

Koren Kaern lay face-up in the sand just outside of his family's tent, staring up at the vast tapestry of stars that blinked and shone overhead. He loved this time of the night, loved his little spot in the darkness. Here, he could try and blot out everything around him. Here, he could ignore the voices, petulant and harsh, escaping through the thin hide of the tent. Here, even in the near-freezing chill of the desert night, he could pretend that all was well.

For more than a month, the desert seemed to have been trying to kill them. Iridonia's badlands were ordinarily harsh, inhospitable. That was to be expected. But, in recent weeks things had been particularly brutal. The ordinarily scorching heat had turned into a white-hot blaze. Watering holes cracked and dried out, pack animals collapsed into the sand, and prey fled for the shade of the rocky foothills to the south. That summer, old and hallowed tribes, with traditions spanning innumerable eons, starved and scattered to the dunes. It was a time to hold close to one's elders. To watch your children closely. To protect your family.

A deep, prideful voice shouted within the tent, answered by an equally vehement reply. Koren's parents were arguing again. He could hear them clearly.

"It is nonsense, Syla. Pure, foolish *katka*. Meaningless. How many times must I tell you?" the deep voice thundered once again, It was harsh, proud. The voice of Koren's father, Arhen.

Another voice, shrill and angry, rose to meet it. Syla, his mother. Just as proud. Just as strong, too. And just as selfish. Koren could see that now.

"Nonsense? *Nonsense?* Arhen, we've barely survived the last month! How do you think we'll live with another mouth to feed? If you leave... if you think...!"

"I told you to come with me. I *told you*," Arhen shouted right back.

"*And I don't need to do what you tell me.* Do you think I needed to stay here? I...I could have left, anytime that I wanted. Do you think that I *wanted* a second child? You were just started to listen to me about the cities. If we had gone there..."

"Honor calls me back to Tribe Kell!"

"Honor? You're going back because they said that they would make you *chief*. That's the only honor that's in it for you. And just because of that, you think you can drag your woman and child along like trophies to display for your new tribe!"

"They were always my tribe," the deep voice growled. "You should be honored to be an *Ankari's* mate, the mother of a chief's son."

"What does your *zerka's* honor mean to me?" she spat back. "I've lived my whole life with a tribe. I've borne a son to the tribe, a *crownhorn*...and our lives are still *miserable* here!"

"You are soft," he stated flatly.

"And you are a fool, Arhen Kaern," she responded with a hiss. "You wanted a second child. You wanted a zerkin' *lineage*. You think it will survive the summer?" she scoffed, her voice almost taunting. Outside, Koren clenched his fists.

There was a long silence, followed by a deep, angry sigh. Finally, Arhen's voice broke through once again. He sounded... set. Decided.

"...I do love you, Syla," he murmured quietly, just inside the tent's entrance. There was another pause, and Koren heard his mother sigh.

"...and I do too, Arhen... but I *can't do this anymore*," she responded. The two of them seemed to have reached some sort of accord.

"Neither can I," he agreed quietly. Moments later, Arhen pressed out of the tent's flap, rising to his full height in the cold night air. He was a tall, strong man, bound with chords of tight musculature that bulged through his simple hide tunic and trousers. At twenty-four, he stood at well over six feet tall, half a head taller than the next-largest man in Tribe Lod. The caramel hue of his skin was inscribed with a swirling, black pattern, almost like the dappling on a nexu's coat. The tattoos marked him as a warrior. A strong man. A prideful man. Sighing deeply, he ran a roughly callused hand through the smooth, rich mop of chocolate-brown hair that trailed over his horns, down to the small of his back. His horns rose at sharp right-angles, symmetrically aligned. He was a crownhorn, a rarity, destined for power and leadership among their kin, if the elders were to be believed. And, if the buds of Koren's own horns were anything to go by, it looked very much like he would take after his father.

Arkin harrumphed angrily, slamming a booted foot into the hand. Then, he turned, and saw Koren lying in the darkness. Arhen took a step forward, and Koren immediately jumped to his feet, puffing his chest out in challenge. He was only eight, and though he was quite tall for his age, his father still towered over him.

The older Zabrak stared down at his son, who didn't so much as flinch under the gaze. Then, he chuckled, low and rumbling, beckoning with one hand.

"Come, boy. We're leaving," he stated flatly. Koren didn't budge.

"You're going to back Tribe Kell?" he questioned, his voice cold, unwavering. Arhen seemed to hesitate for a moment before answering, his brow furrowing.

"Yes. It's time for us to go back where we belong."

“You mean where *you* can be chief?” Koren suggested sharply, taking a step forward. “I heard you. I heard you talking to their *Ankaro*. Old Val’teo’s gone, and his heir ran years ago, so now they want the Kaerns back. Right?” he accused, anger seeping into his voice. Arkin, in turn, rose to his full height, stepping right up to the boy.

“*Quiet*, child. You don’t know what you’re...-”

“I do. I’m not stupid. And I’m not leaving,” Koren declared, forcing his reedy eight year old’s voice to sound deep and stable. To sound unafraid. “I want to see my sister.”

“If the child is a girl, it won’t last the summer. Now, *come with me*,” his father commanded angrily, seizing Koren by the shoulder. “You will be the son of a chief, part of a *lineage*. You are a *crownhorn*, boy. I don’t intend to let you waste your days here, reading those city-books, *dreaming-...!*”

Arhen was cut off by a sharp, sudden *crack* as something struck hard in the back of his head, his grip on Koren slipping away. Hissing, the older Zabrak turned on his heel, drawing a long dagger at his waist to face his attacker. Taking a step back from his father, Koren saw them both clearly.

At first, he thought the woman was his mother... but no. She was taller, slimmer, without the obvious swell of the child held under her heart, the baby that Koren was sure would be a girl. She was older, too, a long silver braid hanging from between a set of yellowed very-well groomed horns. What flesh wasn’t covered by thin linen robes and thick, tailored furs was etched with jagged burgundy markings, almost seeming to be carved into her flesh. She brandished a short, dark quarterstaff at Arhen, held expertly within deeply wrinkled fingers.

Setle Mell was Koren’s grandmother, his mother’s mother. Not quite fifty years old, she was an experienced midwife, a renowned healer, and a self-titled wise woman. Whether or not she was wise was never really debated, for she was also known as one of the toughest women on that side of the badlands, with an iron-hand that was not to be trifled with. And right now, she looked *apoplectic*.

“Have you forgotten all honor, Kaern?” she half-spat, advancing on him with her staff. Though he still stood a full six inches taller than her, she seemed totally unafraid, her weapon held directly before his face.

There was silence for a moment. Then, he stepped forward, his hand still on the dagger at his hip.

“Don’t try and talk to me about honor, crone. This *is* honor. Strength. Independence...”

“Loyalty?” she interjected, her pointed teeth bared. “You’re abandoning Syla. You’re abandoning your child. You think I’ll let you take the other, like a *thief*?” There was a fresh silence as the words struck him seemingly harder than her earlier attack had. Slowly, he took a step backwards.

“I... have the right. He is my son.”

“*And* he will be given the chance to choose his tribe, as is our custom. He has seen Kell. He has seen Lod. He will choose,” she stated finally, cutting him off before he could talk further. Arhen stood silent for a moment... and sheathed his dagger, looking towards where Koren stood. The silence pulled on for a few moments more.

Koren looked between the two of them... before moving to his grandmother’s side, staring his father straight in the eye.

“I want to see my sister,” he stated quietly. Firmly. Arhen seemed to waver on his feet in the moment that followed, a flash of anguish unfolding over his face as he watched his son walk away. Then, his expression stiffened, hardening with resolve. Without another word, he turned on his heel, and paced out of the camp, into the darkness of the night-drenched dunes. Koren and Settle watched him go for a few moments, before the older woman dropped to one knee, her blue eyes locking on his. Her voice was serious, quiet, concerned, but her anger seemed to have faded to a grim disappointment.

“Are you alright? Did he hurt you?” she asked, brushing a hand through his light brown hair. Koren just shook his head, eyes falling downward.

“You’re sure? If he laid a finger on you...”

“I’m fine,” Koren interjected calmly, cutting her off. People had always said that he acted older than his age. He proved that now, looking into his grandmother’s face with a stiff upper lip, seemingly unperturbed by all that had occurred. She gave him a searching glance, one hand trailing over his face... before sighing, her lips twisting into a smile.

“Good. You’re a strong boy. You’ll do well,” she finally stated. The pride in her voice was all that he ever could have asked for, his back straightening and his chest puffing out as if to prove her right. A twinkle went through the older woman’s eyes, and she gave a slight, halting chuckle, ruffling his hair. “Come. It won’t be long before the child comes... and I’m going to need all of the help that I can get.”

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A birthing in tribal Zabracki society was a process that involved practically the whole of the tribal. Low drums were beat, hunters and huntresses prepared a special meal for the new mother, and

the herbalists, elders, and mothers of the tribe came to oversee the birth, help the mother along. Normally, the father would be accompanied out on a hunt and a duel... but, without Arhen, that portion of the tradition was very quietly ignored.

Koren and Setle were at Syla's side the whole time, from the breaking of the water until the first, paltry cries rose into the sweltering heat of the desert air. Setle held the babe first, passing her off to Koren, who handed the girl to his mother in turn.

The infant was puny, barely enough to fill two hands, not even four pounds in weight. Koren had weighed twice that much when he was born. Its cries and struggles were pathetic, though it took to the milk with voracious passion.

When Koren looked into his mother's eyes as she held her newborn daughter, he saw no love. Only a quiet assurance. The same, grim confidence that he had felt course through the room when the infant was delivered. The same silent thought that he heard whispered throughout the tribe in the days afterward.

None of them believed that she would survive. Not even Setle.

The tent was silent. Tradition stated that not one in the tribe should speak until the child was named by their mother... and yet, Sila said nothing. She just looked down at the little girl, her brow furrowed, light brown hair hanging in a sweaty mop.

The whole camp lay still, the quiet carrying... until Koren finally broke it.

"Sera. Name her Sera."

He had picked the name two days before, after studying an old text on tribal heroes. It was a good name, with a vaunted history. Strong. Meaningful. Yet still, a few of the elders gasped, gazing at the child with surprise or fury in their eyes. Setle was certainly hovering somewhere between the two. To her, tradition was *all*.

Syla remained silent. After a few moments more, she nodded her sweat-streaked head, her brow still furrowed. She hadn't yet smiled once. "Sera, then. *Vaxla cek, ayure cek, Sera.*"

The tribe repeated in chorus, the words rippling over the voices in the tent, and the hundreds of mouths that waited outside.

*Life to you, honor to you, Sera.*

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Syla was fully recovered two weeks later. The next night, she disappeared, leaving only a single

note behind. She had left to pursue a life in the cities, a life beyond the harshness of tribal living. She regretted her decision, but said that honor had compelled her; she would have been unable to properly raise two children on her own. The Tribe internalized the total and complete dishonor that the abandonment meant, for both Sila and Arkin. Voices would whisper for years about them, holding them up as object lessons. Selfish. Short sighted. Ruled by their pride.

And they waited for little Sera to die.

The summer dragged on. The drought got worse. The heat crushed even the strong, killed the prey, dried the water. The sun beat down like a hammer, ripping the breath from your lungs, boiling the water from your sweat, from your mouth, from your flesh. Many fell to the sands, and moved no more.

But Sera survived. She devoured the milk that was given to her, even as it was sparse. When it came time for food and water, she devoured that, too. Her cries grew stronger, and stronger, and stronger.

Koren loved his sister, the last blood relative in his life. He held her close, constantly attentive. Always watchful, always protective. They were never far apart.

And together, their gazes strayed away from their desert roots...

To the stars. Always to the stars.