

Head Enforcer Kren Zvanhahz Bolep arrived at the site of yet another Tysu alert, wondering if he'd actually find something to worry about this time. Gon Wiwenhahz had sound panicked, rather than shamefully uncertain as the other villagers had after similar sightings. However, Gon was a somewhat excitable fellow under normal circumstances. *Better to be safe than sorry*, Kren decided as he slowed his dartwing, going into a floating swoop. It allowed him to take a good look around the border area of his home village of Hahz. The arrow-shaped flier's gradual descent gave him a view of nearby farmland and the homes that dotted it. The woods beyond the invisible protective barrier offered him little to see beyond the leafy canopy. The scene was quiet, with nothing to note but a few farm animals in distant pastures. Observing nothing amiss, Kren hurried his landing, ready to get the latest time-wasting hunt done with. Moments later, the dartwing came to a rest in the soft, tall grasses a few yards from the edge of the barrier.

He climbed out of the dartwing, simultaneously tossing off his protective helmet. He stretched, enjoying the feeling of autumn's first chill against his skin. The flier, specifically designed for law enforcement, was made for speed rather than comfort. Kren's wide-shouldered frame was not only broad for the cockpit, but long as well. The head of Hahz's law authority shook the kinks out of his muscled frame. He grinned at his patrol partner, who'd landed behind him.

Arga Enrihahz was as tall but with a slighter build than Kren. Nonetheless, his dartwing was no more comfortable for him to ride about in. It amused Kren to watch the reddish-brown and ivory-striped Risnarish male unfold himself from the oval hole in the middle of the dartwing, wrenching his bulk free.

Arga straightened and pulled his helmet off. His hands sported three fingers at the moment, and he raked them over the bristling, striped mane that ran from the top of his head to between his shoulder blades. He snorted as he stared out at the line of trees turning blue-ish in the twilight reflection of the planet Cadi, the gas giant hanging in Risnar's darkening sky.

Preparing for the task ahead, Kren hardened the soles of his feet. He walked over to stand at Arga's side. "Good night for a mythical creature hunt."

Arga scowled, his brow bone descending over silver eyes with black starburst pupils. "A complete waste of our time. A report at least every other night for the last two weeks! If this keeps up, I'm suggesting limits on broadleaf chewing."

Kren laughed. "I'm betting they saw a paddle-tail with mange. What kind of creature exists without fur, scales or armored hide?"

"Monsuda."

Both men pulled faces at the hated word. Fortunately, the Risnarish's enemy had not breached the village's protective barrier fields in a long time. With the supposed Tysu sighting taking place within Hahz's border, it was a sure bet it wasn't an insectile Monsudan or one of their slave drones.

Kren rubbed a hand over his own spiky mane. "Gon's description didn't sound like a Monsudan. His description didn't sound like anything I've ever heard of."

"Except legendary creatures such as the Tysu. Next thing you know, we'll be consulting with the spirits of the dead." Arga took a deep breath, his narrow nostrils flaring. "At least it's an excuse to get out of the office. I love the smell of forest after a rain."

Kren also inhaled, letting the scent of damp earth, fragrant foliage, and his partner's clean musk fill his senses. He felt pleasure at the scene unfolded before him. The smell of the recent rain. The mysterious aura of the gloaming at the edge of the forest that ringed Hahz. The equally enigmatic scenery of the tangled trees with their deep, secretive shadows. The errand they were on might have been a waste of time, but at least it was an enjoyable one.

He glanced at the two domed homes that came closest to the woods on this side of the village. Soft light glowed from the roofs. A female Bonch loped across the lawn of Gon's property, a basket's handle clenched between her teeth. A tiny furry face peeked up from the basket, its gray muzzle stretched in a happy smile, tongue lolling out one side of its mouth. Kren chuckled at the youngster's appearance. The Bonch were so cute at that age.

He turned his back to the village and faced the shadowy forest again. He told Arga, "Well, let's see if we can find the mythical beastie and make Hahz safe for the Risnarish again."

They stepped through the invisible barrier that kept out the Monsuda while allowing Risnarish biological signatures free passage into and out of the village. A small hunting path led through the snarl of trees, shrubs, and vines. Law enforcement partners for nearly two decades and friends since entering the Learning and Recreation Center as toddlers, the two men walked in comfortable silence.

They were just out of view of the domes at the outskirts of the village when Kren slowed and stopped. He peered into the brush beyond the path, the growing twilight making some of the shadows impenetrable to sight.

Kren shifted his pointed ears into a cuplike shape, seeking to capture any sound. Arga halted next to him, doing the same.

In a whisper so low it might have been an errant breeze, Arga asked, "Sense something?"

"Listen. The nightfliers are silent. They've been spooked. Whatever is out there, it's nearby."

His skin automatically armored, answering the instinct for protection. Malleable flesh turned as rock-hard as a hiser's hide, protecting all vulnerable organs from harm. Plasma shot or projectile bursts could penetrate armored Risnarish skin, but blunt trauma and even puncture wounds were deflected. If Kren was about to encounter a wild animal, he was well protected.

Arga's striped skin rippled as he, too, armored. He took a deep breath and his eyes widened. "I smell something. Not overwhelmingly awful, but not pleasant either."

Kren caught a whiff of it as well. The smell was sour, similar to tog milk that had been left out in the sun. He exchanged a look with his partner. The recent rash of Tysu sightings often included reports of a strange odor. This certainly qualified. What in the hell was out there?

He nodded to Arga. They went off the path, following the scent through less densely packed foliage. Certainly something could have moved through the area with little problem. He could still make out patches of underbrush here and there in the remaining light from the huge planet hanging in the night sky. Broken twigs and disturbed leaves and pods from the surrounding trees littered the path, signs a living creature had passed through.

Yes, the sour odor was strengthening, growing bright in Kren's nostrils. His mane stood up straight on his neck and spine. His hand sprouted a couple of extra fingers as he grabbed the stunner wand on his belt. Had it been the telltale oily scent of a drone or the dry husk smell of a Monsudan, he would have armed himself with his plasma shooter. This was no known enemy. It was probably some animal, sick or infected.

Arga had his wand out too, firmly gripping the telescoping rod with six fingers and a thumb. "That stink—" he started to whisper.

A high-pitched cry interrupted him, something that sounded similar to a small child's wail. A shrub a few steps away shivered—and a bipedal creature burst out from behind it.

Kren shouted in wordless surprise. Pale flesh. A long, whipping mane. Absurdly slender arms and legs flailed as the creature ran deeper into the woods, crashing through the underbrush as it went.

"What was that?" he strangle-screamed.

At the same moment, Arga shrieked several octaves higher than his usual voice. “Shit! Did you see that?”

Kren plunged into the woods after the Tysu. He heard Arga’s thunderous tread behind him and the creature’s wild flight in front. The two men raced after the off-putting smell of the being crashing through the underbrush.

The Tysu was slow and noisy, making it easy for them to catch up. Even in the low light conditions, its fair skin was easy to spot as it struggled through the growth. Within a few seconds, Kren and Arga were only two strides behind it.

It knew it was caught. It wheeled around, its long, blond tresses fanning out as it turned to face them. It kept moving until it was able to put a tree to its back.

Kren expected a fight. Instead it crouched low, cringing with tiny five-fingered hands spread wide, as if it would push them away.

Kren and Arga drew up short, close enough to make contact, though they didn’t reach out. Instead Kren trained an illumination beam at it, spotlighting the thing they’d caught.

But what was it?

The being’s one-colored peach skin was apparently soft, as it was covered in scratches. Kren supposed the small injuries had come from the strange animal’s flight through the dense woods. Had it no armor? Except for the triangle of pelt over its genitals and the mid-back length of its hair, it showed no signs of protective covering at all.

He’d never seen the creature’s like, but the signs declared she wasn’t the only one.

His gaze kept going to that fuzzy vee between her thighs when not arrested by rounded breasts with the fascinating pink points.

Arga voiced the same thoughts. “It is ready to nurse. Where is the offspring?”

Risnarish women only displayed breasts when they were in the nursing stage of motherhood. This female was similar enough to Kren’s people that he had to assume she had given birth fairly recently. The full breasts had no other reason to be present.

He muttered, “Good question. It looks as if it’s in season as well.”

Kren swallowed hard. Through the kinky curls of the Tysu’s light-colored pelt, he could plainly spy the cleft of a female sex. It resembled that of the Risnarish women he had bred with. Did this thing have a mate nearby, along with a baby?

So many questions for this strange, cringing being. A sense of pity washed over him for the obvious fear in her odd eyes...with *round* pupils. How was it possible that something obviously not Risnarish could possess so many similarities to his species? What was she?

Underlying Kren’s confusion was the idea that the funny-looking female was pretty in a dainty, exotic fashion. Fine-boned, too delicate and defenseless when compared to the hardy creatures of his planet...but fascinating with her heart-shaped face, wide sky-blue eyes, and blatantly female exhibition.

By the All-Spirit, what was wrong with him?

Arga brought him out of his reverie. “We need to bring this in and send out trackers to see if its young can be found.”

Kren gazed at the cowering female. He was Hahz’s law authority head and should be dispassionate and clinical. He tried to look at the creature that way, but sympathy and uncomfortable fascination still prickled at the edges of his regard. He pretended otherwise.

“I see no obvious defenses on her. Maybe she’s venomous?”

“Let’s examine her teeth,” Arga said. He checked to be sure his wand was on its lowest setting before giving her shoulder a light tap.

The contact made a slight, unimportant *pop*. With such brief contact, it would not knock the creature unconscious. She should only experience a quick jolt, akin to the momentary sting of static electricity.

She yelped, again a childish sound. With her mouth wide open for an instant, Kren saw an upper and lower jaw lined with flat, plant-eater teeth. Her canines were a bit pointy but certainly no threat to his armored skin.

By the All-Spirit, even her claws were flat and flimsy. It was as if she'd been created to be food.

"She can't be as helpless as she seems," Kren said. "No creature develops without some sort of natural defenses."

Arga looked as flummoxed as he felt. "There's one way to find out."

"Right." Kren came to a sudden and probably stupid decision. He grabbed the creature.

As he yanked her against his body, she shrieked. He winced and folded his ears against the piercing sound. Her hands closed in fists and she pounded against the hard hide of his chest. She cried out again, this time in agony. She wrung her hands and tears streamed down her cheeks.

Kren's shoulders hunched. Damn. He'd hurt her. It had been her fault for hitting him when he was armored, but he still felt bad. Every tear streaking from her extraordinary eyes was a stab to his twin hearts.

He restrained the urge to shake her for being foolhardy. "Damn it. Why did you do that, little girl? Here, let me look."

He unwrapped his arms from around her body to take her hands in his. He fussed over the delicate digits of her fingers—it seemed she preferred to keep four to a hand along with her thumbs—checking them over to make sure she hadn't done damage to herself. He rubbed his thumbs over them in turn, frowning to feel hardness beneath the skin. Fingers with bones? Could that be right?

He uttered cooing sounds, as his guardians had done when he was a small boy and had hurt himself. As he tried to soothe her, her sky eyes stared up at his face. She looked terrified, but Kren fancied he saw a trace of hope in her expression too.

He couldn't get over the softness of her skin. When he'd grabbed her close, her motherly breasts had mashed against his chest, molding her pliable body to the hard, armored planes. The sensation had been unsettling.

Trying to quiet his confusion, he glanced at the watchful Arga. "She's soft. Fragile. I think I could crush her if I'm not careful. What is she? How can she exist with no defenses?"

Arga's heavy brow had descended over his eyes, silvery orbs in the dark. "If I had to guess, I'd say she's a Monsudan experiment. Although their monstrosities are usually nasty. This is—well, she's cute. Like something you'd take home and tame for a pet."

Kren looked her over carefully. She peered up at him with those frightened eyes, but at least she'd calmed down. High, delicate cheekbones, tiny pointed chin...a being of astounding beauty for all its alien peculiarities. Kren found it hard to believe that the Monsuda, which shared the planet of Risnar, could make a creature so lovely. Yet Arga was right. It was the only explanation that made any sense. Legends of the terrifying Tysu notwithstanding, there was no such being as this native to Risnar or any of the planets known to its people.

So damned lovely. Knowing what would happen to the creature if it was a result of Monsudan biological engineering tightened Kren's chest with hurt. There was no help for it, though. The law was the law. Monsudan lab creations were destroyed without prejudice.

With regret, he jerked his head in the direction of the dartwings. “Let’s get her back to the station. Nex can have a look at her first. If he’s got no idea and we’re sure she poses no immediate danger to our people, the biologists at the temple can figure out what she is.”

Arga opened a pouch on his belt, the one article of clothing he wore on his armored hide. He took out a length of flex strapping and unrolled it as Kren spoke in his most soothing voice to the pale animal he held.

“It’s all right. This won’t hurt you. Hold still, little—thing. Little Tysu.”

“She’s not a Tysu. The Tysu supposedly has long fangs and claws,” Arga reminded him. “It eats naughty children who don’t listen to their guardians.”

“I can’t stand calling her a thing, animal, or creature. She’s too pretty.” Kren held the female’s wrists, then made her lower her arms to her sides.

Arga snapped the end of the flex strapping with a practiced flick of his wrist. It whipped out and coiled around the Tysu, pinning her arms in position. It kept winding about her, fastening her legs tight together. She’d already been helpless, but now she could neither resist nor run.

She cried out to find herself bound and began struggling again. Her wails went straight to Kren’s hearts. He hated to see any vulnerable being as scared as this Tysu was.

He imagined Arga found him ridiculous as he hummed calming noises and petted her long hair. Patches of it were silky, like the magnificent nikwen that roamed in herds on the distant plains, but much of it was matted and tangled. Monsudan created or not, she’d been living wild for several days. She needed a good washing and grooming. He wrinkled his nose. Maybe it would help the somewhat unpleasant odor coming from her too.

To Kren’s surprise, Arga joined in the attempt to quiet the Tysu. His partner awkwardly patted her shoulder and said, “Easy. Easy,” in a rough voice. “Don’t cry, little pretty. We’re not going to hurt you.”

Arga tended to put on a tough front, but he treated the Tysu with nervous care. Kren tried to not smile, and succeeded for the most part, but Arga noticed his amusement and shrugged. “Laugh, but I know you feel the same as I do.”

“Like the world’s biggest jerk for scaring her? Yeah. If we could get away with it, I’d set her loose. But if she’s of Monsudan origin—”

“Contain and destroy.” Arga stopped and grimaced sickly at the female as she glanced up at him and blinked free the last of her tears as she ceased trying to wrench free. “Poor critter. At least she responds to kindness.”

“Let’s go before I do something to make you bring me in on charges.” Kren swung the Tysu up and cradled her. He turned toward the path that would take him to his dartwing.

“Forget it. They’d put me in charge and I refuse to handle that kind of responsibility.” Arga went ahead of Kren, pushing back the foliage to clear the way so the Tysu wouldn’t get scratched up any worse than she already was.

Kren again smothered an instance of humor. Arga loved to claim he had no interest in being accountable, but he was the first to charge into a situation. Kren always sought his counsel and never worried if he had to put his partner in charge of anything. Well, except for those few months when Arga had been inconsolable over his old guardian’s disappearance. However, his friend had been as reliable as ever once the grief eased.

Kren followed Arga through the dense woods. They were almost to the edge of the tree line when the Tysu, light as air in his arms, burrowed her face against his chest. Like a child begging for comfort, she snuffled and rubbed her cheek against the leathery thickness of his flesh.

Arga had turned when Kren halted, his expression pitying as he watched the girl-creature huddle. Then his eyes widened as Kren's breast rippled and he softened his skin to match the Tysu's for softness. She moaned and pressed her face between the swells of his pectoral muscles.

Arga's voice filled with warning. "Kren—"

"I know, I know." Kren started walking again, feeling the wet warmth of renewed tears coming from the Tysu. "She could bite. She could be venomous. If she kills me, you can gloat."

Arga grimaced a reproach. "I would never do that. Just keep an eye on her, okay?"

Kren couldn't have not looked at that tiny body if he'd wanted to. She fit in his arms so well, draping as sweetly as the best-spun cloth to dress his bed.

He gave himself a little shake. He did not want to be thinking of his bed, not while holding this strange and yet similar female. He was being stupid. She could be Monsudan.

Yet she showed no sign of aggression. She lay against him, her attitude that of someone who was tired, lost, and without hope.

They reached the dartwings. Kren climbed in, squeezing himself into the tight confines and settling the Tysu in his lap. They were crammed in, but it seemed crueler to put her in the captive cargo area in the craft's underbelly. She gawped around, her attitude again fearful. With the flex strapping holding her tight, she didn't bother to struggle. She gave him a look that seemed downright reproachful, as if to say, *Why are you doing this to me?*

Kren didn't attribute that kind of intelligence to her, but he squirmed inwardly all the same. Sometimes the animals on his farm gave him that expression, especially on days when the weather didn't allow them to graze the pasture. The beasts were dumb, but they had managed to figure out how to make a man feel bad with sad, soulful eyes.

She jerked when he strapped his oversized helmet on her head. Kren reinforced his skull armor and slid a pair of goggles over his eyes to keep anything from blowing into them. Then he lifted off, prompting the Tysu to cringe against him. He made all of his body pliant so she wouldn't be too uncomfortable.

They flew into the deepening night. Kren kept expecting his prisoner to start up that ear-piercing caterwauling once more, but she didn't. She huddled against him, pressing deeper into his body and trembling. With night coming on, the temperature dipped steadily now. Without flesh armor, she would be cold. Kren controlled the dartwing with one hand and wrapped his other arm around her, trying to keep her warm. He set the seldom-used air blower to send warmth into the cockpit. Since the craft was open at the top, it wouldn't mitigate all of the chill.

She didn't have to suffer for long, thank the All-Spirit. Within minutes they reached Hahz's enforcement dome. Kren landed his craft in its designated spot, noting Arga alighting a few seconds later.

Kren pushed out of the cockpit, lifting the Tysu in his arms yet again. She was definitely shivering now. He hurried to get her inside. The double doors sighed open before him, and balmy warmth bathed his soft skin.

He stepped into the large open area where the officers of the day shift gathered, minding the small village of Hahz. Nearly half a dozen silver eyes turned his way, widening when they saw what he carried.