

Aris' Tale
-Chapter Two-

Aris eventually crawled into his own bedding later that night, when the world had grown dark and the only light came from the flashes of lightning. Salria had stayed quietly asleep, the storm outside seeming to not disturb her rest at all. It didn't give him much trouble either, his only worry having been calmed to allow him a relaxed sleep. As predicted the storm went on for the following days, keeping both he and Salria stuck inside until it passed.

He'd taken to lighting a small fire in the hearth that was built into his hut, granting them a bit of warmth and some light. It also allowed him to put together a hot meal from his provisions, albeit a simple one. He and Salria sat in front of that small fire on the third day of her coming to his hut, eating a simple broth he'd made from the smoked meat and some spices. She hadn't spoken much since the first day, and she was likewise as quiet while she ate.

"Salria?" He asked, looking to break the silence.

"Yes Aris?" She aired, taking a swallow from her soup.

"I've been wondering..." He started, stirring his own bowl idly. "What made you come here? I know you wished to be far away from people, but why leave at all?"

Salria didn't reply at first, keeping quiet for the longest time. He cast a glance over at her, finding her orange eyes staring into the fire, orange on orange light flickering in them.

"I told you that the 'Emperor' ruled most of the land out there. Well, his rule is not one through peace." She finally stated. "He wants all to submit to his authority, and those who don't are made to by force. My parents told me there was once a time when there was a peace between my homeland and yours, but not anymore."

Salria turned her head to look at him. "What made me leave and run all this way, Aris, was when the Emperor's soldiers came and raided my village." She declared, pain in her eyes again. "That was when my parents and everyone I grew up with died, and I decided I just wanted to be away from it all."

She turned back to stare into the fire, eyes sparkling. His ears drooped, raising his hand slowly before gingerly laying it on her shoulder. Her body tensed, and for a second he thought she would brush his hand away. She surprised him though, by scooting over and pressing her side into him. Aris blinked as he felt her warmth up against him, bending his head down to look at her as she rested up against his shoulder.

It was the first time he'd ever been close to her, her scent starting to fill his senses as he breathed. Salria soon pulled away though, returning to her spot in front of the fire. He looked over at her, the female wiping her eyes quickly as they returned to their normal appearance.

"If... this emperor is your enemy, why come here when we are supposedly in the land ruled by him?" He asked, managing to find his voice.

She turned her head to smile at him. "None would think to look for me here of all places, don't you think?" She said. "And besides, I don't think any care about this place with how detached it is."

"Aren't you worried someone here might be loyal to this emperor though?" He pointed out, giving a frown.

"Well... I knew before coming here that you live all in a world of your own." She stated. "But... that is also why I don't wish my name and reasons for being here to spread around too much."

"Ah, I see." He muttered.

As they sat he became aware that the wind wasn't howling as loudly outside, actually not hearing anything besides the fall of rain against the roof. He set his empty bowl aside, getting to his feet and walking over to the window. It was just as bleak looking, rain still coming down in sheets, but at least the wind and lightning had calmed. With luck that meant the storm was passing, though it could just as likely start up again.

"How does it look?" Salria asked from behind him, orange eyes peering over.

"Still wet." He replied, stepping away from the window. "Though it's calmed down a bit out there. Could change though."

"Ah..." She breathed, placing her bowl down. "Thank you for the food, Aris."

"Of course." He said with a nod, glancing down at her. Her orange eyes stared back, until he started to fidget in place slightly. "I'm ah, going to check and see how Krel is, alright?"

"Alright." Salria replied with a hum, looking back to the fire.

Aris turned to where his cloak hung by the door, taking it off the hook and throwing it around his shoulders. "I won't be long." He said to her, pulling his hood up before opening the door and stepping outside.

The rain drummed against his cloak as he closed the door and started walking, but his cloak kept him dry this time. The ground was soggy under his claws, and the skies just as dark. As he walked he realized that the days off that Gamel had given were passed, by an extra day even. He knew that once the rain slowed however,

Gamel would have them right back to work. The walk to Krel's wasn't far at least, the wet paths soon bringing him to the hut where he lived. It was very similar to his own; meager accommodations that kept a roof over his head and a safe place to sleep.

He stepped up to the door, knocking firmly to get the male's attention and see if he was home. Aris imagined he would be, as he couldn't see many reasons why he would be out right now. That thought soon proved true, the door swinging inward to reveal his black-furred friend.

"Aris!" Krel greeted him, quickly stepping back to allow him in.

"Hello, Krel." He said, stepping through the door and into the dry interior of the hut, flipping his hood down.

"I was beginning to wonder where you were." He stated, closing the door and walking over to a small fire of his own. "Want some tea?"

"Ah, sure." Aris nodded, his friend quickly taking two wooden cups and filling them from a kettle that had been steeping.

He took the cup when it was handed to him, giving a sniff of the local leaf that Krel used before taking a small swallow of it. He'd always liked the brew, and now was no different.

"So, where have you been the last few days Aris?" Krel asked, drinking from his own tea. "Just been staying in your hut?"

"Mostly, yes." He nodded.

"Did you ever go to the river to tell, ah, Salria about the storm?" He questioned, brown eyes looking over at him.

"I did, yes." He confirmed, tail twitching.

"And?"

"She's... been staying in my hut since the storm began." Aris informed.

"Ah." Krel murmured. "I guess it's a good thing you went and got her then. I went to see the river earlier, actually, and it's starting to run pretty high. As always."

Aris hummed, sipping down more of the tea.

"It must be pretty cramped in that little hut of yours, Aris." Krel stated, giving a grin. "Have you been sharing a bed with her?"

He gave a growl at that, nearly chucking the cup at Krel's head if it weren't for the fact he didn't want to waste the tea.

"What?" Krel said with a chuckle, looking ready to dodge a possible projectile. Or a pounce. "You can't tell me you don't like her that way. You're never interested in a female, and then you're suddenly going out of your way to get her to stay with you."

"It's not like that." He muttered in reply, scowling. "She needed somewhere to stay out the storm."

"Fair enough, but do you not like having her staying with you?" Krel continued.

"Well, yes." He mumbled. "But I didn't do it because I wanted to... *share a bed with her.*"

"It's alright if you do, Aris." He said, less jokingly this time. "You like her and have never been with a female before. If she likes you back there's nothing wrong with wanting that."

Aris didn't respond, tossing back the last of his tea. "I'm going to head back, Krel." He stated, setting his cup down. "Thank you for the tea."

"Aye, alright Aris." Krel nodded as he stepped over to the door. "See you in the fields soon."

He opened the door and crossed back out into the rain at that, pulling up his hood as he shut the door. The rain pattered against his cloak as he made his way home, retracing his steps and thinking about what Krel had partially joked about on the way. He did like Salria, but he was trying not to think about her *that* way. A part of his mind wanted to, but he didn't know how she felt about him, beyond maybe just a friend.

Aris soon found himself back at the door to his hut, squeezing the latch and ducking inside as he opened it. He pulled his wet hood down, turning away from the closed door to face the interior of his hut. Salria was still sitting by the fire, her orange eyes peering over at him as he hung up his cloak.

"Aris." She greeted, her hand subtly moving away from her belt when she saw it was him.

"Hello." He nodded in return, stepping over to the small fire to get some of the dampness out of his fur.

"How was your friend?" She asked, resting her head back onto her knees.

"He is fine." He replied, sitting down.

"That's good." Salria mumbled. "And how is the storm?"

"It seems to be calming." He said with a shrug. "The rain is still coming down hard though."

"I see." She replied.

"Krel... mentioned the river was running high." He stated, glancing at her. "I wouldn't doubt it washed out your camp by now."

She gave a hum. "It was nothing but branches and leaves really, everything important I keep is in my pack." The female uttered. "I can rebuild it, if I must."

"Aye, I suppose you can..." He murmured, tail twitching. "You know... you don't have to live out in the forest."

"What do you mean?" Salria questioned, turning her head to look over at him.

"Well, I'm sure you could get a hut of your own." He pointed out. "Or... stay here, if you wanted."

Her expression became neutral at that, turning her head back to the fire. "Perhaps, Aris."

Aris' ears drooped, seeing that wasn't a topic she wished to discuss. He was honest when he said that, but he hoped he hadn't said something wrong. He sat quietly, letting Salria have her peace as the rain sounded against the roof. There wasn't much else to do in the waiting, leaving him to just relax as the small fire crackled away...

As the time wore on the light lessened, allowing the flames of the fire to cast a flickering light around his hut. Neither of them had spoken, the silence hanging heavy until he eventually couldn't stand it any longer. Aris climbed to his feet suddenly, drawing Salria's gaze as he walked over to his chest of drawers and pulled one open. He found what he was looking for quickly, pulling the object free and sliding the drawer closed.

Salria watched him curiously as he sat back down in front of the fire, placing a moderately sized box of heavy polished wood down in the space between them. He turned a latch, parting the halves of the box to reveal two sets of veined stone pieces. One set was black, the other white, and both had been chiseled to resemble shapes then polished smooth.

"What is this?" The female asked him as he set about removing the pieces, flipping the box over so it laid flat into a board.

"It was given to me." He replied. "From my parents, I think."

Salria picked up one of the black pieces, looking it over in the firelight as it rested in her palm.

"The stone looks quite... exotic." She uttered, looking at the patterns. "Materials of this quality seem as though they would have been costly."

"Maybe, I don't know." He muttered with a shrug. "Would you like to play? It's not really a game you can play by yourself."

"Alright..." She consented, leaving him to arrange the pieces on the board as he was taught so long ago.

When he'd gotten them all arranged, he began the process of explaining to her how the game worked. "So, we can each move one piece per turn." He started, motioning to one of the pieces. "The objective is to corner this piece here..."

After that he showed her the rest of the pieces, teaching her how she could move each one and when. It took a little time to tell her everything, but he didn't mind and soon they were able to start a real game. He let her take the first turn, he moving his own piece once she'd done so. The game was usually a slow one, depending on how much thought you put into it and how long it took you to do so. There were perhaps more fun games, but if you had the patience and time it was a different kind of fun to out think your opponent.

Since she was new to the game he went slow, but she still lost the first round. He pointed out some things to her and then followed that up with another round and another after that, until the only light came from the fire near them. By the end of their fourth game he lifted his head, the fire having burned low. The tally was three to one, with her having beat him once, and he decided that it was getting late.

"Should probably get some sleep now." He stated; taking all the pieces and placing them back into the box.

"I suppose." Salria said, watching him fold up the box and latch it closed.

"How did you like the game?" He asked, carrying it back to his drawers and stashing it away.

"It was... different." She replied, orange eyes looking up at him. "We didn't have any games like that in my village."

"I guess it was more common where... ever my parents came from." He stated, trailing off at the end as he realized he didn't know where they'd come from.

"You truly know nothing of your parents?" Salria asked, noticing his expression. "Not even where you came from?"

"No." He replied simply. "All I was ever told was that I was sent here when they died, and that they loved me greatly. They left a few things here for me, but beyond that I don't know anything about them."

"Have you ever asked the people here?" She questioned. "Surely if you were sent here they must know something of them."

"I've tried, but... no one has ever given me a straight answer, if they even know at all." He muttered. "Eventually I just stopped asking, and accepted it for what it is."

"I see." She uttered, resting her head on her knees.

"I'm, ah, going to sleep now." He said. "Gamel will want me in the fields when the rain stops, so I don't want to be late and upset him."

"Alright." She responded as he stepped over to his bedding and laid down.

"Goodnight Salria." He stated, before rolling onto his side and resting his head on his pillow.

"Sleep well." She murmured, leaving him to his rest.

It didn't take him long to find it, slipping comfortably into sleep as he listened to the rain outside...

His mind was not idle as he slept, Aris finding himself lost in a dream. It was not a rare thing for him to dream, but what made this one so special was how vivid it was. He wasn't sure at first if he truly was dreaming, but as he began to experience the imagined scenes he realized it couldn't have been reality. He was lying on his back, but he was not alone, the murky green form of Salria sitting on his waist. She was doing more than just sitting though, her clear orange eyes staring down into his intently as she slowly bobbed her hips.

He couldn't feel anything exactly, whether that be because of the dream or his inexperience in the act, but he didn't have to guess what they were doing. Despite the fact that it was a dream, it didn't lessen the small thrill he got when he wrapped his arms around her, burying his nose into the fur on her chest. Her scent was familiar to him, and because of that he was able to smell it in his dream. She reciprocated the action, pressing her head to his as she moved against him. Aris could have happily stayed in that dream awhile longer, but his mind decided then to wake him from his slumber.

He blinked his eyes open, finding himself still prone on his side just as he'd fallen asleep. It wasn't dark in his hut anymore though, early light streaming in through the window. He pulled himself into a sitting position, looking around the hut. He could still hear the light patter of rain above, but it sounded as though the rain had almost drawn to a close. Salria still slept soundly on her mat, and at the moment he was glad for that. His dream of her, albeit short, had left him in an uncomfortable state, both physically and mentally.

Aris felt a bit guilty as he looked over at her sleeping form, even though he realized it wasn't entirely his fault if his mind manifested certain feelings or urges as it had. Still, he couldn't deny that it was an... enjoyable dream. He swallowed, taking his gaze off her and climbing to his feet. If the rain had nearly stopped that meant Gamel would want to at least see him, considering it had been... four days since he'd given them the time off.

He took a long swallow from the jug of collected rainwater, before stepping over to the door and opening it quietly. He didn't want to leave Salria alone in his hut without warning, but he also didn't want to wake her, and he had to go to Gamel's field. There was also the fact that he wasn't in the best frame of mind to talk with her, even though she likely had no idea of the dream he'd had. Regardless, he would talk to her later in the afternoon... assuming she was still there.

His ears drooped at that as he started walking over the soggy ground, realizing that now that the storm had stopped she would want to separate herself from the village. If that was what she wanted though, there wasn't much he would be able to do to stop her. He just hoped she'd at least tell him where she chose to make her camp again, so that he'd be able to talk to her still...

The walk to Gamel's was for the most part unchanged, apart from the odd branch or limb that had been broken off by the wind. A dampness hung in the air from all the rain, small puddles of water yet to be absorb into the ground lying everywhere. After a short time the fields came into view, the familiar flat land and the old Sergal's hut greeting him. The field they'd worked and planted looked thoroughly soaked, the soil dark. That's what this particular crop of his liked though, the deep seeds using the water to grow in their early state.

As he neared the field Gamel emerged from his hut to meet him, waiting for him to approach.

"Enjoy your days off, Aris?" The male asked gruffly. "I trust you weathered the storm just fine."

"Ah, yes." He replied.

"Krel stopped by earlier as well." Gamel went on. "And as I told him, there isn't much to be done quite yet."

"So... do you need me here?" He asked slowly.

"For work? No." The Sergal replied. "But, how about I show you something instead?"

"Show me something?" He repeated, puzzled.

"Aye, come." Gamel turned at that, waving a hand for him to follow. Aris did so; a bit skeptical about what Gamel was going to show him.

The old male led him back to his hut, opening the door and ducking inside. He followed in after a moment, eyes adjusting to the dimmer light inside. Gamel's hut was a bit bigger than his own, but as a way of making up for that extra space he'd seemed to amass more things to fill it. Chests and shelves sat wherever they could fit, filled with various objects and books while just leaving enough space to move around in. Aris had been inside a few times before when he was younger, and the old Sergal had shown him some things then too. He certainly had his share to show, and stories to tell, for someone who just tended crops.

When the door had closed Gamel walked over to one of the chests, motioning for him to come over. As he did so the Sergal undid a few latches and lifted the lid up, revealing a layer of cloth. Gamel took a hold of the cloth and pulled, showing that it was just a cover for what lied beneath. Under that cloth were neatly stacked pieces of armor, looking as though there was enough metal plates there to cover the majority of one's form.

"This is a bit of history older than you, Aris." Gamel stated at that. "And one I thought you might be interested to see."

At that Gamel reached down and picked up the topmost piece of armor, handing the helmet over to him. Aris took it gingerly, feeling its weight settle in his hands as he looked it over. It was one smooth piece of some kind of metal, made to settle over the wearer's snout, head and ears. The snout was one uniform section, draping down from the top of the helmet and hanging just a bit lower than the person's jaw. The bottom of it was open below the lower jaw, allowing you to rest it over your head completely.

"Try it on if you want." Gamel stated.

He paused for a moment, looking skeptically at the helmet before he turned it around in his hands and brought it up to his head. He slipped it down, feeling the weight settle across his snout and head. It wasn't horribly uncomfortable, considering it obviously wasn't made for him, and his vision was only slightly obstructed. It actually felt as though there was some kind of padding attached to the inside, the interior not feeling hard like he expected.

There were many more intricate pieces resting in the chest, including both broader plates for what he guessed was the torso, and layered together pieces for the other areas. It all looked like a large amount of armor, capable of covering him from head to claw no doubt, and it left him wondering why and how Gamel had it.

"An image of me twenty years ago." The old male said with a small chuckle as he looked over. "How does it feel?"

"Not... terrible." He replied; his voice slightly muddled by the helmet.

"It would be interesting to see you wearing the whole suit." Gamel mused. "But I imagine you wouldn't want to stand here so long to don it."

Aris almost argued that point, but decided to let it go for now as he took the helm off his head.

"Is this all yours?" He asked.

"Yes, it is." Gamel replied. "Though the time when I wore it has long passed."

"Were you a soldier then?" He asked curiously.

"I wouldn't say a 'soldier', exactly." The Sergal uttered, stepping over to a chair and sitting down. He looked to be thinking to himself after that, dark eyes contemplating before he continued. "I used to be one of the personal guards for the emperor and empress of this land, you see."

"The... emperor?" He questioned, thinking back to what Salria had said about an "emperor".

"Yes. But that was a long time ago." Gamel mumbled, a flat look crossing his eyes as he sat. "Almost feels like a lifetime ago now."

"What made you go from that, to... tending crops in a village?" He asked.

"Comical, when you put it that way." He snorted. "But that, Aris, is a long story for another time. Let me just say that it was both not my own choice, and my duty that put me here."

Gamel stood at that, stepping over to the door and opening it.

"You may go now, if you wish. I'm sure I've taken up enough of your time with an old Sergal's history." He stated. "Come back tomorrow and I'll see if I've thought up anything you can help me with."

Aris ducked out of the door, glancing back at the old Sergal. "Thank you..." The male grunted at that, giving him a wave in farewell as he closed the door and returned to his own matters.

That left Aris standing on his own outside the hut, turning his head up to the sky. It was still cloudy, but their foreboding appearance had departed as the sun tried to break through. Seeing as it didn't seem he'd be working in the fields today, Aris started walking back to the village, deciding he would get some food from the market before heading home. And, maybe Salira would still be there as well...

Aris made it back to the village market quickly enough, the day brightening up a bit as the clouds slowly parted. Now that the storm had stopped the local residents were back to their daily routine, and he was able to find the cook he liked. With food in hand he made his way back home, hoping that his guest hadn't decided to simply depart. She hadn't, and as he opened the door to his hut he found as much when he saw her sitting in front of the hearth.

"Aris." Salria said in greeting, glancing over her shoulder at him.

"Salria." He responded, a small smile creeping across his maw at her still being here.

"Why are you grinning so?" She asked, quirking her head.

"I just thought you would have left since the storm stopped." He told her, shutting the door.

"Ah." Sarlia breathed. "No. I have been thinking about it, but I haven't decided yet."

"Oh... Well, would you like some food?" He asked, indicating the package he had in his hands.

"I suppose." She uttered as he walked over and sat down, placing the wrapped package of meat between them.

He unwrapped the bundle, flattening down the cloth to reveal the charred and seasoned meat. He gestured for her to go first and after a moments hesitation she did so, cutting off a chunk with her claws. She took an experimental bite, swallowing it down.

"Not... terrible." She uttered, taking another bite.

He smiled at that, cutting free a tender chunk for himself.

"Did, ah, Gamel not have anything for you to do?" Sarlia asked, glancing over at him.

"No." He replied slowly, frowning. "But... he did show me something."

Salria gave a hum as she ate, but didn't question him as to what he was shown.

"You mentioned an emperor." He stated. "But is there an empress as well?"

"Before the current emperor, yes." She told him curiously. "She was the mate of the previous emperor, and they both ruled together. Until they were betrayed, anyway."

"Oh, I see..." He mumbled, ear twitching. Could those have been the empress and emperor Gamel talked about then?

"Why do you ask?" She questioned.

"Just wondering." He offered in vague reply.

"Alright..." She muttered, swallowing down the rest of her food.

Salria stood at that, drawing his gaze as she walked over to her pack and picked it up.

"Thank you for the food and shelter Aris, but I think it's time I left." She declared, moving to the door. "I need to get another shelter made before it grows dark."

"Wait!" He spat out, jumping to his feet and stepping over to her, reaching out a hand to gently grab her wrist. "You don't have to go."

Her orange eyes narrowed at him as he stopped her. "I do, Aris." She said flatly, turning to the door again.

He took a hold of her other wrist, stepping a bit closer as his icy eyes pleaded with hers. "Please stay." He said quietly.

She didn't answer at first, and from the close distance he could smell her scent invading his nose again. It quickly started to muddle his thoughts, conjuring up the dream he'd had as he brought his snout in closer to press against her neck, breathing the scent in. She went stiff as he did so, muscles tensing.

"Aris." Salria said firmly, trying to push him away. "Stop."

He couldn't though, nor did he want to as his hands let go of her wrists to lightly rest on the soft fur covering her sides. The feelings he held for her were driving on his urges now, and as he felt the warmth through her fur he couldn't argue. He pressed his snout into her neck a bit more firmly, letting his tongue come out to affectionately lick her. If he'd been a little more consciously aware he would have noticed her demeanor, but as it stood he wasn't aware of much else besides how she felt.

It came as a surprise then when she suddenly lifted her arm, bringing it down in a swipe across the top of his snout. He jerked away from her with a startled yelp of pain, bringing his hands up to press against his muzzle as blood started to seep into his fur. He looked up at her, his eyes watering from the blow to his sensitive nose. Salria had a very neutral look, her ears lying low as her eyes stared widely at him. She didn't say anything, and before he knew it she had opened the door and darted outside, disappearing from view.

Aris didn't try to go after her, knowing she would quickly vanish and the pain in his snout too prominent to try. He stepped over to his drawers, retrieving a piece of cloth to press against his snout and control the bleeding. He fell into a sitting position on his bedding, hanging his head as he pressed the cloth against the cuts from her claws. He scolded and cursed himself for allowing his urges to take control like that.

He gave a defeated sigh, feeling a deep sadness. It had just felt right, and he honestly thought she had started to feel something for him as well. *Evidently not.* He thought bitterly. Now he'd most likely lost whatever friendship he'd started to have with her and let down her trust, all because of his desires. That was probably a worse blow than being rejected. He slumped down onto the bedding, resting his head on the pillow as he held the cloth to his snout. It was already late enough that he may as well get some sleep; Gamel was expecting him back in the morning.

That, and he didn't feel like doing anything else now. Talk to Salria, yes, but that path was likely gone. He let out a breath, closing his eyes to the throbbing in his snout. Hopefully he hadn't scared her off entirely...

Aris drifted off to sleep shortly after that, slumber taking him after the bleeding on his snout had slowed. He wasn't sure how long he slumbered, but when he woke it had grown dark outside. He blinked his eyes open with a groan, still feeling sleep hold trying to pull him back. It made him wonder why he'd even woken, but the inside of his maw was parched enough that water was favorable. As he reached for the jug of water he finally noticed that the cloth he'd used to staunch the bleeding was still on his snout, lifting a hand up to pull it away. He winced when he tried to pull it, the blood having dried onto the material as his cuts clotted.

"I'm sorry." A voice said suddenly, making him jerk in surprise.

He looked over in the direction of the voice, seeing Salria sitting with her orange eyes reflecting in the darkness.

"You came back." He stated; ears lowering as he tried to remove the cloth without opening his cuts again.

"Yes..." She mumbled, moving to sit in front of him and take the jug of water, pouring some of it over the cloth to loosen it. "I... felt bad." She added, slowly peeling the stained fabric free.

"It's not your fault." He replied, turning his head away from her at how close she was. "I shouldn't have done that."

"It isn't that you shouldn't have, Aris." Salria declared, grabbing her pack and dragging it over. "I was just... uneasy."

He glanced at her as she fished around in her pack, taking out a flask and a patch of cloth. "I was worried I scared you off."

"This will sting." She stated, wetting the cloth from whatever was in the flask. It did indeed sting, wincing when she rubbed it over his snout. "It wasn't because of you I did that, Aris. I've noticed how you act around me, I just wasn't ready for you to do that. I've had some... bad experience in the past with males."

"What do you mean?" He asked, frowning as she took the cloth away and set it aside.

Salria paused, ear twitching in consideration. "I told you my village was attacked." She reminded, taking a small jar from her pack. "When I escaped, it wasn't without difficulty. I had managed to run, but one of the attackers followed me. He caught up, and I wasn't able to fight him off or get away. He... used me, but while he was... *distracted* I was able to grab his dagger and stab him."

"Oh..." He murmured. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." She muttered, opening the jar and spreading some kind of paste on the cuts. "You are not him, and I shouldn't have treated you like you were. You have been far kinder to me than I could imagine."

She recapped the jar, returning both it and the flask to her pack.

"Thank you." He said to her, gingerly touching the cleaned cuts.

Salria looked at him a moment, still sitting in front of him, before she leant in and pressed the side of her snout against his. He blinked in surprise at the unexpected touch, pressing back against her a moment later. It felt different when his mind wasn't clouded by desire, and he slowly raised his arms to wrap around her. She didn't tense up this time, instead leaning into him until her fur was brushing over his and her head rested against his neck.

"Have you changed your mind about staying?" He asked quietly, breathing her scent in.

Her answer was to pull them both down onto the bedding, lying against him and resting her head on his arm. "Yes." She mumbled.

Aris smiled, wrapping his arms tighter around her and enjoying her warmth against him. He forgot all about the claw marks she'd given him, happy just to know he hadn't scared her off and even happier to have her with him. He rested his head down against hers, closing his eyes with a contented sigh. Sleep was pulling at him again, and with how comfortable he felt right then he saw no reason to argue.

"Goodnight, Salria." He mumbled, feeling her relax against him.

He slowly drifted off to sleep at that, holding Salria close. He would have to wake in the morning, but right then, he didn't care about anything else beside the green-furred female sharing the embrace with him...

When he woke again for the final time it was light in his hut, Salria still lying next to him. He enjoyed that a moment longer before pulling away from her, slowly getting up so as not to disturb her. He got to his feet, leaving her lying on the bedding as he grabbed his jug of water and took a neglected drink, glancing out the window as he did so. The morning was early, but he would have to go check in with Gamel soon to see if the old Sergal had work he needed help with.

He set the jug back down, gingerly touching a hand to his snout. A hard layer had formed over the cuts, already on their way in the healing process. He had to wonder

if they would leave scars, though they hadn't been horribly deep. Even if they did, he would live with them without complaint. Aris made his way over to the door, deciding it was time he should head to Gamel's, much as he would have preferred to stay right then.

He pulled the latch and ducked outside quietly, leaving Salria to her sleep as he closed the door. Early morning sun greeted him, the dampness in the air from all the rain starting to give way to clear skies. He took a deep breath of the air, before setting off at a walk down the path to Gamel's fields. Aris wasn't sure what the old Sergal would have in store for him, if anything, though perhaps he'd have them prepare another of the plots. He briefly started to wonder if Krel was at the fields already, but that wonder was soon put to rest.

"Aris!" Called the male's familiar voice, making him look back to find him walking up the path.

"Krel." He said back in greeting, following the path between two trees growing from the soil.

"I guess Gamel wanted you to come today too." Krel said with a grin, though as he drew next to him a concerned look crossed his face. "What happened to your face, Aris?"

"Nothing..." He replied quickly, bringing a hand up to the cuts.

"Be honest." Krel demanded. "Did you get into a fight or something?"

"No." He said again giving a sigh, knowing full well Krel wouldn't stop asking. "Salria clawed me."

"What?" The male exclaimed. "Why?"

"Well..." He mumbled, not quite able to say the reason freely. "It was last night, and she tried to go and make some shelter again in the forest. I asked her not to and told her she could stay, but she declined. I grabbed her wrist and I... caught her scent and started getting closer to her. It went from there, and she ended up clawing me."

"Ah, so Aris got a little too frisky." Krel uttered jokingly, but continued on before he could growl at him. "What happened after that?"

"She ducked out the door and disappeared." He said with a glare. "I just fell asleep after I'd taken care of the cuts. She came back later though and took care of my snout in apology. She... stayed, after that."

Aris decided to leave out the part where she cuddled and slept next to him, not particularly wanting to give Krel more material to joke about.

"Well it's a good thing she came back at least, I suppose." He said. "I guess she does sort of like you after all."

"Yeah, I guess she does." Aris mumbled.

"Although, clawing you is an odd way of showing it." Krel added, smirking.

He gave a snort and glared over at him.

"Come on Aris, let's see what Gamel has in store for us today." The male stated with a chuckle, changing the subject.

Aria followed after him as he took the lead, drawing near to the flat ground where the fields lay. Krel's joking didn't bother him truly, it was just a reflex for him to grow defensive when he joked about personal things like that. No amount of joking could spoil his mood anyway, not when he knew Salria would still be staying at his hut when he got back.

They soon reached the fields, the path spitting them out onto the flat land that rested amongst the hills. There wasn't much change in appearance with the handful of plots, besides the fact that green sprouts and leaves had popped up on them. Both he and Krel knew then what Gamel's tasks would be for them, the heavy rains watering his crop but also fueling the growth of the numerous weeds over the last few days. And so it was that their prediction was proved right when they came to Gamel's hut, the old Sergal coming out to greet them.

"Good morning you two." He stated to them gruffly, giving a quizzical frown at his snout but not asking into the matter. "I have some work for you to do..."

Thus was the start of their day's endeavor, thoroughly setting about removing the weed-like plants so they wouldn't starve the growth of Gamel's crop. The process wasn't quite as physically involved as tilling the ground itself, but it made up for that in tedium. It was something that had to be done though, and it left him to steadily dig them free with the tool they had each been given and deposit them in a simple wooden wheelbarrow for disposal later.

It was slow work, made more so by the fact they had to make sure to remove all of the weeds lest they simply grow back again. Still, it was something they had done many times before, and having Krel working with him made it not as dull as working alone at least.

"So." Krel began as they found themselves crouched low together removing the weeds. "What happened after she came back?"

"What?" He questioned, blinking as he looked up from the ground.

"The female, Salria." He said in clarification, giving a mocking look. "What happened when she came back from clawing you?"

"She apologized and cleaned the cuts for me." He replied vaguely. "Then said she'd changed her mind about staying..."

"Mhm, and after that?" Krel pressed, giving a smirk.

"We talked for a little." He responded as he pulled a clump of plant free, giving Krel the hints of a glare.

"Alright, alright." The male surrendered with a chuckle. "I know when you're avoiding something and if you don't want to talk about it that's fine. Just curious if the Aris I've known for so long started sharing that bed of his."

Aris gave a snort, but he couldn't be upset with Krel for his questions and joking. He'd know him for years, and they'd certainly shared their own jokes. There was also the fact that he could have been concerned despite his joking and was only looking out for him as a friend, which he also couldn't be upset about. He had started sharing his bed of course, though he imagined not in the way Krel thought. Maybe that was why the jokes prodded at him so much too, because he wanted those jokes of his to be true.

He swallowed as his mind drifted to other thoughts, focusing on finishing the work before him. The contact he'd had with her was enough for him, regardless of what he wanted. It had been very comforting to have her with him like that, and he didn't want to press his luck a second time and end up having her disappear for good. She definitely seemed skittish enough for that, but given what she'd told him he couldn't blame her. Still, she'd come back and gone so far as to sleep together with him, regardless of her skittishness, and she'd even said it "wasn't that he shouldn't have" when she'd apologized...

He had to force himself away from those thoughts again, digging another weed free. It was hard not to think those thoughts, especially with how much he liked her. And then... maybe those thoughts came to him so much because he'd never actually been with a female or cared about one so much before. Aris gave a grunt; no, he cared for Salria regardless of his state of life prior. He just started to move on to the next weed when all he found was empty dirt, making him look up and realize they'd gone around the entire plot.

He climbed to his feet, brushing off as much of the clinging dirt as he could before moving to his half-full wheelbarrow. He took a hold of the handles and started pushing it out of the field, being mindful not to run over any of Gamel's sown plants. They had to dump the weeds elsewhere of course, for they'd likely find their way back into the soil if they didn't. He met up with Krel on his way, the both of them ferrying their collection of refuse weeds to dump at the location Gamel had directed them to many times prior.

With their wheelbarrows emptied they returned to Gamel's shed, stowing the tools and equipment back where they'd taken them. With that all done and the work for today finished, they both started towards the stream for a much needed bath. They were stopped before they could depart though, Gamel waving to them from by his hut.

"A word, Aris." He called. "You needn't stay Krel."

Krel gave him a sidelong look, but decided to not stay when Gamel didn't seem to want him to. "I'll see you at the river, Aris." He stated in farewell. "Or back at the village..."

Krel turned and walked off at that, leaving him to see what Gamel wanted him to stay for. He walked over to the old Sergal, ears perked questioningly.

"Is something wrong?" He asked slowly.

"No." Gamel replied, dark eyes watching him. "But how did you get those cuts on your face? Were you attacked by someone?"

"I wasn't attacked. It was an... accident." He mumbled, tail twitching as he debated how much to tell the Sergal. Gamel had always been fair to him, but his story about defending the "empress and emperor" had him leery to speak about Salria; even more so since Salria asked him *not* to speak of her to anyone.

"An accident?" He questioned, frowning. "By whom?"

Aris tensed his jaw slightly, Gamel for some reason being quite adamant. "What emperor did you serve in that story you told me?"

"What emperor?" He repeated, eyes narrowing on him. "Who have you been talking to Aris?"

He kept his jaw tensed, for the first time truly refusing to answer the old Sergal with his questioning of Salria. It was long moments of silence before either of them spoke, Gamel staring at him with the same narrowed frown.

"Ah... I see now." The Sergal finally breathed, nodding. "You are hiding someone, aren't you? Someone running from an 'emperor'?"

Aris held his air of insistent silence, icy-blue eyes watching him.

"Have they told you whom this emperor is, Aris?" Gamel continued, cocking his head. "Because I promise you, whomever they have talked about is not the same as the family I once served. Now tell me true Aris, who are you hiding?"

He grit his teeth, not wanting to give up Salria, but also struggling with the fact that Gamel had never done him any wrong.

"A... stranger I met." He grudgingly replied. "She came here a little over a week ago."

"A stranger?" Gamel said. "Does she come from the south?"

"Yes... she does." Aris responded, wondering what that meant to Gamel.

"I understand now." He hummed, his pose relaxing and his gaze softening. "You're afraid I would harm her because you think I once served this 'emperor'."

Aris didn't immediately reply to that, but evidently Gamel could see the answer in his features.

"She has nothing to fear from me, Aris." He declared to him honestly. "I assure you that we share the same dislike for the current emperor."

"Very well..." He mumbled.

"The family I once served, were the Veraxian's. The emperor of which she speaks is nothing more than a traitorous snake, and I bear no allegiance to him." Gamel told him after a short pause, bitterness creeping into his voice. "But... enough of that, go get cleaned up. Be at ease that your secret is safe with me, just... be careful Aris. I will see you tomorrow."

The old Sergal turned at that, signaling that he could depart with a wave.

Aris stared at him momentarily, before deciding to heed that bid and resume his trek to the river. Gamel seemed... honest in his words, so he would simply have to trust him for now. He could speak with Salria and see if it was true what he said as well, but he didn't think Gamel would lie to him over this. Aris quickly put the fields behind him, walking the path that would take him to the water. If he had still been watching, perhaps he would have seen the way Gamel stood, staring off into the horizon with an odd expression...

When he got to the river Krel was still there, the Sergal turning in the water to face him as he striped off his loincloth and waded into the water.

"What was that about?" Krel questioned after he had dunked himself below the surface a few times to cool and calm himself.

"He asked me how I got these cuts." He replied. "And... started asking about Salria."

"Did you tell him about her?" Krel asked curiously, floating idly in the water.

"Not right away, but... eventually I did." He answered.

"Ah." The male uttered. "Are you worried about her?"

"Yes." He admitted, frowning as he stroked his arms through the water. "But... Gamel doesn't have any reason to harm her."

"I'd imagine not." Krel agreed. "So much secrecy and paranoia surrounding this female of yours. She must mean a lot to you."

"She does." He replied honestly, not sensing any joking in his friend's voice this time.

"Setting all my joking and wising around aside Aris, I am glad she makes you happy." The male stated. "There's just a lot more to where and what she came from, so that's why I am concerned sometimes."

"I know Krel, about all of that." He said, eyes looking up to his friend. "It's just... a part of me needs her, I guess."

"I understand." The male nodded with a smile. "How about we finish up here, and you can go back to that female you need so much."

Aris couldn't help but grin slightly at that despite the prodding nature. Krel was still his friend, and he couldn't get defensive about every claw he poked him with.

They waded back to the bank, wrapping their loincloths back around their soaked waists and setting off on the return trip to the village. The sun was descending in the sky as it dried their fur, the afternoon growing late after their work. Krel parted from him upon reaching the village, saying a goodbye before he walked the path across the land towards his hut. That left him to go to his own home, the day too late to do anything else, if even there was anything else.

He walked up to the front of his hut, coming to the door and squeezing the latch. When he stepped inside what greeted him was the unchanged view of his home, save for the one green-furred female that was sitting with her head on her knees. He smiled at seeing Salria, closing the door behind him and walking over to her.

"Salria." He said in greeting, sitting down near her for the first time that day.

"Hello, Aris." She replied, orange eyes looking up to him.

He stared at her with that smile until he was able to work up the nerve to reach a hand over, laying it lightly on hers. Salria was still for a moment, before she eventually scooted over against his side.

"How is your nose?" She asked, the fur on her shoulder brushing his.

"It's fine." He replied. "If people hadn't been reminding me I'd have forgotten about it by now."

"That's good." Salria uttered, looking over to him and the claw mark on his snout. She lifted a hand to rest lightly on it, making him look down at her and press his nose into her wrist.

"Have you been here all day?" He asked as she dropped her hand.

"Yes." She replied.

"You can go outside you know." He said. "There's a lot of different things to see if you look around."

"Perhaps." She mumbled.

He knew it was because she didn't want to make her presence known to everyone in the village, but he didn't see that as a reason to stay inside his hut. Aris rested his head down between her ears, causing her to tense momentarily before she relaxed.

"You don't have to worry here." He said reassuringly, nose pressing into her fur.

Salria let out a sigh, but didn't argue that statement as she gingerly pressed up against him. They sat like that for quiet moments, before he reluctantly decided to part from her, at least for now.

"Can I ask something?" He queried.

"You may." Salria mumbled.

"The 'empress and emperor' that you talked about." He started curiously. "Do you know what their names were?"

Salria's orange gaze looked over to him at that, giving him an odd expression. "I do know it, yes." She replied. "Not many remember their full names anymore, but their family was called Veraxian. Why do you ask, Aris?"

"Well..." He began uncertainly, not wanting to lie to her. "You know Gamel yes? From the fields?"

"I remember him, yes." Salria agreed, frowning.

"He asked where I got the cuts on my face, and I... ended up having to tell him about you." He told her. "But he had already figured out I was hiding something. You don't have to worry about him doing anything Salria, I trust him enough."

She gave a hum at that, looking away from him. "I suppose I can do nothing but trust in your judgment then, Aris." She said.

"I'm sorry." He offered, ears drooping. "I didn't mean to break my promise."

"It is alright." She uttered, eyes softer when she looked back to him. "You cannot hide me from everyone. It is inevitable that some will find out if I am to stay here. But, what does that have to with the old rulers?"

"It's a bit of a long story, but he apparently served them a long time ago." He replied. "At first I didn't want to tell him about you because... I thought he meant this 'emperor' you're hiding from."

"I see..." Salria mumbled, ears perking. "That is interesting. Most who served that family were 'removed' as far as I know."

"Well, maybe that explains why he's here." He mused with a small shrug. "All I know is he's been here for as long as I've been alive."

"Perhaps I will speak with this Gamel some time..." Salria said thoughtfully. "Does all this talk of emperors and rulers not seem odd to you, Aris?"

"A little." He uttered, not expecting that question. "I do find it strange and wish to learn about it, but as I said, I've grown up here, detached from it all. It is a lot to learn about and understand."

"Does it not worry you at all?" She questioned, looking over at him.

"It is hard to worry about something you've never seen before." He said with a slight smile, looking down at her orange eyes a moment before continuing. "But, it does worry me because of... you. You say this emperor wishes to dominate with his rule, but I don't wish to see you harmed because of it."

Salria was silent at that, simply gazing up at him with a strange expression. She surprised him a bit when she lifted one of her green-furred hands up, sliding it up the side of his face and resting it on his ear.

"It is quite pretty, you know." She stated.

"What is?" He questioned, confused.

"The jewelry, in your ear." She clarified, tapping a finger against the spot for emphasis. "It looks nice, and it goes with your eyes."

"Oh..." He breathed, both remembering the adornment on his ear and being slightly taken aback by the form of compliment.

"Where did you get it?" Salria asked.

"I... don't know." He said slowly. "I've always had it. It must have been put there when I was young, before I came here."

"I see." She mumbled, eyes meeting his. "What is it you want, Aris, in return for how much you care?"

"What do I want?" He repeated, swallowing slightly. He could tell it was an honest question, and he wanted to answer her truthfully. "I just... want you." He said quietly. "I've never felt as happy or comfortable like I do with you, and I just don't want that to change."

She was silent for the longest time at his response, her hand resting against his head.

"When you first came to my shelter, Aris, all I could think of was what that male from the attack on my village had wanted from me, and how much resentment and anger I felt." She said, creating a small frown on his features as she watched him. "But I was wrong about you, and if I truly make you feel that way, I will... be a friend to you."

Aris wasn't sure what to say to that, but by the way she was looking at him he didn't think he had to respond with words. All he could do was give a warm smile, one that Salria returned after a moment. He wouldn't have called it a declaration of what her feelings were, but it was enough.

"I should get to sleep." He mumbled, noticing after a time that it had grown quite dark inside his hut. "I am tired from working, and I have to be back at the fields tomorrow."

"Go on then." Salria replied, letting her hand fall.

He moved over to his bedding reluctantly, not wanting to but needing to sleep regardless. As he sat himself down on the padding he was at least given the pleasant surprise of Salria coming to join him, the female evidently deciding to share sleep with him now. He wasn't going to complain, gratefully letting her lay down next to him. He draped an arm lightly over her as she pressed up against him, resting his head down above hers.

"Goodnight, Salria." He murmured.

Her response was to nestle her head in against his throat, curling up against him. He breathed a happy sigh, curling his arm around her tighter. This feeling of having her close to him was one he would never tire of, and one he was very glad to have. He only hoped that his presence granted her just as much happiness and comfort as her own did for him...