

Zoomka!

Kharka commanded the hovercam to snap, having made sure the wide angle captured not just the three of them, but also the stunning backdrop of the wide savannah. She sent it to instant posting on ClickClock and relished in the immediate incoming stream of excited “Zoomka!”s from friends and relatives.

She was absolutely thrilled to vacation with Chital and Sndnslwke. After the three had gotten married, they decided to celebrate the occasion by going on a romantic planet-hopping getaway. Once over, they’ll need to hunker down and get on with the business of nesting and hatching a triplet of their very own little Keet’hbees.

“Planeterth Free Massage!” said Agxla-II with glee, referring to the rough ride. Agxla-II, who insisted on being called Ag, was not only their tour guide, but also their driver, cook, and evidently, on-board entertainer. He beamed at her from the driver’s seat, “Excellent! Right?” Kharka couldn’t tell if Ag was serious, laughing with her, or laughing at her. The vehicle trudged along the dusty road delivering sharp pangs to her bum with a vindictive zeal. It was so totally worth it, she reminded herself. The shots she was getting were awesome.

None of Kharka’s other friends travelled to such exotic destinations, she thought smugly. Most opted for a week of luxurious fog showers and invigorating sand spas in North Keet’hbee. Ugh. How dull. The universe is too big and exciting, why do Keet’hbees never bother looking beyond the tip of their trunks?

Ag was not a Planeterthen native, of course. Though the planet was filled with wild beasts and complex vegetation, it had no indigenous Level 3 sentients. Settlers from across the less fortunate planets of the federation had come to Planeterth to find work, mostly in tourism. A lot of them Alpha-centaurians. Too many, in Kharka's opinion.

A gangly beast with a long neck sporting a neat pattern of light and dark browns was running not too far from them. Four legged. How quaint. "The locals call it 'giraffe'," Ag explained, "and this one," he pointed at a black and white striped-patterned beast, also four legged, "is a 'dzeebrah'." His standard galactic was decipherable, but his accent drove her nuts. Alphians always spoke like their mouths were full of lint.

Planeterth had been trending lately among those in the know, but still not overly mainstream. A perfect sweet spot, "Raw+Authentic", as ClickClocker Maat42 declared, and that one knew her stuff.

Kharka rounded her three nostrils into perfect loops, lowered her chins and commanded the hovercam to snap again. Another delish post. Their friends will be so jelly. "We so totally got here before it got big," Kharka said smirking, and both Chital and Sndnslwke nodded enthusiastically, patting her ears while posting their own ClickClocks.

She recalled the planet was home to life forms of binary sexual reproduction, amongst them creatures whose gestation actually happened within the body of their parental units. So disgustingly fascinating.

"Will we see the nearly Level 3 sentient locals?" Chital inquired. Chital always liked being on top of the plans. Good thing too. Not Kharka's strong suit. Certainly not Sndnslwke's.

Ag looked at her sheepishly. “Ah, they called humans, ya, hard to see, few left. Maybe see, maybe not.” Chital humphed, mildly disappointed.

They were startled by a loud thunk.

“What was that?” Sndnslwke jolted up, nostrils quivering.

Chital and Kharka put their primary trunks around Sndnslwke, soothingly stroking her large delicate ears. Sndnslwke looked at them with loving appreciation, as her breath settled down.

“Poachers,” Ag explained.

“Poachers?” Kharka was not familiar with the word

“It’s illegal hunting, love,” explained Chital. Yup, so good to have someone who is on top of things. “What are they hunting?” Chital asked.

“Humans.”

“Tsssss,” Sndnslwke hissed through her trunk in disapproval. “Surely that’s punishable? Intelligent creatures with pain receptors?”

“Illegal, ya, but good moneys. Also not Level 3 sentient so ok.”

“Why hunt them?” Kharka asked, feeling sadness seeping into her. She hated being sad. It didn’t feel nice and she didn’t come out well on cam.

“Meat is very tasty, best for Alpha-centaurians. We discovering planet, we harvest much send home. Also hair of genitalia of adults bring blessing.”

“Do they need to be killed for that hair?” Kharka asked in clear distaste. Those Alphians were friendly, but so backwards.

“No, but easier just kill. Also make decorations from fots and hands. Door knobs, paper baskets. For east spiral planets. They like to buy.” some planets have the worst taste, Kharka thought.

Another loud thunk disturbed the idyllic, though bumpy ride.

“Are these humans dangerous?” Sndnslwke asked. The sweet thing, always too anxious.

Sndnslwke was the one who wanted to visit Planeterth the least. In fact, she was strongly hinting the spa and fog option was preferable. She grudgingly agreed, seeing her spouses’ excitement and recognizing the major FOMO it will give her circles.

“Oh no. Have no defense. Killing sticks, primitive combustion, simple nuclear fission. Nothing big.” Ag said dismissively.

“Say Ag, How did you come to know so much about this area, anyway?” Chital asked.

Ag looked uncomfortable again. Kharka knew by the tell-tale Alphian sign: slight vibrations of the smooth protruding appendages Alphians used for depth sensing at astounding accuracy. It made them good hunters.

“Ag not always tour guide. Used to be one.”

Thunk.

“A human poacher, you mean?” Kharka asked, nostrils widening.

“Yes.”

Shame on you is shame on us, she thought, unable to disseminate the judgement and disgust welling in her.

Thunk. The sound was putting Kharka on edge.

“Please forgive Ag.” he said, “was young. Ag like humans now. Not as food.”

“How many still remain?” Chital asked.

“They are scatter. So many dead. They lost technology, lost most language. Maybe 100, maybe 1000. Hard to say. Others still poaching. Not Ag.”

The road curved and the vegetation opened up. Ahead of them, they could see a large ground vehicle zigzagging recklessly across the plains, towing a makeshift platform. Dangling from it were the corpses of six or seven of the human creatures. They seemed gaunt and not particularly appetizing but Alphians eat their own mothers at birth, and from there proceed to eat just about anything else that’s made of meat.

A tear dropped from Kharka’s third eye, the most emotional one. She contemplated humans. From what she knew of them, they were a kind and wonderfully cute species. With their smooth, coverless skin, only two eyes and clawless arms. So ill equipped for life. She pondered in awe how they ever survived as long as they did. Perhaps it’s just as well, some species were too gullible and trusting. Easy to pluck off, not designed to withstand evolution, the harsh ever-watchful mother of all.

Sensing her disturbed mood, Sndnslwke tugged gently and lovingly at Kharka's large ears.

“I can’t wait to get a nice cold Silicone Onset when we get back to our capsule tonight,” Kharka sighed, thinking of her favorite drink.

She closed her eyes and wiped some tears with her elegant middle trunk. She extended her two other trunks towards her two beautiful spouses. She cherished being able to sit between them, protected, nurtured. She caressed their sensitive nostrils and intertwined her trunks with theirs. She made the right choice.

“Tomorrow we’ll be swimming with cave Dilfidos on planet Slavxara,” Chital knew to remind her.

“Oh!” She had totally forgotten. Excited by the thought, Kharka snorted-squealed, “Zoomka!”

That’s enough fretting, she decided, and promptly put aside sad things she could do nothing about. That’s just how things are, she smiled to herself and to the hovercam, hugged her spouses, and sent another ClickClock, this time with a sparkle filter.