made her grimace from the pain. Her hair was tousled and matted from what Erhan assumed was a struggle, and her cheeks were flushed.

He wanted to take her into his arms right then and there, but the Jorvlens ahead had already spotted him. A second later, the rest of them came up behind him, hemming

them both in.

“Well, well,” one of the Jorvlens snarled. “Nice of you to show up and try and reclaim our property.”

The Jorvlens sniggered, but Erhan’s blood boiled.

“Watch your mouth,” he warned, slithering forward and baring his deadly fangs, venom dripping from their tips.

The laughter died out as one of the guards shot Erhan a menacing look. “You watch yours.” The Jorvlen grunted before pulling out a long, slick knife and holding it up to Kleena’s throat. The look of terror in her eyes was enough to still Erhan, though he kept his fangs exposed as a warning. “That’s what I thought,” the Jorvlen sneered, a smug look spreading across his face. “Now you’re gonna come with us or the slave gets it.”

Kleena shot him a look that said “no,” but there was no way Erhan would leave her to this fate. He had saved her once, and he could— would —save her again.

For a second, he considered trying to fight his way out and rescue Kleena that way, but he didn’t need to be a trained soldier to know it was a futile task. He was surrounded and outnumbered, not to mention, he had no weapon.

“Fine,” he spat at the guard. “I’ll come with you.”

The guard grinned and slowly lowered the knife from Kleena’s throat. The relief in her eyes was palpable, but so was her guilt. Erhan knew there was no other way, though. She was safe—for now.

“Get him in chains!” the guard shouted to the Jorvlens behind him. It took only a

second before Erhan felt their rough grip on his shoulders and wrists. It was clear the Jorvlens enjoyed binding him, and a pair of shackles clamped down on his wrists, a little harder than was necessary.

Erhan hardly felt it, though. He couldn't tear his eyes away from Kleena, who was undergoing the same treatment. It wasn't until they had been hauled into the enemy ship and thrown into a cell together, though, that she brought herself to return his gaze.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean for you to—"

"Shhh," Erhan interrupted, hoping his care was conveyed in his eyes. "It'll be okay."

In the silence that followed, they simply stared into each other's eyes. Erhan hoped Kleena believed his words.

Unfortunately, he wasn't sure if he did.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Kleena

Kleena's heart pounded a wild, desperate rhythm as the Jorvlens circled them, their lewd remarks and mocking laughter slicing through the oppressive silence.

Every vile comment sent a chill down her spine, but the thought of what they might do to Erhan truly terrified her. Her eyes darted to him, worry for his safety eclipsing her own fear.

What if they kill him? What if I never get the chance to tell him how I truly feel?

She could feel the malice radiating from their captors, a palpable force that made her skin crawl.

Erhan's reaction was ferocious. Despite the cuffs and chains that restrained him, he lunged at their captors with a rage that shook the cold metal walls of the ship.

"You touch her, and I will kill you!" he roared, his threats reverberating with a raw, primal intensity.

His tail lashed out violently, and his muscles strained against his bonds, turning him into a force of nature fueled by his need to protect her. Every movement, every surge against his chains, was a testament to his unyielding spirit.

The Jorvlens responded with brutal efficiency, beating him mercilessly to subdue his defiance. Each blow landed with a sickening thud, and Kleena's screams filled the air as she watched in horror.

“Stop it! Please, stop!” she cried, her voice cracking with desperation.

The sight of Erhan being beaten, his body writhing under their assault, was a nightmare she couldn't escape.

The sound of fists meeting flesh, the grunts of effort from the attackers, and Erhan's pained gasps created a horrific symphony that echoed in her mind.

How could I let this happen? How can I save him?

When the captors reached for Kleena, their intentions clear and malevolent, Erhan's fury seemed to reach new heights. He lunged again, every ounce of his strength channeled into a desperate attempt to keep them away from her. He bit, hissed, bared his fangs, and used his tail to fend off the attackers, sending one of them flying across the room.

Kleena screamed, her heart leaping into her throat, grateful it wasn't Erhan's body that lay crumpled on the ground. Her fear for him was a living, breathing entity, constricting her chest with every passing second.

How far would he go to protect me? I can't stand this!

In retaliation, the Jorvlens forced Erhan into heavier chains, thick links encircling his neck with a sinister clink.

The sight of him, bound and restrained, tore at Kleena's heart. His defiance was palpable, his eyes blazing with unyielding determination even as his body sagged under the weight of the chains. She could see the raw anger and protectiveness in his eyes, a reflection of her own desperation. His spirit was unbroken, and she felt a surge of pride amid her fear.

“Please,” Kleena begged, her voice trembling with fear and love. “Do what you want with me, but leave him alone. I’ll do anything you ask. Just don’t hurt him anymore.” Tears streamed down her face, and she looked at the Jorvlens with a pleading intensity.

She could see the cruel delight in their eyes, their enjoyment of her torment, and it made her stomach churn. The Jorvlens’ laughter echoed around them, a chilling promise of the twisted entertainment they planned to derive from their suffering.

How can they be so cruel? How can they find joy in our suffering?

“Oh, how touching,” one of them sneered. “This will be more fun than we thought.” The words were laced with malice, and the implication of what was to come filled Kleena with dread.

The thought of what they might do to Erhan was a torment she could hardly bear.

Kleena’s voice cracked as she cried out, “I love him! Do you hear me? I love him so much that I will die if anything happens to him!”

Her declaration hung in the air, a desperate plea mingled with a confession of the deepest truth in her heart. She had never imagined herself capable of such a proclamation, but in that moment, it was all she could offer.

Erhan’s eyes met hers, a mixture of agony and fierce resolve burning within them.

For a moment, the world seemed to narrow to just the two of them, their love and fear intertwining in a silent exchange. Then the Jorvlens’ cruel laughter shattered the moment, dragging them back into the grim reality of their captivity. The bond they shared was a fragile lifeline amid the encroaching darkness.

As the enemies tightened their grip and prepared to carry out their vile intentions, Kleena's heart pounded with a mix of fear and unyielding love.

She clung to the hope that, somehow, they would survive this ordeal together. Her thoughts filled with a fervent prayer for their salvation.

The Jorvlens cackled, their eyes gleaming with perverse delight. Kleena's breath hitched as they reached for her, their hands rough and calloused against her skin. She recoiled instinctively, her mind screaming in protest, but her body remained rooted to the spot, paralyzed by fear.

The Jorvlens laughed, their amusement evident. "Is that so?" one of them taunted, his grip on her tightening. "Then prove it." He shoved her forward, causing her to stumble and fall to her knees.

Kleena gasped, the impact jarring her, but she forced herself to look up and meet their gaze with as much defiance as she could muster.

Erhan's chains rattled as he strained against them, his eyes blazing with fury. "Leave her alone, you bastards!" he roared, his voice filled with raw, unbridled rage.

The Jorvlens dragged Kleena to her feet, their hands rough and merciless. "Let's see how much she's willing to sacrifice," one of them sneered, his eyes gleaming with cruel anticipation.

Kleena's heart pounded, she could feel Erhan's eyes on her.

As the Jorvlens' taunts and laughter echoed around them, Kleena's resolve hardened. She would not let them break her, not while Erhan still fought for her. She would endure whatever they threw at her, if it meant keeping him safe.

I don't care what they do to me. I will stand strong. For Erhan.

One of the Jorvlens grabbed Kleena by her hair and twisted it, pulling her head back. "Scream!" he demanded again, his voice filled with sadistic glee.

Kleena's vision blurred with tears, but she remained silent, her resolve unbroken. She wouldn't give them the pleasure of hearing her pain. The captor's frustration grew, and he struck her across the face, the force of the blow snapping her head to the side. Stars exploded in her vision, but she remained steadfast. Her silence was her defiance, her way of fighting back. She couldn't let them win.

Erhan's roar of rage filled the room as he watched Kleena being tortured.

The captors seemed to take perverse pleasure in their torment, their laughter echoing in the cold room.

"Your defiance is admirable." One of them sneered. "But it will only make things worse for you." He tightened his grip on Kleena's hair, his eyes glinting with malice.

Kleena's mind raced. She couldn't break. She couldn't give in. Erhan needed her to be strong, to show these monsters they couldn't break their spirits.

She took a deep breath, forcing herself to remain calm despite the pain. "Do your worst," she spat, her voice steady despite the tears in her eyes. "You won't break us."

The captor's eyes narrowed, and he struck her again, the force of the blow making her vision go dark for a few seconds. But she didn't scream.

Erhan's roar filled the room "You'll pay for this," he growled, his voice a promise of vengeance. "I swear, you'll pay."

The captors only laughed, their amusement a sickening contrast to the pain they were inflicting. They enjoyed this, the power they had over their prisoners, the fear and pain they could cause.

It was a game to them, a twisted form of entertainment.

Kleena's mind raced with thoughts of escape, of how they could turn the tables on their captors.

If only there was a way to distract them or to break these chains... anything!

She had to stay strong, for Erhan, for herself. She had to believe they would get through this, that they would find a way out. "Stay strong, Erhan," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "We'll get through this. I swear it."

She said the words with confidence, but in her heart, she didn't know if she could keep her promise.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Erhan

Erhan's eyes blazed with defiance as the enemies began to beat him, each blow fueling his determination to protect Kleena at all costs. He gritted his teeth, absorbing the pain, every strike against his body a reminder of his failure to keep her safe.

If I can only break free, these fuckers are in for a world of pain!

The thick chains around his neck and body constricted with every futile attempt to break free, the cold metal biting into his flesh. But the thought of them harming Kleena truly terrified him. The potential loss of her, the woman he loved, was more agonizing than any physical torment.

He remembered the time they spent together, the warmth of her touch, the sound of her laughter. The idea of losing her, of seeing her hurt, ignited a ferocity within him that refused to be quelled.

He struggled against his chains with renewed frenzy, his muscles straining, his skin tearing where the metal bit deep.

Kleena! I must get you out of here! Fuck!

He roared in frustration, the sound a primal echo of his desperation. His heart was heavy with despair, the love he felt for Kleena making the prospect of her suffering unbearable.

The Jorvlens, sensing his inner turmoil, commanded Kleena to stand tall so they

could see her better, their voices dripping with brutal anticipation.

Erhan's helpless rage hit a crescendo, the cruelty of their intentions a visceral knife to his soul. He thrashed against his bonds, the chains rattling with a grim finality that underscored his powerlessness.

"No! Leave her alone!" His voice was raw, a plea wrapped in anger and desperation.

He locked eyes with Kleena, the silent scream caught in his throat mirrored in her tear-filled gaze.

I'm sorry, my beloved.

Erhan's regret weighed heavily on him. He regretted avoiding her, not telling her his true feelings, and wasting precious time they could have spent together.

Each second that passed without him breaking free felt like a lifetime of missed opportunities.

"Kleena," he choked out, his voice breaking. "I'm so sorry."

Tears spilled down Kleena's cheeks as she faced the cruel command, her body trembling. "Please," she begged, her voice cracking with emotion. "Don't hurt him. I'll do anything, just don't hurt him."

She is in danger but she begs for mercy for me? I don't deserve that kind of love, Kleena! Erhan's heart broke at her plea, his love for her a burning fire in his chest.

The Jorvlens laughed, a chilling sound that echoed in the confined space of the ship. "Anything?" one of them taunted. "Then start with your clothes."

His hatred for their captors intensified and he vowed that if they were given a chance to be together again, he would make it up to her. He would tell her everything, cherish every moment, and never let fear hold him back.

I will show you all the love I feel. You'll never feel unwanted ever again. I swear!

As the Jorvlens closed in on Kleena, Erhan's vision blurred with a mix of frustrated tears and rage.

He summoned every ounce of strength left in him, his determination unwavering. "I won't let you touch her!" he roared, his voice echoing through the ship.

Erhan's eyes locked on to Kleena's, and in them, he saw her unwavering trust and love.

It's futile! I'm not strong enough. Damnit!

Just as the enemies prepared to carry out their vile intentions, a sudden jolt shook the ship, the sound of battle penetrating the thick walls of their cell.

The ship shuddered violently, causing the Jorvlens to stumble, their cruel laughter abruptly silenced by the unmistakable roar of conflict.

Erhan's eyes went wide, hope ignited within him as the chaos outside intensified.

Could it be?

He strained against his chains, every fiber of his being attuned to the sounds of their possible salvation.

Kleena looked at him, her fear momentarily overshadowed by the surge of adrenaline

coursing through her veins.

The walls of the cell trembled as heavy footsteps echoed closer, a fierce clash of metal and energy weapons growing louder with each passing second.

Shouts of command and the sharp crackle of blaster fire filled the air, the tension within the cell rising to a fever pitch.

The cell door burst open in an explosion of sparks and smoke, silhouetting a group of heavily armed figures against the harsh light of the corridor.

Their movements were precise, their weapons cutting through the Jorvlens with deadly efficiency.

I recognize those weapons. Help has arrived at last!

Blades glinted, and energy shields hummed as they pushed forward, a disciplined phalanx of force and determination.

One of the rescuers, a figure clad in dark, sleek armor, rushed to Erhan and Kleena's side.

With swift, practiced motions, they disabled the chains binding Erhan, their touch reassuring and firm. "We're here to get you out," the rescuer stated, their voice steady despite the chaos.

Erhan, newly freed, didn't waste a moment. His eyes blazed with a mix of fury and glee as his eyes fell on the Jorvlens who had tormented them.

This was his chance to fight back, to reclaim his dignity, and to protect Kleena. He grabbed a fallen weapon, feeling its familiar weight in his hands, and launched

himself at the nearest Jorvlen with a roar of pent-up rage.

As Erhan fought, his thoughts were a whirlwind of determination and vengeance.

These monsters thought they could break us. They thought they could hurt her. They were wrong .

Every swing of his weapon, every strike, was fueled by the memories of Kleena's tears and his own helpless fury.

He relished the sensation of striking back, of turning the tide in their favor.

The satisfaction of seeing the Jorvlens fall under his assault was a balm to his wounded pride and a testament to his strength.

The rescuers, impressed by his ferocity, formed a protective barrier around him and Kleena, ensuring no harm came to them as they made their way through the chaos.

Erhan, satisfied that he got to fight back, grabbed Kleena's hand and pulled her closer to him. The tip of his tail protectively curled around her stomach, keeping her close.

I will never let you out of my sight again. You'll be protected for the rest of your life. I promise.

They moved as a cohesive unit, every move purposeful and every action synchronized.

The corridor outside the cell was a battleground, but the rescuers' training turned the tide of the confrontation. They cut down the Jorvlens with a blend of tactical precision and raw power, their advance unstoppable. They guided Erhan and Kleena through the ship, shielded from harm by their rescuers' expert maneuvers.

Blaster bolts flew past, barely missing their targets as the group pressed forward. The rescuers' energy shields flared, absorbing hits that would have otherwise struck Erhan and Kleena.

The path to freedom was fraught with danger, but their protectors were relentless, carving a way through the enemy ship with unyielding resolve.

Finally, they reached the hangar bay, where a sleek transport ship awaited. The rescuers hustled Erhan and Kleena aboard, covering their retreat with disciplined fire and unwavering determination.

As the transport's engines roared to life, the rescue team made a final stand, holding the line against the Jorvlens until the ship safely lifted off.

Battered but alive, Erhan and Kleena collapsed into the transport's seats, their breaths coming in ragged gasps.

The rescuers closed ranks around them, offering silent reassurance as the transport sped away from the enemy vessel.

The stars blurred outside the viewports, the vast expanse of space a stark contrast to the confines of their former prison.

The journey back to the Nirum empire was swift, the transport ship navigating through the stars with practiced ease.

When they finally landed, the ramp lowered to reveal the grandeur of the Niri palace. Guards and officials awaited their arrival, and as Erhan slithered down the ramp with Kleena at his side, they were greeted by the king and queen themselves.

His brother, the king, glided forward, his expression a mix of relief and

determination. “Welcome home,” he said, his voice resonating with authority and warmth. “You have endured much, but you are safe now.”

The human queen Azha, her eyes soft with compassion, reached out to touch Kleena’s arm. “Rest now,” she said gently. “You are among friends.”

Erhan remained tall beside Kleena, his hand finding hers in a gesture of solidarity and comfort. The weight of their ordeal lingered, but so, too, did the bond they had forged in the crucible of their trials.

Together, they were ready to face the future with renewed strength, their hearts intertwined by the fierce love and unyielding resolve that saw them through the darkest of times.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Kleena

Kleena's journey in the palace began with a sense of trepidation mingled with a deep yearning for solace. She was escorted by the human queen's own Niri attendants to a private chamber, where a warm and compassionate welcome awaited her.

The walls of the room, adorned with intricate tapestries and soft hues, seemed to whisper promises of safety and care, a stark contrast to the horrors she had recently endured.

The queen—a human among the Niri—a graceful beauty with an understanding heart, soon joined her. Her presence was soothing, her every movement imbued with a calm elegance that put Kleena at ease.

Wow, her presence is almost the opposite of Erhan's. So inviting and warm.

As the queen settled beside her, she felt an unexpected wave of relief wash over her. The queen's eyes, filled with empathy, silently urged Kleena to share her story.

I could lose myself in those eyes. They seem to brim with love, and she doesn't even know me.

Taking a deep breath, Kleena recounted her harrowing experience, the memories still raw and vivid.

The queen listened intently, her gaze never wavering, providing a steady anchor in the storm of her emotions.

As she spoke of the auction and the fear that had gripped her heart, she couldn't help but wonder about the fate of the other women who had been captured alongside her.

"Your Majesty," she began, her voice trembling, "what happened to the other women from the auction? Were they rescued? And the rescue team... Did they all return safely?"

The queen's expression grew somber, a shadow passing over her serene features. "I'm afraid, dear one, that only three women survived, including you," she replied gently. "Two members of the rescue team perished during the mission."

Her heart sank, the weight of the news pressing heavily upon her.

I had hoped more of them were saved, fewer lives lost.

The realization that so few had lived was a cruel blow, a reminder of the brutality they had faced.

Tears welled up in her eyes, but she fought to keep them at bay, drawing strength from the queen's unwavering presence.

"I'm so sorry," Kleena whispered, her voice barely audible. "I wish... I wish I could have done more."

The queen placed a gentle hand on Kleena's shoulder, her touch reassuring. "You are not to blame, Kleena. The responsibility lies with those who perpetrated these atrocities. But know that your survival is a testament to your strength and resilience."

Bonding over their shared compassion for others, the queen extended an offer that caught Kleena by surprise. "Would you consider becoming my assistant?" she asked, her tone both hopeful and sincere. "It would give you a chance to find purpose and

begin your journey of recovery.”

Kleena was taken aback by the offer. She felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the queen’s kindness and the royal family’s efforts in saving her.

This is the perfect opportunity to repay the queen’s kindness. Maybe I can find a new path forward.

“I would be honored, Your Majesty,” she replied, her voice filled with resolve. “Thank you for giving me this chance.”

As the days passed, Kleena threw herself into her new duties, finding solace in the tasks that kept her mind and hands busy.

The grandeur of the palace and the bustle of court life provided a welcome distraction from her inner turmoil. The routine brought a semblance of normalcy back into her life, a sense of purpose that had been missing for so long.

Within the safety of the palace, Kleena deliberately sidestepped any paths that might cross with Prince Erhan’s.

I can’t face him yet. It’s all too... raw.

Her heart was still feeling sensitive from the recent turmoil, the pain of their separation, and the events that had led to it lingering like a shadow over her days.

She couldn’t bear the thought of talking to him, not when her emotions were still so tumultuous.

Despite her efforts to avoid him, she couldn’t completely escape the prince’s presence. Erhan made several attempts to speak with her, but fortunately, the palace

protocols and her new duties kept him at bay.

Kleena knew he couldn't force his way into her life, and for that, she was grateful. The distance allowed her the space she needed to heal and regain her strength.

As she adjusted to her new role, Kleena found herself occasionally stealing glances at the prince from afar. His presence stirred a hurricane of emotions within her, a swirl of longing, anger, and regret.

Whenever their eyes met, a spark of the old connection flared, only to be quickly extinguished by the reality of their situation.

I can't see a way forward for us, not when so much has happened. And all my wounds are still so fresh.

One evening, as she was organizing the queen's chambers, a sense of melancholy settled over her. The luxury and beauty of her surroundings only highlighted the stark contrast to the pain she still carried within her. She paused, gazing out of the window at the sprawling palace gardens. The sight was serene, a reminder of the world outside her inner turmoil.

Kleena's thoughts drifted to the other women who had been rescued alongside her.

I wonder how they're coping. Are they finding a way to heal from their trauma? Or do they feel lost, alone, and misunderstood, too?

The queen had assured her that they were receiving the best care, but she couldn't help but worry.

She knew firsthand how difficult it was to recover from such experiences, how the scars lingered long after the physical wounds had healed.

Determined to make a difference, Kleena decided to approach the queen with an idea. She wanted to create a support group for the survivors, a safe space where they could share their experiences and assist each other in their healing journeys.

The queen listened intently as Kleena outlined her plan, her eyes reflecting both compassion and approval.

“I think that’s a wonderful idea, Kleena,” the queen said with a warm smile. “Your strength and empathy will be a great asset to these women. I will do everything in my power to support you in this endeavor.”

Grateful for the queen’s support, Kleena set to work on her new project with renewed vigor. She contacted the other survivors, inviting them to join the group. The first meeting was an emotional affair, filled with tears and shared stories of pain and resilience.

Kleena felt a deep sense of connection with these women, their shared experiences forging a bond that transcended words.

As the weeks passed, the support group became a beacon of hope for its members. She found solace in helping others, her own healing journey intertwined with theirs.

The sense of purpose and community gave her the strength to face each day, to continue moving forward despite the lingering shadows of her past.

Despite her newfound sense of purpose, Kleena couldn’t completely shake the feelings she had for Erhan.

Why do you linger in my thoughts, my dear prince? Am I going to go crazy with all the thoughts of you?

His image remained lingering in her mind like a ghost.

She longed to speak with him, to understand his perspective and to find closure for the unresolved feelings between them.

But the fear of reopening old wounds held her back, a barrier she couldn't yet overcome.

One afternoon, as she was walking through the palace gardens, she spotted Erhan in the distance.

He was speaking with a group of advisors, his expression serious and focused.

Kleena's heart skipped a beat, the sight of him stirring a mix of emotions she couldn't fully untangle. She quickly looked away, her resolve wavering.

How could I ever face him again after everything that happened? After avoiding him for so long?

She paused by a secluded bench, sitting down to gather her thoughts. The palace gardens were a haven of tranquility, a place where she could find a moment of peace amid the chaos of her emotions.

She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath and letting the soothing sounds of nature wash over her. In the quiet of the garden, Kleena reflected on her journey. She had come so far, survived so much, yet the path ahead still seemed uncertain.

The support group had given her a sense of purpose, but it hadn't erased the pain of her past or the unresolved feelings she had for Erhan.

She knew she needed to find a way to reconcile these emotions and find peace within

herself.

If I don't, I'll never heal.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Erhan

Erhan's heart was heavy with frustration and longing. Every day since their rescue, he had tried to reach out to Kleena, hoping to bridge the gap that had formed between them.

His attempts, however, were met with a gentle but firm obstruction.

The queen's influence was a protective barrier around her new confidante, and no matter how hard he tried, Erhan found himself unable to get close to Kleena.

Why won't Queen Azha let me see her? I need to make things right.

Every morning, he sent her flowers and gifts, small tokens of his affection and regret. He hoped that these gestures would convey what his words could not—that he was sorry for the pain he had caused her and that he still cared deeply.

His offerings were accepted without response, and the silence only deepened his sense of helplessness.

She must hate me. How could I have been so foolish?

On several occasions, he had tried to corner her, to catch her in a moment when she couldn't avoid him.

Once, he had seen her from a distance in the palace gardens. His heart had leapt at the sight of her, and he had rushed forward, calling her name. By the time he reached the

spot where she had been, she was gone, like a ghost slipping through his fingers.

Please, Kleena, just give me a chance to explain!

Despite his status as prince, his usual entrances were rerouted, and his queries were redirected. The palace's corridors, once so familiar, had become a maze keeping him from Kleena. It was as if an invisible hand was guiding him away from her, ensuring that their paths never crossed.

"Why is this happening?" he muttered to himself, slithering along the length of his chamber from one side to the other and back again, his mind a whirlwind of confusion and sorrow.

He knew he had hurt her, but he couldn't understand why she wouldn't even give him a chance to explain and make things right.

Maybe she's better off without me. But how can I just let her go?

Finally, in his growing desperation, he decided to speak directly to the queen. He found her in her private chambers, surrounded by attendants who immediately withdrew at his arrival.

The queen looked up from her desk, her eyes meeting his with a mixture of understanding and gentle reproach.

"Your Majesty," Erhan began, bowing slightly out of respect. "I need to speak with you about Kleena. I don't understand why I'm being kept from her."

She regarded him with a calm, steady gaze. "Erhan, I have seen your efforts. I know you are trying to reach her. But Kleena needs time. She has been through a great deal, and she is still healing."

His fists clenched at his sides, his frustration bubbling over.

“But how can she heal if we don’t talk? I need to apologize, to make things right. I can’t bear the thought of her suffering because of me!”

The queen’s expression softened, and she rose from her seat, crossing the room to stand before him. “Sometimes the best way to help someone heal is to give them the space they need. Kleena is finding her strength again, and you must allow her that time.”

He took a deep breath, trying to rein in his emotions.

He knew the queen was right, but the thought of waiting, of being separated from Kleena, was almost unbearable.

“I understand, Your Majesty,” he said finally, his voice low and strained. “But it pains me to be away from her. I want to be there for her, to support her.”

She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “I know, Erhan. And your concern does you credit. But you must trust that she will come to you when she is ready. Pushing her now could do more harm than good.”

He nodded, the weight of the queen’s words settling heavily on his heart. “Thank you, Your Majesty. I will do my best to respect her need for space.”

As he left the queen’s chambers, Erhan felt a sense of resignation mixed with determination. He would give Kleena the time she needed, but he would not give up on her.

Every day, he continued to send her flowers and gifts, each one a silent promise that he was waiting and still cared.

She has to know I love her. She has to.

Weeks turned into months, and the distance between them remained.

He threw himself into his duties, using his work to distract himself from the aching void that Kleena's absence left in his heart.

He trained with the royal guards, making sure they were prepared for any future missions. But no matter how busy he kept himself, his thoughts always returned to Kleena.

She's all that matters to me now. She even has me spending time in the palace, a place I avoided in the past.

One evening, as he was meandering through the palace gardens, he spotted her in the distance. She was speaking with one of the queen's attendants, her face illuminated by the soft glow of the lanterns.

Erhan's heart ached at the sight of her, and he felt an overwhelming urge to race to her, to hold her, and tell her how much he missed her presence in his life. But he held back, remembering the queen's advice. He would not force himself upon her, would not push her before she was ready. Instead, he watched from afar, his heart filled with a mixture of longing and hope.

Is this what it means to truly love someone? To wait, even when it hurts?

Despite the distance, Erhan found small ways to be close to Kleena.

He made sure that the gardens were well-tended, knowing that she often found solace there. He arranged for her favorite foods to be included in the palace meals, hoping these small gestures would bring her some comfort.

Please, let these small things show her how much I care.

He also kept an eye on her from afar, discreetly ensuring that she was safe and well.

He spoke with the queen's attendants, gathering news of Kleena's wellbeing without intruding on her privacy. Every piece of information, no matter how small, was a balm to his worried heart.

While overseeing a training session with the royal guards, Erhan received a message from the queen. She requested his presence in her chambers. His heart leapt at the possibility that the queen might have news about Kleena.

When he arrived, the queen greeted him with a warm smile. "Erhan, I have been observing Kleena's progress. She is healing, slowly but surely."

His heart swelled with hope. "Thank you, Your Majesty. That is the best news I could hope for."

The queen nodded. "She has thrown herself into her new duties, finding solace in helping others. I believe she is finding her strength again."

He took a deep breath, steadying himself. "Do you think... Do you think she might be ready to speak with me soon?"

The queen's gaze softened. "Perhaps. But remember, Erhan, healing is a process. You must continue to be patient and give her the space she needs."

Erhan nodded, his resolve strengthening. "I understand. I will wait as long as it takes."

As he left the queen's chambers, Erhan felt a renewed sense of purpose. He would

continue to support Kleena from afar, respecting her need for space while remaining a steadfast presence in her life.

His love for her was unwavering, and he was determined to prove that love through his actions, not just his words.

One evening, as he was walking through the palace gardens, he spotted Kleena sitting on a bench, her gaze fixed on the horizon.

His heart ached with longing, but he respected the distance she had put between them. Instead of approaching, he found a nearby spot where he could watch over her without intruding on her solitude.

As he sat there, his thoughts drifted back to their time together, the moments of connection and the deep bond they had shared.

He remembered the warmth of her smile, the sound of her laughter, and the way her presence had filled him with a sense of completeness.

Those memories were a source of both comfort and pain, a reminder of what they had lost and what he hoped to regain.

I will wait for you, Kleena. No matter how long it takes.

He knew the road ahead would not be easy. Rebuilding their relationship would take time, patience, and a willingness to face the pain of the past.

He was ready for the challenge. His love for Kleena was a constant, a guiding light that would lead him through the darkness.

Kleena

Kleena's fingers flicked through the piles of official documents that the queen had tasked her with organizing. Under any other circumstance, she would have found the task dull—a tedious chore that she'd push to the end of her list and then procrastinate on for days, if not weeks.

But as she pulled out one aged parchment and slid it onto one of her six neatly organized piles, Kleena almost smiled. The busywork was the perfect distraction, occupying enough of her mind that she could relax into the task at hand. It was a welcome reprieve from worrying about the fate of human women or her still-awkward avoidance of Erhan.

She sighed as thoughts of him invaded her mind, trying to push away the image of his face. She hardly knew what she felt when it came to him. Shame? Desire? Confusion? Love? Fear?

He'd tried so many times to approach her since they landed on Nirum, and Kleena couldn't quite explain, even to herself, why she'd hurried away at the sight of his approach.

Maybe next time...

She shook her head, as if willing the thoughts to dissipate, but as she did, a shadow fell across her work. She moved, thinking for a moment that the shadow was hers, but when the darkness didn't shift, Kleena suddenly realized someone else was in the room.

“So, you’re the human girl,” came a hissing voice behind her.

Kleena spun around to see a female Niri blocking the doorway behind her. Something was menacing in her tone and in the way she looked at Kleena through slitted eyes. Her tongue darted out quickly, and Kleena knew this was to taste the air around her, to parse information from her scent in a way a human could never understand.

“And you are?” Kleena’s words teetered between politeness and defense.

The Niri female let out a noise that sounded like a scoff as she slithered into the chamber.

“I’m Janaya,” the female said, leaning down until she was right in Kleena’s face. “And I’m sure you already know what that means.”

Kleena searched her mind for the name, wondering if at some point Erhan had mentioned her. An official maybe? A servant? A family member?

But her mind came up blank. She shook her head a little, confusion on her face. This seemed to enrage the Niri, though, and she suddenly hissed in Kleena’s face. It caused her to stumble back against the desk where she’d been working, scattering her neat piles of documents.

“You’re nothing to him. You know that?” Janaya spat.

Her hood flared ever so slightly as she spoke, which sent a cold shiver running through Kleena. She was all too aware of Janaya’s fangs, of the fact that, if she wanted to, she could sink them into Kleena’s flesh and have her dead in a matter of seconds.

“Erhan only wants you as a vessel for his eggs. Why else would he bring a human

here?”

The words were unexpected, and Kleena tried to follow. But her confusion must have shown on her face. Janaya let out a cruel, mirthless laugh before speaking again.

“Oh, you poor stupid human girl,” she spat with false pity. “You don’t know. Do you? The Niri have been suffering a fertility crisis for generations. It wasn’t until King Gravon mated with Queen Azha and she became gravid that we discovered the solution. Male Nagas can mate with female humans and have nirlings. That’s the reason you and the other human females are here: as egg bearers.”

Janaya’s words lanced through Kleena’s chest, and before she could stop herself, she let out a small cry. This seemed to please the Niri female.

“What? Did you think he loved you?” she crooned, her eyes searching Kleena’s face as if to drink in her suffering. “Don’t flatter yourself. You’re just a surrogate, a breeder.”

The words hurt, but something in Kleena hoped they weren’t true.

Surely that’s not all I am to him?

As she thought over the time she’d spent with Erhan, over their night in the fertility tent...

Her blood ran cold as the words echoed in her mind. The fertility tent. Could it really be? But no, their lovemaking had been too spontaneous, too tender, too real. Kleena hung onto the small certainty she had, hidden though it was, by doubt and fear.

“Erhan wouldn’t do that to me,” she told Janaya, trying to muster the strength to stop her voice from shaking. “We have something real.”

Didn't they? The gifts, the time he was giving her to heal, the looks they occasionally shared...

Janaya gave her a cruel smile, shaking her snake-like head with something akin to glee. "No, you don't," Janaya countered. "If Erhan wanted you for anything other than your womb, why would he be engaged to me?"

"What?" The word came out involuntarily, and Kleena knew as soon as she said it that it was exactly the reaction Janaya hoped for. But she couldn't help herself. She needed to know what this female was talking about. Janaya took her time, smiling as her tail snaked up and began to caress Kleena's arm.

"That's right. My parents have been in negotiations with the imperial family since long before Erhan even met you." Janaya's tail wound its way up toward Kleena's face until finally, it stroked her neck. The proximity made Kleena freeze as much as Janaya's words did. "I'm his fiancée, and there's nothing more to it. Just face it, Erhan is using you for egg bearing and nothing more. We will take your offspring and raise it as our own. You will be nothing but a surrogate."

With this, Janaya brushed a stray strand of hair from Kleena's face before letting her tail retreat.

Kleena hardly knew what to do with the revelation, and as she stood there in stunned silence, something seemed to shift between her and Janaya.

"Well don't look like such a baby," Janaya scoffed, though her voice was softer than before. "If you don't want to be a breeder, don't be a breeder."

"What do you mean?"

Kleena's heart raced, and the weight of dread pooled in her stomach. She had no idea

what she was supposed to do now that she knew the truth.

She was a means to an end for Ebran.

“The best thing for you to do is leave before the prince can cast you aside himself.”

Janaya’s words pierced Kleena’s heart again. The thought of leaving this place, the queen, Ebran... it was all too much.

“But where would I go?” she muttered, more to herself than to Janaya.

The Niri, however, seemed to take her words as a challenge, and whatever actual pity or compassion had flickered into the conversation before was extinguished by her next sentence.

“I don’t care where you go,” she spat. “But I recommend you figure that out soon before I drag you through the mud on Nirum. Ebran is mine, and I’m not about to let some breeder whore get in the way of that. Trust me. It’ll be better for you to leave before I get territorial.”

The way she spoke made it clear she intended to make good on the threat, and Kleena backed up further against the table, terrified of the malicious glare in Janaya’s eyes.

“Is that clear?” the Niri asked, cocking her head and moving closer to Kleena once more. Her tongue flicked out and Kleena was sure she was tasting her fear.

“Yes.” She nodded, unable to do much else.

This seemed to please the Niri, and finally Janaya backed off, giving Kleena enough room to breathe again. After one last menacing glance, Janaya slithered from the room, but her presence and her words lingered long after.

Kleena let out a deep breath, grappling with everything that had just happened. Her mind raced again with memories of that one fateful night of lovemaking, and she tried to understand what had really happened.

They'd had dinner together, laughed, kissed, made love... all things that might suggest a real connection between them. It had certainly felt like a real connection. At least until...

Shocked, Kleena remembered the next morning. Erhan had disappeared without so much as a word. She knew that no man who harbored true feelings for her would do that, but if she was just "a vessel for his eggs," as Janaya had put it, it made perfect sense. Even more so if Erhan was already betrothed to someone else.

The weight of the truth came crashing down upon her, and suddenly Kleena felt sick and panicked. Then she was running, running, running while this new thundering knowledge penetrated every inch of her heart and mind.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Erhan

Erhan sat vigil at Kleena's bedside, his eyes never straying from her still form.

The steady beeping of the monitors was a constant reminder of the scare she had given him. Earlier, he had seen her rushing to the queen's office and had followed her, intending to look at her closer and maybe finally talk.

She had fainted before she could reach her destination, her pallor a stark contrast to the vibrant woman he loved.

What had happened to her? Had something occurred that made her faint? Was the work too taxing?

He touched her face gingerly, his fingers tracing the contours of her cheek.

Why are humans so fragile?

As he sat there, lost in thought, he decided he would talk to the queen later about Kleena's work.

Perhaps she needed a break.

He had been terrified when he saw her collapse. The fear that gripped him was unlike anything he had ever experienced in all his years of battle. It was a reminder of how deeply he cared for her, how much he needed her in his life.

He stared at her unmoving body, suddenly afraid something more serious than a simple fainting spell was wrong with her.

What if she has a human disease we're not equipped to handle? Or something that can't be cured?

Suddenly feeling intensely anxious, he grabbed her hand, caressing it. His tongue flicked out as if trying to sense her condition.

Minutes went by, and she didn't move. Her breathing was normal and her face peaceful, but he couldn't fight off the pit in his stomach.

I can't lose her, not now!

Erhan sat silently, whispering words of encouragement to her while the routine of the medical wing played out in the background.

He found a small amount of solace in the fact that the doctors didn't approach him with any bad news. At least not yet.

When Kleena finally stirred and opened her eyes, relief flooded his senses. Their eyes met, and for a moment, everything else faded away.

His relief was short-lived as Kleena's expression hardened, and she demanded he leave the room. Her words stung and hurt more than any sword wound.

"Kleena, please, let me stay," he begged, his voice filled with desperation.

"Leave, Erhan," she said harshly. "I don't want you here." Her words cut deeper than any weapon. Every word felt like a personal failure, reflecting the chasm he had allowed to form between them. He had tried so hard to protect her, to give her the

space she needed, but it seemed he had only driven her further away.

I shouldn't have avoided her after our night on Jorvla. I should have told her everything about me.

"Not before you tell me how you ended up fainting." His words were gentle but demanding.

She glanced at him but quickly looked away. "I don't know. I guess I didn't eat enough today, or something."

"Skipping one meal doesn't result in a medical visit, Kleena."

She sighed, her hands fidgeting with the blanket.

When she didn't respond after a minute's silence, he cleared his voice. "Are you ill?" Though he tried to remain calm, his concern was obvious.

Kleena looked at him, her expression a mixture of guilt and something he couldn't place. "No, I'm okay. This was just... I fainted, that's all. There's nothing to it."

Unconvinced, he shifted and sighed. "If you won't tell me, at least tell the queen. She will be worried when she finds out you're here."

She stared at her hands, and Erhan could have sworn he saw tears welling in her eyes.

I hate this tension, this feeling of not being welcome.

Before he could say anything else, Kleena spoke. "Will you please leave now?"

His heart sank. He had hoped she would let him stay if she could see that he really

was concerned for her. That he cared.

“Leave, Erhan. I told you I don’t want you here.”

“Kleena, I’m sorry,” he said, his voice breaking. “I never wanted to hurt you. I thought... I thought staying away would be best for you.”

Kleena’s eyes softened slightly, and he saw a flicker of compassion.

Maybe she feels the same way.

In a moment of raw honesty, Erhan began to confess the burden he had silently carried.

It’s time I lower these walls and let her in. Just this once, I think it would be okay to have someone else truly know me.

“I’ve never told you this, but my dam died giving birth to my egg. She was eggbound with her last clutch and I was the only survivor.” His voice broke, his heart heavy with the memories of his childhood.

“I learned about the true events of the day I was born from mean noble children who thought it would be funny to pick on me.”

Kleena listened in silence, her eyes fixed on him.

“Many within the palace... They blamed me. They said I was the cause of her death. Growing up, I believed them. I thought I didn’t deserve love or my own family as punishment for my sin.”

He took a breath before continuing. “As a result, I distanced myself from my sire,

brothers, and the palace. I refused to be the prince. How could I when I killed my own dam? I also decided to never fall in love. I vowed that I would not put myself in a position where I could hurt someone the way I hurt my dam. Her love for me killed her, essentially.”

Kleena’s face softened even more, her eyes reflecting a mix of compassion and love.

It gave him the courage to continue.

“I became a cold person, someone who would shy away from deep connections. It took me years to form some kind of relationship with my sire...by then, he had already mated with the new queen.”

Erhan’s face was expressive while he spoke, something not often seen when interacting with him.

“She was kind and caring, and instantly accepted me. It took me years to reciprocate her familial feelings.”

He looked into Kleena’s eyes. “I never intended to fall in love with you, you know,” he admitted. “But I couldn’t help it. You brought light into my life in a way I never thought possible. I love you, more than I’ve ever loved anyone.”

Erhan went silent.

The anguish was palpable in the air when Kleena finally responded, her voice heavy with sorrow. “Erhan, we can’t be together.”

Her words sent a fresh wave of despair crashing over him. “What? Why not?” he asked, desperation evident in his voice. “Please, tell me what’s keeping us apart.”

Her eyes filled with tears, and she turned her head away, unable to meet his gaze. “I can’t, Erhan. Just... Please understand that we can’t.”

“Why won’t you tell me? Is it something I’ve done? Something I can fix?” His frustration bubbled to the surface.

Why does she continue to reject what we both feel, what seems to be our inevitable truth?

“Because you’re a coward, Erhan,” she said bitterly, her eyes flashing with anger. “You avoid your problems instead of facing them. You think sending flowers and gifts will fix everything, but it doesn’t. You can’t just waltz back into my life and expect me to forgive you.”

Erhan felt a mix of frustration and heartbreak.

Something about the way she spoke seemed off, as if her words were forced. He shook his head, refusing to believe she meant what she said.

“Kleena, please,” he begged, his voice cracking. “This doesn’t feel right... I need to understand. Whatever it is, we can face it together. I just need you to give us a chance.”

She remained silent, her tears falling freely.

He noticed that she refused to look at him, and he reached out to touch her hand. She pulled away, though, the rejection stinging him deeply.

“I just opened up to you in a way I’ve never done with anyone else. I...was that not enough to convince you that I care?” Frustrated, he grabbed her chin to make her look at him. “What else do you want me to do? Beg? Plead? Fight?”

Kleena stared at him, her eyes wide. She didn't look scared but was clearly surprised by Erhan's passionate reaction.

"I-I..." Her voice trailed off, and he let go of her, his tongue flicking out angrily.

She shied away from him again, hugging her knees to her chest. "I didn't ask for this, any of it..."

His heart ached, the truth of her statement hitting him hard. "I know. And I want to make things better for you, so please trust me, Kleena."

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Kleena

Kleena's heart ached to hear Erhan's words, to hear everything she'd secretly hoped for suddenly spoken aloud. But as the words hung in the air between them, she felt a resistance in her heart.

After everything that had happened, how could she truly allow herself to trust him?

"I don't know, Erhan..." she began, shaking her head slightly and turning her gaze away.

From the corner of her eye, she saw him lean forward; saw the pained look on his face at her rejection. It made her breath catch in her throat as she felt the warmth of him emanating toward her.

It was the closest they'd been since returning to Nirum, and it brought a host of warm memories flooding back to her. Memories she'd been trying to keep at bay.

"Kleena," he began, his voice soft and searching. "How else can I say it? I've fallen entirely in love with you. You must know that."

Those last words did it, broke her open and left her finally raw to him. She felt something in her chest open up, and despite her best efforts, it beckoned to her, urging her to let go and fall into the love that she'd been holding back this whole time.

When she met his gaze, she knew she couldn't fight it any more. She knew he meant

what he said and she knew she felt the same.

“Tell me you don’t believe me,” he challenged her and she knew she couldn’t. It was clear Erhan knew that, too.

When he leaned forward to kiss her, that was the last barrier. She let herself fall into the kiss, let herself get lost in the softness of his lips and the warmth of his tongue. She let her hands meet his face, and when he found hers, she realized she was crying. The tears ran down her cheeks, only to be caught by his hands.

A swell of love, of relief and belonging, rose in Kleena’s chest as they kissed. It was as if she’d been waiting for this her whole life. In fact, maybe she had.

For a moment, all her doubts and fears were washed away with that wave of love. It felt good, it felt safe, it felt...

But a sound at the door pulled them suddenly from their reverie. Kleena looked up to see a doctor enter the room, followed closely by the queen.

“Oh, you two!” she exclaimed, clapping her hands together in delight. “I’m so pleased to see you’ve found your way back to each other. I hoped some time apart would give you the space you needed, but I suppose in times like these, the heart cannot be stopped. Well, that makes this news even more exciting!”

“What news?” Kleena asked, her hand still clutching Erhan’s. Her heart pounded as the queen stepped closer, gazing at them both with a look Kleena couldn’t quite place.

“The news that you’re gravid, my dear! Pregnant with Eهران’s nirlings.” The queen announced with a blazing smile.

The words struck Kleena like a punch in the chest. Around her, it seemed as if the world was moving in slow motion, but all she could do was sit frozen and watch it all happening as if to someone else.

The doctor's nods of confirmation, the queen's bubbling congratulations, and Erhan's cry of happiness along with his embrace—it all seemed entirely unreal. Or hyperreal. Kleena couldn't decide.

Even as Erhan's arms enveloped her, Kleena felt as if an icicle was formed in her spine. Something made her sit rigid and still rather than sinking into his embrace.

Because she finally knew the truth.

Janaya's hissing words came rushing back to her: surrogate, breeder, whore. All the relief and joy of Erhan's confession now felt hollow. He had challenged her to doubt his love, and this news brought her up to the challenge.

Kleena's train of thought was broken when Erhan suddenly pulled her close, pressing his lips against hers with a new fervor. But everything in Kleena revolted at the sudden closeness to this male, who she wasn't even sure she knew anymore.

The knowledge that she had been duped consumed her, and suddenly the icicle melted, replaced with the white-hot anger of one who has been fooled in the worst of ways.

“Get off me!” she cried suddenly, wrenching herself from his embrace and pushing him back.

The cries of celebration that had echoed around the room fell into a stunned silence. The only sound was Kleena's panting breath. Soon, though, the gasping for air became thick and wet and erratic.

Her panting had turned into sobbing.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Erhan questioned her, but she couldn’t answer.

Instead, she buried her head into her hands, overwhelmed by everything that was happening to her. She had fallen for this male, only to learn that he wasn’t who she thought he was. And now she was pregnant—gravid—with his alien children.

What did that even mean? And why was he playing these games with her? If she was supposed to be a breeder, why did he play as if he loved her? At least with the Jorvlens, she was under no illusions. Here, she was still effectively a sex slave. She just didn’t know it until this moment.

“You’re using me,” she finally choked out between sobs.

When she managed to look at Erhan, she saw only confusion in his eyes. It made her angry to think, even now, he would continue to deceive her.

“I’m not going to fall for this,” she continued, still sobbing as she spoke. “I want nothing to do with you, with or without the baby in the picture.”

Instinctively, her hand shot to her belly, and for the first time, the reality truly sank in. She was with child. The thought of a new life growing inside her shocked her to her core, and as much as she loved the thought of being a mother, she dreaded the life this child would endure if she allowed Erhan to keep using her as he had been.

No, she thought. The best thing is to get us both as far from Erhan as possible.

The thought crossed her mind that, as the child of a prince, that would be much easier said than done. But she brushed it aside. She would find a way out, just as Janaya had foretold.

The thought of the Niri woman suddenly jolted Kleena, and she almost flinched even at the memory of her. At the time, Janaya had scared her, but now Kleena found something unexpected creeping into her chest. She found, to her surprise, that she actually felt sorry for the Niri woman.

Now that she knew Erhan was only using her for breeding, Janaya's jealousy was understandable. What could be more insulting to a barren woman than to be replaced by another?

It made Kleena shudder. Despite Janaya's threats and malice, Kleena couldn't bring herself to cast her aside, the same way she would be cast aside by Erhan the moment their child was born. She had more integrity than that.

"Kleena," Erhan was saying, taking her hand and squeezing it gently. "What's going on? What are you saying?"

He seemed to be truly confused, and for a second, Kleena wanted to believe this had just been a huge misunderstanding. But she couldn't possibly see a way for that to be true. As much as her heart ached to do it, she pulled her hand out of Erhan's, so deliberately that he didn't try to take it again.

She looked Erhan in the eye, her voice resolute as the sobs died away.

"I won't be part of your adultery," she told him firmly, even though the thought of leaving him still broke her heart. "You have a fiancée. You should be ashamed."

The words were out now, Kleena reasoned, although it felt like a black hole had opened up in her chest. She knew she couldn't live her life begging for the scraps of Erhan's affection.

Even though she'd fallen for him, the life of a sex slave at worst and concubine at

best was enough to crush any hope she might have had left that they would be together.

The thought of the child in her womb bolstered her decision. She had been brought to Nirum to give Erhan a child, but now she was sure the child was hers, and hers alone.

Erhan

“Fiancée?” Erhan uttered, hardly believing what he was hearing. “What fiancée?”

He gazed into Kleena’s eyes, trying to figure out if this was some kind of joke, but the pain in her expression was all too real, as were the tears that were still rolling silently down her cheeks.

Erhan’s chest felt as if it might burst. He’d finally told Kleena what she truly meant to him, finally told her the truth about his past, and then, miraculously, discovered the woman he loved was pregnant with his child. He had never felt such elation or happiness.

But it had all come crashing down so suddenly, and Erhan had no idea why.

“Kleena, what are you talking about?” His voice was gentle but searching, and for a second, he saw a flicker of doubt in Kleena’s otherwise resolute gaze.

For a moment, Kleena remained silent, her jaw locked, and Erhan glanced back to the queen for guidance. She met him with a frown, concern obvious on her face. Out of the corner of his eye, Erhan saw the doctor slip discreetly out of the room.

All hints of celebration had dissipated now, and when Erhan looked back, he found Kleena’s expression was still set, her dark eyebrows furrowed, her mouth a thin straight line, and her eyes holding back a flood of unspoken pain and anger.

“Please,” he ventured again, leaning forward ever so slightly. “I really don’t know

what you're talking about."

For a moment, he wasn't sure if Kleena would speak, but finally, she let out a small strangled sound and opened her mouth.

"Janaya," she said the word like it was poison, but it meant nothing to Erhan and he shook his head softly.

Kleena either didn't see the gesture or didn't believe it because when she spoke again, her tone was accusatory.

"When were you going to tell me about her?"

Erhan shook his head again, at a loss for words. "I'm sorry, Kleena, but I really don't know..."

His words trailed off as he struggled to understand what was happening. At this, Kleena appeared frustrated, sitting up in bed and staring at him, then at the queen, then back at him with a look of indignance.

"She told me everything, Erhan," she said. "That she's been betrothed to you since before you and I even met. That her parents are in talks with the imperial family. That I'm nothing but a... a breeder."

All of this was news to Erhan, and that last part, especially, pained him. He shook his head emphatically.

"Kleena, no. How could you think that?"

"Fine, a concubine then," she interjected, crossing her arms and looking away. "Whatever you want to call it, I don't want it."

Erhan was finally starting to piece together what Kleena was implying, and the thought horrified him.

“I promise you, I am not betrothed to anyone,” he insisted, leaning forward to try and enter Kleena’s line of sight. “I’ve never met anyone called Janaya, and you are definitely not a breeder, or a concubine, or anything like that. Please believe me.”

At this, Kleena turned her head slightly, but it wasn’t to look at Erhan. It was to look at the queen.

Queen Azha stepped forward then, placing her long, slender fingers upon the end of Kleena’s bed.

“He’s telling the truth,” she assured, her voice warm and gentle. “There’s no betrothal. Who is this Janaya, and what exactly did she say?”

At her words, Kleena’s face softened slightly and Erhan felt a glimmer of hope shining through the darkness. He knew he’d done nothing wrong but his tether to Kleena felt so delicate, so fragile, that he held his breath as she spoke. It was as if he feared any sudden move would scare her away forever.

“She came to see me in your chambers,” Kleena admitted, the tears drying on her cheeks now. “She told me about the fertility crisis and said the only way for Niris to breed was with human women. That’s why I—and the other human women—were brought here.”

She glanced briefly at Erhan, and he could see the deep pain in her eyes as she said the words. All of him wanted to interject, and he almost did, but a soft gesture from the queen told him to wait. He knew she was right, but the thought of Kleena believing that lie for another second broke his heart.

“She said she was engaged to you,” Kleena continued, addressing him directly now. “And that it would be best for me to leave before I was discarded.”

On this last word, her voice broke a little, and a single tear rolled down her cheek. Instinctively, Erhan reached forward to brush it away, but Kleena flinched at his touch. It cut him right to his core.

Queen Azha spoke quickly, cutting through the awkward moment with grace. “And she said her parents were in talks with our family over this so-called betrothal?”

Kleena turned back to her and nodded. The queen hummed thoughtfully at this before speaking again.

“That settles the mystery then,” she explained with a look that exuded both authority and reassurance. “There is no such engagement. From time to time, we receive letters from nobles and merchants, offering their sons and daughters as potential spouses for members of the royal family. We never take any of them seriously, of course, especially not for grown Niri like Prince Erhan.”

She tutted and shot Erhan a look of respect. “It sounds as if some family got ahead of themselves, filling their daughter’s mind with promises they were in no position to make. If she was in the palace grounds, she’s probably employed here, giving her the illusion of proximity to the prince. I almost feel sorry for her.”

Erhan watched intently as Kleena’s cheeks regained a little of the color they’d lost during their earlier exchange, and when he reached out to take her hand, she didn’t pull away this time.

“Now,” continued the queen, delicately. “I’ll leave you two to talk this over. For your sake and the sake of the babe.”

She shot them one last meaningful glance before gliding out of the room.

“What the queen says is true, Kleena,” he insisted once she’d left, finally catching Kleena’s eye. In her gaze, he saw confusion but also something he hadn’t seen before. Hope.

“I meant it when I told you I love you. You’re the only woman I’ve ever loved, and the only woman I ever want.”

“What about the breeding...” Kleena ventured, her voice wavering slightly.

Erhan shook his head. “That’s not what you’re here for,” he told her, squeezing her hand. “You, nor the other human females. Though, I have to admit I’m both terrified and thrilled at the thought of you having my nirling. And the part about the fertility crisis is true. But, Kleena, you’re here because I love you and because, from what I can tell, you feel the same way. Don’t you?”

Erhan held his breath again as he waited for the reply he hoped would come. Finally, Kleena let out a sigh as if the last of her walls were coming down.

“Yes,” she admitted, tears forming again. “I do. I love you.”

It was as if he was breathing fresh air again after being on the brink of drowning. Kleena’s words and the look on her face told him the turmoil was over. That she loved him. She loved him. She loved him.

Pulling her close, Erhan let his tail snake up the bed and wrap gently around one of Kleena’s calves. It was as if he couldn’t possibly get close enough.

“I love you so much, Kleena,” he told her. “I never thought I’d find love. I never thought I’d have a family. Nor that I deserved either of those things. I’m terrified of

hurting you, or of losing you, the same way I did my mother. But for the first time in my life, I'm willing to work against those fears."

Kleena nodded gently as Erhan spoke, but when he finally uttered the question that had been in his heart for some time, Kleena was struck still.

"Will you be my mate?"

Kleena's eyes widened, and as he waited for the answer, Erhan's heart thundered. He had never wanted someone so much, nor had he ever opened himself like this to another. But he knew, more than anything, he wanted to be with her.

Finally, a broad smile spread over Kleena's face as she nodded.

"Yes," she whispered, the words coming out as a laugh of incredulity. "Yes, I'll be your mate."

Every fiber in Erhan's body celebrated as he pulled Kleena close, pressing his lips against hers. He knew he had finally found love, and it was as terrifying as it was glorious.

He never wanted anything else.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Kleena

The month that followed the unexpected news of her gravid state passed in a blissful haze for Kleena. Her health flourished along with the new life she carried, and the palace buzzed with preparations for the grand engagement celebration.

She was constantly smiling, though in private moments, she could be seen chewing her lower lip.

She was about to step into a role she had never imagined for herself, and the enormity of it all sometimes took her breath away.

This is everything I've ever wanted. No, it's better than I could even have dreamed, and the thought of my dreams coming true is scary!

She chuckled nervously, fussing with her hair.

It was time.

Under the high vaulted ceilings of the royal hall, Erhan coiled tall, an air of anticipation about him as he awaited Kleena's entrance. He looked regal and confident, and the way his people looked at him made it clear they admired and respected him.

His eyes constantly darted to the grand entrance, his tongue flicking out every so often. As Kleena walked into the hall, every eye turned toward her.

She emerged, radiant and elegant, her hand resting gently on her slightly rounded belly. The flowy green dress she wore highlighting her pregnancy.

A soft murmur of admiration filled the hall, and Kleena could see the warmth in the eyes of those gathered.

When she finally reached Erhan, he took her hand, their fingers intertwining instantly.

Erhan looks so handsome, but I'm sure I can see a nervousness about him. It's adorable.

Their shared smiles spoke volumes. The love between them was visible to all present, an unspoken bond that everyone could see.

Before the ceremony began, Erhan leaned in to whisper to her, "Janaya is confined to her residence," he informed her softly. "Her punishment is social isolation, imposed with a grace befitting the Niri regard for female nobility."

Kleena felt a sense of relief wash over her.

Oh, thank goodness. That whole situation was a damn heavy burden that soured my happiness. But I didn't want her to be thrown in jail or something.

She nodded and smiled at Erhan, her eyes shining.

The engagement ceremony commenced with the king and queen presiding with regal benevolence. Their happiness for Erhan and Kleena was evident in their approving nods and the warmth in their eyes.

As the declaration of their union echoed through the hall, it was met with a chorus of

cheers and applause.

Toasts were made in honor of the couple, the clinking of glasses and the swell of music encapsulating the festive mood that had taken over the court.

This all feels so unreal. Surreal, yet wonderfully real at the same time.

Throughout the celebration, Erhan and Kleena's hands remained intertwined.

It was a silent symbol of their commitment, a silent promise to face whatever came their way together.

They were showered with well-wishes and blessings from their subjects and family alike, each one adding to the warmth and love that enveloped them.

The celebration carried on into the night, the kingdom rejoicing in the love and the forthcoming heir of their beloved Prince Erhan and his chosen mate, Kleena.

They danced through the night, lost in their own world despite the hundreds of eyes watching them.

I could spend eternity in his arms, and it wouldn't be long enough...

As the night wore on, Kleena found herself gazing into Erhan's eyes, her heart full.

She could see the future they would build together, the challenges they would face and overcome.

She felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the path that had led her to this moment.

Later in the evening, the queen approached Kleena, her eyes soft with maternal warmth. “You look beautiful, my dear,” she said, her voice filled with pride. “And you are carrying the future of our kingdom. How do you feel?”

She smiled, her hand instinctively going to her belly. “I feel... blessed, Your Majesty. This child is a gift, and I am grateful for all the support I’ve received.”

The queen nodded, placing a gentle hand on Kleena’s shoulder. “You are a strong woman. And you will make a wonderful mother and a magnificent princess. Remember, you are never alone. We are all here for you.”

Tears filled Kleena’s eyes as she looked at the queen. “Thank you, Your Majesty. Your kindness means the world to me.”

As the queen moved on to speak with other guests, Erhan pulled Kleena close. “Are you all right?” he asked, concern flickering in his eyes.

She nodded, a soft smile playing on her lips. “I am, Erhan. I truly am.”

He kissed her forehead, his love for her evident in every touch, every glance.

“I can’t wait to start this journey with you,” he whispered. “You’ve given me more than I ever dreamed possible.”

They continued to dance, the music and laughter around them creating a perfect backdrop to their happiness.

Our future seems so bright, I’m almost tempted to think it’s too good to be true...

Throughout the night, Kleena observed the court and the people around her. She saw the genuine happiness on their faces, the acceptance they had for her despite her

human origins.

It was a testament to the kingdom's capacity for love and unity, and it made her heart swell with pride.

Erhan remained by her side, his hand never leaving hers.

She could see the pride and joy in his eyes whenever he looked at her, and it made her feel cherished and valued.

As the evening progressed, they were approached by various nobles and dignitaries, each offering their congratulations and blessings.

Kleena handled every interaction with grace, her confidence growing with each passing moment.

She was no longer the unsure woman who had arrived at the palace; she was a future princess, a mother-to-be, and a woman in love.

One particularly touching moment came when a young girl, perhaps no more than eight years old, approached them with a bouquet of exotic flowers. "These are for you, Princess Kleena," she said shyly, her cheeks pink with excitement.

Kleena knelt down to accept the flowers, her heart melting at the child's innocence. "Thank you, sweetheart," she said warmly. "They are beautiful, just like you."

The girl beamed, her eyes shining with admiration. "I want to be just like you when I grow up," she said earnestly.

Kleena felt a lump form in her throat. "What a wonderful compliment," she said softly, her voice filled with emotion. "But remember, you are already special, and

you should always be who you really are inside.”

As the girl glided off to join her family, Erhan squeezed Kleena’s hand. “You’re amazing with nirlings,” he said, his voice filled with pride.

Kleena smiled, a tear slipping down her cheek. “I can’t wait to raise our nirling together,” she said, her voice trembling with emotion.

The night continued to unfold in a whirlwind of joy and celebration. As the festivities began to wind down, Erhan led her to a quiet part of the garden.

The moonlight bathed them in a soft glow, and the night air was filled with the scent of blooming flowers.

“I love you, Kleena,” he said, his voice breaking the comfortable silence. “More than words can express.”

She looked at him, her heart overflowing with love. “I love you, too, Erhan. And I am so grateful for everything we have.”

He leaned in, capturing her lips in a tender kiss filled with promise and hope, a seal on the love they shared.

When they finally pulled away, they rested their foreheads together, a sense of peace settling over them.

As they sat there, wrapped in each other’s arms, Kleena knew that no matter what challenges lay ahead, they would face them together.

Their love was strong, their bond unbreakable.

With a contented sigh, Kleena nestled closer to Erhan, his hand resting protectively over her belly.

She realized the reality of new life within her, a reminder of the beautiful journey that lay ahead.

As the first light of dawn began to break over the horizon, the two rose to make their way back to the palace.

They walked hand in hand, ready to embrace whatever the future held. Together, they were unstoppable, their love a beacon of hope and strength.

The palace, still glowing from the night's festivities, welcomed them back with open arms.

And as they entered their new life together, Kleena couldn't help but feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude.

She was home, she was loved, and she was ready to face the future with Erhan by her side.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Erhan

The palace gardens shimmered with iridescent flowers, vibrant pink-blue grass, and glittering pools of turquoise water. At least they did to Erhan. For the rest of his and Kleena's thirty or so guests, the gardens looked slightly different.

Whatever they're seeing, though, Erhan thought, I'm certain it's beautiful since that's what they keep telling me.

"Prince Erhan, this place is so magical!"

He turned to see Calla grinning at him, transformed from the humble villager he and Kleena had left behind to a noble beauty in her formal wedding garments. By her side, Marcus beamed in his equally impressive formal dress before throwing himself at Erhan's middle in a hug that caught him off guard.

"Marcus!" Calla scolded, tugging at his shoulder. "That's no way to greet a prince!"

"It's the perfect way to greet an old friend, though." Erhan laughed, hugging the young boy back. "And you don't have to call me Prince Erhan now. You never did before."

"You were wanted before," Calla told him truthfully as Marcus finally extricated himself from the hug.

"You two are practically family," Erhan assured them both. "Honestly, without you, Kleena and I wouldn't be here. In more ways than one."

Calla gave Erhan another shy look but he pulled her in for a hug anyway and she relaxed into the prince's grip.

"Congratulations, to both of you," she told him. "Speaking of which, where is the bride?"

As Erhan pulled out of the hug, he grinned. "Apparently human mating rituals dictate that I'm not allowed to see her until the ceremony. We've tried to pay homage to both our customs."

Calla went to answer, but suddenly the hiss of a rainstick quietened the small, intimate crowd and signaled the beginning of the ceremony. Along with the other men, Erhan began to snake his way around the clearing. The rainstick, carried by Erhan's brother, King Garon, shook and shuddered in rhythm, and soon the men began to hiss in the traditional mating ritual opening.

Soon, the women joined in, forming a larger circle around that of the men and moving in the opposite direction. They hissed in sync, the non-Naga guests mimicking the sound as best they could with their own tongues.

As the circles wound on and on, Erhan found his eyes drawn again and again to the curtains that closed off a small portion of the garden. He knew that any moment now, they would part to reveal his beloved mate.

Softly, slowly, the melodious tinkling of a harp joined the hissing. This was Kleena's tradition, and it mingled with the Naga's sibilant song in a way that reminded Erhan of water rushing over rocks.

As the hissing reached a crescendo, so did the harp, and at its peak, the curtains were pulled aside. Erhan almost forgot what he was doing as he gazed at his mate-to-be. She was stunning, dressed in her people's traditional white lace dress, clutching a

bouquet of flowers that sparkled. More flowers were threaded through her curly chestnut hair, which had been pulled up into an intricate braid.

Erhan felt his entire being erupt into joy at the sight of her, and as she walked up the aisle demarcated by a rich purple carpet, Erhan thought his chest might burst right there and then.

It wasn't just the sight of her . It was the sight of her belly, a small bump beginning to show beneath her dress where her hand rested lovingly. Erhan kept his eyes on her as he circled, hissing his tune to her and to their unborn child—a promise that vibrated through him as he slithered.

As Kleena walked, the Naga and other guests continued to circle until they parted to welcome her inside. Erhan broke off from the other men then, joining her in the center of the maelstrom until finally, with a single resolute rattle of the rainstick, the party fell into an abrupt silence.

King Garon and Queen Azha joined them in the center, with the rest of the guests now moving soundlessly around them, the circles winding continuously.

“My dear brother,” Garon began, gazing at Erhan with love and respect. “You have found your chosen mate. What is her name?”

“Kleena Marcson,” he replied for the whole gathering to hear.

A round of hisses signaled the confirmation that his loved ones accepted his claim to her.

“Dear Kleena,” the queen said once the sound had died down. “You have found your chosen mate. What is his name?”

Kleena gazed at Erhan as the circles moved behind her. “Prince Erhan of Nirum.”

Another round of sibilant confirmation rang through the garden’s clearing.

“And now, in the human custom,” Erhan’s brother announced. “Prince Erhan and Kleena will exchange vows.”

The circles continued to spiral around them as Erhan readied himself to speak. He hadn’t known exactly what he was supposed to say at first, but when he’d sat down to write his vows, he found that they came easily to him. He only had to tell Kleena what he’d spent a lifetime trying to avoid.

“Kleena,” he began, taking her hands and looking into her eyes. “You have broken through me and entered my heart, despite my best efforts to resist you. You are strong and intelligent, brave and kind. You are everything I never dared to hope for.

“I have fallen completely and irrevocably in love with you, and everything about you tells me you’re my mate—both chosen and fate. I promise to spend every day of my life making sure you know that. I promise to love you and our nirling with all of me. I promise never to let you down.”

Another hiss of approval came from the circle, as Erhan waited for Kleena to speak.

“Erhan,” she began, smiling in a way that made his heart swell. “Our fates were intertwined from the very first moment we met—the moment you saved me. Since then, I’ve had the privilege of knowing you, of seeing the parts of you that no one else sees. I love all of them. I can’t wait to be the mother of your nirling, to share my life with you, and to love you more and more every day.

“I can’t imagine a life without you, and I promise I will love you, support you, and cherish you for the rest of my days.”

The circle hissed once more, and finally, the king and queen gave their blessing.

Erhan stretched out his tail in the traditional ritualistic way, wrapping it gently around Kleena's body. Its tip snaked up and around her until it supported the nape of her neck, and the rest of him was drawn up close to her.

"I love you," he whispered, letting his forehead rest against hers.

"I love you, too," she replied, and Erhan felt the happiness of those words flow through him.

When his lips brushed Kleena's, it was like a spark suddenly ignited. Their first kiss as chosen mates sealed their bond, and their guests let out a round of cheers, whoops, hisses, and rattles to celebrate the union.

When Erhan finally unwound himself from Kleena, he found that she was absolutely glowing.

"That was..." she uttered, her hands still resting against Erhan's chest.

He raised his eyebrows, waiting for her to find the right words, but she couldn't.

Finally she shook her head and smiled up at him. "I'm just so happy."

"Good," he replied, bringing his hand up to stroke her cheek. "I want you to always be happy."

"I think I will be with you," Kleena told him before glancing down at her belly. "And with our baby."

Around them, the guests were beginning to approach them to offer their

congratulations. But even as he greeted them and thanked them for their presence, Erhan always kept one eye on Kleena. Truly, he couldn't look away.

The guests remarked on it, with Marcus even teasing him about his “girlfriend,” but Erhan didn't care. He would only have eyes for her, as long as he lived.

As the sky overhead turned purple with the evening light the ceremony shifted to what Kleena called a “reception.” Guests talked and laughed while Erhan and Kleena danced together. They began with a waltz—something Erhan had taken great pains to learn in the month since he'd proposed. It wasn't easy for a Niri without legs, but as he twirled her around the dancefloor, he knew Kleena didn't care. She was clearly thrilled just to be there with him, and so was he.

As the ceremony died down, though, Erhan knew that the next part of the mating ritual would be his favorite. It was, luckily, a custom shared by humans and Niri alike.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Kleena

Erhan's lips pressed against Kleena's as his hands wrapped around her waist, pulling her closer to him. She arched her body against him, leaning into the kiss as he walked them back toward the bed.

He gently laid her down and slid his hands beneath her dress, lifting it over her head. Kleena's breath caught as the moment wrapped around her, making the love she felt for Erhan grow even more.

It was their first time as husband and wife, as mates, and Kleena's heart raced with anticipation as Erhan slid her panties down her legs.

"I love you," Erhan murmured as he leaned over to press kisses along her chest.

"Promise me you'll never leave," Kleena replied as she arched into his touch.

"Never."

Kleena reached down and lifted Erhan's shirt up, pulling it over his head as her hands slid down his stomach to the top of his lower covering. His breath hitched as she undid the button and impatiently pushed the fabric from around his hips.

Erhan's kiss deepened as he felt Kleena's warm skin beneath his fingertips, her heartbeat racing against his palms. He moved lower, kissing down her neck and collarbone and sending shivers along her spine.

His lips trailed further southward, toward the perfectly rounded mounds of her breasts. As he reached them, he gently grazed his teeth against her sensitive skin, causing her to gasp softly.

The sound sent a thrill through him, and he took one nipple into his mouth, flicking it with his tongue before suckling softly while his other hand teased the other one. Kleena moaned in delight as she arched her back off the bed, digging her nails into the sheets in pleasure.

The smell of their mating bond filled the air around them, making their heartbeats synchronize even more. His hands traced circles around her stomach before sliding lower to caress the wetness between her legs.

She was ready for him; eager for their first time together as man and wife. His scent was intoxicating, and she wanted nothing more than to be consumed by every inch of him tonight. With nervous anticipation, he slowly pushed apart her folds

Kleena's eagerness grew as Erhan's fingers brushed against her sensitive clit, sending shivers of pleasure through her body. She couldn't help but moan louder into his kiss, pressing her body closer to his. The feeling of his fingers circling around her was almost too much to bear, and when he finally pushed one inside her, she gasped and bucked upward, her hips meeting his hand with each movement.

His tongue lapped at the other nipple, pulling it between his teeth gently before releasing it with a pop. The sensation sent shockwaves of pleasure coursing through Kleena's body as she writhed beneath him. She bit her lip, trying to stifle the sounds escaping from her throat but unable to contain the soft mewling cries that accompanied each thrust of his finger inside her. She arched her back off the bed, grinding against his hand as he explored her wetness.

Erhan's other hand moved lower, teasing circles around her entrance before traveling

to rub against the sensitive flesh on either side of her clit. Kleena whimpered into their kiss, her fingers digging into his shoulders as she pushed herself closer to the pleasure he was giving her.

As their tongues danced in a tangle, Kleena felt his fingers delve deeper into her slick heat. They twisted and turned, finding her G-spot with precision.

His fingers found a rhythm that made her toes curl and her heart race.

She could feel herself getting closer to the edge, but she didn't want it to end. She wanted this moment with him forever. The feeling of his lips on her skin was like none other; each touch sending shockwaves of pleasure coursing through her body.

His thumb brushed against her swollen clit, circling it teasingly before pressing firmly against it. Kleena cried out in ecstasy as wave after wave rolled over her, washing through her body in a tidal wave of pleasure. Her hips bucked upward, meeting his thrusts with eager desperation. The taste of him was addictive, salty and sweet, like ambrosia from the gods themselves.

She could feel his cocks pressing against her entrance now, ready to claim what was rightfully his—her.

Erhan pulled away slowly, gazing down at Kleena's flushed face and irresistible body before lining himself up at her entrance. He pushed inside slowly, inch by slow inch until he was fully sheathed within her warmth. Their eyes locked as he leaned down to capture her lips once more.

Kleena's breath hitched as she felt Erhan fill her completely. He was so big with both of his cocks inside her, but also so right. She moaned into the kiss, relishing the feeling of him stretching her and claiming her body as his own. She wrapped her legs around him, holding him close as they rocked their hips together in perfect

synchrony. His hips met hers, driving deep inside her over and over again.

Every thrust was answered by a soft gasp from her lips, every grind a moan of encouragement. The friction between them was exquisite, sending electrical pulses through both their bodies with each movement.

His free hand roamed across her stomach, tracing patterns over the soft skin beneath his fingertips before moving up to cup her breast once more.

He pinched the nipple between his thumb and forefinger, tugging gently as he drove into her harder. Kleena mewled into their kiss, pushing herself up to meet each thrust. Their bodies slapped together in a primal rhythm that seemed to echo through the room. The bed creaked beneath them as they made love, filling the air with the sounds of desire and need.

She could feel his erection throbbing against her inner walls; she was tight around him, taking him deeper with every thrust. And when she thought it couldn't get any better, he picked up the pace, slamming into her faster and harder.

“Erhan!” she screamed as she rocked from the force of his thrusts.

His mouth captured hers again, his tongue sliding in and thrusting in time with his hips. The sensation of being filled to the brim with him was incredible; she couldn't believe how perfectly they fit together.

Kleena felt her inner walls clenching around him, milking him for every last drop of pleasure she could get. She could feel her climax building rapidly, but she didn't want it to rush. She wanted to savor this moment and every second with Erhan. His skin felt hot against hers, his muscles tense beneath hers as he held on to her waist tightly.

His hand left her breast and trailed down her stomach, over the curve of her hip, and

then back up to squeeze her ass firmly. Kleena moaned, arching into the touch as if begging for more.

He gave it to her without a word, slapping her bottom lightly before slamming back into her once more. With a soft cry of delight, she met his hips with her own movements, their bodies grinding together so tightly that sweat began to bead on their skin.

Their harsh breaths mingled together as he picked up the pace even further; each thrust knocked the air from their lungs in unison. Kleena gripped at his shoulders, digging her nails into the flesh just enough to feel him shudder beneath her touch. The mattress groaned under them as they became one being in motion.

Kleena felt her orgasm building again, tears forming in her eyes as they rolled back. With one last fierce thrust, Erhan buried himself to the hilt inside her, causing a white-hot rush of pleasure to course through her veins.

His fingers dug into her hips, clawing at the soft flesh as he pulled away from the kiss to whisper against her earlobe.

“I love you,” he groaned. “I’ll never leave you.” He slammed into her again and again, faster now and harder than before.

The bed shook beneath them as if it was caught in a storm while their bodies were at its mercy.

Kleena gripped the sheets, biting her lip so hard she tasted copper when she felt him swell inside of her. He growled low in his throat and pressed his forehead against hers, breath hot against her face as he pinned her down with his strength.

She felt her world explode in a symphony of pleasure that engulfed her senses as their

two orgasms erupted in unison. Kleena's inner walls milked him with fierce contractions, squeezing him tightly, holding on to his flesh like a vise grip while she let out a long, high-pitched moan that echoed throughout the room.

Erhan's body tensed, his hips jerking forward powerfully as he released himself deep into her womb, filling her up with his cum. His mouth found hers once more as they both came down from their peaks of ecstasy, their tongues tangling together in a messy tango of intimacy.

Their breathing became heavy and ragged, their chests rising and falling rapidly as if drowning in each other's touch. Their sweat mixed together on their skin, creating a slick and hot mosaic that glistened under the flickering candlelight.

The scent of sex and more sex filled the room—sweet and musky like honeysuckle blooming on a summer morning. The bedsprings creaked under the force of their passionate movements.

As they slowly found their rhythm again, Erhan leaned down to place kisses along Kleena's jawline, neck, and collarbone before looking deeply into her eyes.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

Erhan

Crystalline waterfalls fell down to the river in a prism of colors as Erhan's hand tightly gripped Kleena's beside the river bank. Pure pink hues splashed into orange and violet swirling currents, wildlife gorging on the large, discombobulated fish.

"It's beautiful," Kleena said, biting into a sliver of the turquoise bread roll. "I never even knew this place existed. Back home, we'd call this a drug trip."

Erhan chuckled, still excited to show her the vast and incalculable universe, protecting her from everything that might harm her.

It might have been their honeymoon, but Erhan just saw it as the start of something greater. Now, he had somebody with whom to share the cosmos.

"This is just the beginning," Erhan reassured her, looking down at the bulge of her stomach.

We're going to teach them so much together.

He could feel the water spray from the river splashing up on them as they lay under the maple trees, cuddled up under a blanket. The water here had calming properties—relaxing enough to forget trip itineraries, policy documents, and diplomatic missions. They had been carried away to a moment in time, divorced from their every worry.

Yet the wild sequence of events that had brought them together wouldn't stop playing

in Erhan's mind.

As he fell asleep under the trees, their leaves rustling together in the cool windy breeze, he remembered their story together. He remembered meeting Kleena for the first time—how striking she was to him for no explicable reason. He remembered the auction house and the series of explosions that had brought them into the city, chasing a child to find safety in a small village.

And he remembered how her nose wrinkled up the first time she'd heard Calla's proposition, faking a marriage to him to keep her cover.

Erhan heard a loud, roaring noise, and he shook awake suddenly.

"Shh," Kleena said, standing over him with a piece of spiky fruit. "You were snoring so loudly, you woke yourself up."

Erhan shook his head.

"How long was I out?"

But as he looked up at the vast emerald sky, which had turned into a deep jade, he had his answer.

"We missed our check-in time," Kleena said. "I'm sure it's not a big deal."

Erhan grumbled.

"But that's okay," Kleena continued. "Because I'd rather be with you here, next to the river, than in some stuffy hotel anyway."

Erhan smirked.

“It was an expensive booking,” he said, “and we could have been attacked.”

Kleena chuckled.

“Even the urosa are too at peace to bother eating us,” she said, gesturing toward the large, round balls of fur that plucked the feather pollus from the banks.

Retrieving their luggage, they found their way back from the river. The more they walked, the more signs they saw of businesses and disgruntled tourists. Erhan could feel Kleena’s apprehension upon seeing the bright and towering neon signs, her steps becoming more hesitant.

Perhaps they should have stayed by the river and lurked in the wilderness their entire honeymoon. Maybe later they could ditch the hotel room and find a nice ocean cabin to escape.

Then as Erhan reached the hotel, he remembered one of the downsides of traveling abroad. The hotel stretched toward the sky, its many windows shimmering with hints of gold and silver, as fireworks went off outside the building.

He held Kleena’s hand tightly, never wanting to let her leave his sight—especially with the nirling she carried, something the criminal underbelly of the planet Yenus wouldn’t understand.

The hotel lobby was a vast indoor arboretum, the leaves golden and falling to the floor slowly. Erhan knew it was just an effect, and the leaves wouldn’t actually start falling for another three months.

“Prince Erhan!”

The hotel clerk pointed as he entered the room, despite Erhan trying to dodge as

much attention as possible. He smiled as he approached the front desk, turning his back to the crowd seated at tables, eating their dinners.

The entire room grew focused upon him. He'd thought that, in all of the galaxies, avoiding attention would not be this difficult. But the tentacles affixed to the clerk's mandible told Erhan he was from Zebbin-5, one of the moons he had saved from the Sideans.

"Hello," Erhan said, trying not to attract more attention to his already blushing wife. "We're running a bit late for our reservation. Apologies about that."

"Oh, no problem at all, Prince Erhan," the clerk said. "Why didn't you tell us who you were? If you'd just done that, we could have offered you a solid discount."

Erhan smiled meekly.

"Do you remember who I am?" the clerk asked, his mouth opening to reveal a large, toothy maw.

Erhan turned to Kleena, expecting to see extreme frustration in her face. But she actually appeared amused by this development.

So Erhan decided he'd play along.

"I'm sorry," Erhan said. "I don't."

"Dinnel," the clerk said, as though it might offer Erhan a hint. "That's my name."

Erhan grimaced, not sure what to say. He'd saved many people, and even more knew who he was.

“I’ve cleaned up a little bit since you saw me last,” Dinnel said. “And it’s been several years too, so I’m older. My species ages incredibly fast.”

“Oh, just stop teasing us,” Kleena interjected, surprising Erhan. “Who are you, Dinnel?”

Dinnel smiled. “Is this your new wife? She’s a keeper.”

Erhan nodded. “On that, we agree.”

And he looked fondly back at Kleena. He’d been so stressed out about showing her a good time that he forgot how lucky he was, if only for a moment.

“You saved us from slavers and the coup, and then your king offered us a temporary place to stay in your palace,” Dinnel said. “But I was just a child back then. I think I annoyed the hell out of you.”

Realization dawned on Erhan suddenly.

“Were you the one who kept poking my tail with that little sword thing?”

Dinnel laughed, something, which despite the context, proved slightly unsettling. The Zebbes were often discriminated against for their monstrous-like appearances, their many rows of teeth and lashing tentacles driving people to consider them monsters. This had historically been used to justify much of the mistreatment they had faced, despite their being one of the oldest races in the universe.

“Sorry about that again,” Dinnel still chuckled.

“Please don’t apologize,” Erhan replied. “You were just a child. There is nothing to forgive.”

Erhan finished typing on the interface, as the screen showed their reservation, marked “free of charge.”

“I hope you don’t mind, but I offered you an exception for your service to the universe,” Dinnel said. “Your stay is free, on us.”

Erhan could feel the frustration boiling up suddenly. It wasn’t that he didn’t appreciate the gesture. He just knew that businesses such as these depended on them, and their room was one of the priciest in the entire building.

“I couldn’t possibly impose,” Erhan countered.

But Dinnel shook his head. “It’s already been done,” Dinnel said. “Think nothing of it.”

Erhan didn’t want to minimize the appreciation he felt. But his family could have easily afforded the room.

Amusingly, he wondered if his family’s vast wealth might have been due in part to instances like this, where services were discounted or made free in return for others’ appreciation.

As much as he tried to hide it, Erhan knew that Dinnel could see his discomfort.

“If you want to do anything at all for me in return, not as a bribe,” Dinnel said suddenly, “you could bring us up to your king during the peace talks. I know your king is considering lightening the tariffs imposed on the Sideans.”

It didn’t feel at all like an equivalent exchange. Erhan almost wanted to bite back in retort. But as he looked at Dinnel, and then remembered the conflict from years back, he couldn’t help also remembering his sympathy.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Erhan replied, taking the room code from Dinnel before approaching the elevator.

Buttons of every conceivable color dotted the display. Not only could this elevator shoot up toward the many levels of this hotel, but the pink buttons designated teleportation transport while the red were basement levels.

“I guess I never realized how much you’ve done for the universe,” Kleena said suddenly as the elevator doors slammed shut.

Erhan had no idea how to reply, instead embracing Kleena as he brought her closer.

“Just doing my part,” Erhan said. “You know, at one point, the strike team was just a way to distract myself from princely duties. Sometimes, even I forget everything we did together.”

Kleena smiled.

Choose a destination , the elevator commanded. First floor, lobby. Second floor, gardens...

The elevator continued, listing off every floor in the hotel and even some not in the hotel.

“But of all my victories—all the people we’ve saved, all the wars we’ve stopped...”

Erhan brought Kleena in, kissing her deeply as the elevator doors opened. Erhan didn’t care who knew how much he loved this woman.

“I’m proudest of you, Kleena.”

And he looked down once more at the bulge in her stomach, wondering what else the universe had in store for them—where they'd go next... together.

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:25 am

KLEENA

“Oh my gods, Erhan, it’s happening!” Kleena cried, clutching the picnic blanket with one hand and her bulging belly with the other.

It had been only six and a half months since they’d received news of her gravid state and although the Niri doctors had done everything they could, the exact gestation period had remained unknown. Until now.

“Wait, you mean...” Erhan asked, whipping around from where he’d been pouring out two glasses of nonalcoholic sava-wine.

For a second, he stared at Kleena with a panicked expression until wine began to flow over the rim of the glass and right into his lap, sluicing down his dark scales.

“Ye-eeeeess!” Kleena replied, suddenly racked with a shudder of pain. It was unlike anything she’d ever experienced, and she let out a cry that cut through the sound of nirlings playing nearby.

It seemed as if the whole park turned to look at her, but Kleena hardly paid attention. All she saw was Erhan’s look of fear as he rushed to her side. Within seconds, he had lifted her into his arms and was gliding toward their shimmering blue shuttle.

“Medical! Emergency!” he yelled into the control once he’d settled Kleena in beside him.

Another wave of pain racked her body, and she let out a cry just as the vehicle sped

away, siren blaring.

“It’s going to be okay,” Erhan reassured her, clutching her hand in both of his. “You’re going to be okay.”

The look in his eyes told Kleena he was worried, though, and admittedly, so was she. Though there had been other human-Naga births on Nirum, they were too few for the doctors to know exactly what they were dealing with. One thing they had been able to predict though: Erhan and Kleena would be having twins. The night of the fertility celebration, Erhan had implanted two eggs inside her womb.

“They want out!” Kleena yelled over the wailing siren as they careened through the streets of Nirum.

“They’re fighters like their sire,” Erhan joked and Kleena managed a smile.

“They better not be getting any ideas,” she joked back, but a sudden jolt in her spine turned her weak smile into a look of panic. “Oh, Erhan, they’re coming!”

She gripped his hands hard, straining her head back and arching her back in a desperate attempt to quell the pain. But it was coming in waves now, rocking her body from the inside.

It felt like forever until they reached the medical wing, but Kleena and the twins managed to hold on until then. Suddenly, a flurry of doctors flocked around her, yelling to each other and pushing her into a wheelchair.

Erhan hurried beside Kleena, clutching her hand the entire way.

As the doctors transferred her to her private delivery room, Kleena mumbled the promise that had become her mantra over the previous six months.

“I love you. Your daddy loves you. You’re perfect. I love you. Your daddy loves you. You’re perfect...”

She couldn’t wait to tell her babies in person, but she had labor to get through first and then egg hatching. Another wave of pain rolled through her body, her spine jolting again with the pressure of their impending birth.

“That’s good. You’re doing great!” one doctor encouraged as they transferred her to the birthing pool. “Now it’s time to start pushing!”

Kleena was shocked. It had been less than an hour since her first contractions began, and her water hadn’t even broken yet. But then, she didn’t exactly know what she was supposed to expect from this. The queen, of course, had been the first human to bear Niri eggs, but she had never spoken candidly about the birth itself.

In any case, it was too late for that now, and Kleena knew all she could do was surrender to the process.

“Come on, my love,” Erhan encouraged her, slithering into the birthing pool beside her.

She was still clutching his hand tightly, and she looked up into his eyes, nodding. Then she bore down, letting out a deep, guttural cry as she did.

“That’s it!” yelled the doctor, hovering over the pool to assist the process.

Another push and Kleena felt something inside her shift. It was as if a weight was moving through her, inch by inch. For fifteen minutes, she pushed until she finally felt it all at once—the first egg.

It slipped out of her before sinking down to the bottom of the pool and catching her entirely off guard. She had half-expected a baby, not an egg, and for a second, she

almost cried at the sight.

But then the doctor fished the egg out of the water, and she saw it.

About a foot long with leathery black skin, the egg was malleable and semi-translucent. She let out a small cry when the shadows inside began to move and she realized she could already see their first child writhing around inside.

The sight of it made her heart skip a beat. Even more so when the doctor handed the egg to her and Erhan. For a moment, they clutched the egg gently together, gazing lovingly at the half-hidden creature squirming inside.

“When does it—” Her question was broken midway through, however, by another massive contraction.

“Aahhhh!” she cried out, bucking under the pain.

“There’s still the second one, remember!” the doctor cried, getting back into position over the pool. Kleena cried out again as Erhan took the first egg with one hand and held hers with the other.

She began pushing once more, and this time it didn’t take long. The second egg followed quickly, slipping into the pool and leaving Kleena exhausted. But the thought of meeting her babies imbued her with a rush of love that cut through the pain and the exhaustion.

“Let me see my babies,” she managed, her voice hoarse from screaming.

With a smile, the doctor handed her the second egg. Just as he did, Kleena heard a small crack beside her.

When she looked, she saw a small hole beginning to form in the egg that Erhan held.

Kleena held her breath for the appearance of their first child, but something else caught her attention suddenly.

As if hearing its sibling, the second egg followed suit, and soon, pieces of black shell were falling away right before Kleena's eyes. She hardly knew where to look until she heard a small coo from below. When she looked down, her heart almost beat out of her chest. A small black face was peering out at her, hazel eyes gleaming and blinking into the brightness of the world.

The baby's eyes were the exact shade of Kleena's, and her hand reached out to stroke her baby's beautiful face.

When she turned, she saw that a second face was peering up at Erhan, this time with deep green eyes that matched his.

Kleena was overcome with the purest joy she had ever felt. Their two children, a boy and a girl they quickly discovered, had now wriggled free of the shells' remains. They were already grasping at Kleena with their tiny human-like hands.

"Oh my god," Erhan whispered beside her as he pulled Kleena and their two babies into a gentle embrace. "They're so perfect."

Kleena nodded, gazing at the babies with love in her eyes. "I love you. Your daddy loves you. You're perfect."

When she tore her gaze away from her two miracles, she saw that Erhan's eyes were welling with tears of joy.

"You've given me everything," he told her, pressing his forehead to hers. "Thank you. For loving me. For choosing to be with me. And for these two beautiful nirlings."

Kleena's heart swelled as she watched her husband's outpouring of emotion, and her own vision grew blurry from the tears that were now beginning to form.

"I promise I'll always be a safe harbor for you and the nirlings," Erhan continued, smiling through his tears. "I'll always be here for you, all of you."

With this he glanced down at the babies who were snuggled up between them, their tiny hands clutching at Kleena's hair and Erhan's scales.

"I promise the same," Kleena said, laughing a little as tears began to roll down her cheeks. "I will love you and our kids for as long as I live."

With this, Erhan's lips found hers, meeting in a tender kiss that Kleena felt roll all the way through her. She had found true love, in all its forms, and she knew she would never take any of it for granted.