

A/N: This story was the end result of a few late night conversations when I asked Kered to spill his guts about Klingon culture. He was nice enough to then let me name my character after him. The other character, well, she's all mine.

### A Ticklish Situation

Kered watched as Niala's eyes fluttered shut. No, there was no doubt about it. Although clever, the woman could not hold her liquor. But, it was not her fault, since there were very few species that could drink a Klingon under a table. She had given it a valiant effort, though, holding out longer than Kered had expected. In the end, however, the outcome was never in doubt.

It had become a habit of theirs to meet in the mess hall in the late hours of the evening. There they sat and talked about things both profound and meaningless. The habit had started one evening when Niala had had a question about Klingon culture. She'd been so curious that she'd spent the better part of a day trying to locate Kered. By the time she'd finally spotted him sitting alone in the mess hall, it was well after midnight. The two had talked until Niala started to fall asleep despite her best efforts to stay awake. They had agreed to continue the conversation another evening. And now, three months later, the habit seemed to be firmly in place. At least two nights a week, sometimes more, the two met in the mess hall after midnight to talk.

Truthfully, Kered wasn't sure why Niala continued to meet with him. The doctor was silver haired and forty-five years older than her, hardly ideal company for someone who had just turned thirty. Thankfully, he still had a lean and well-muscled body, instead of the softer, heavy-set body that some Klingon males developed as they aged. He wasn't old as far as his people reckoned age, but his age bothered his crewmembers enough that he had few romantic encounters among them. The younger they were, the more they were bothered. Niala, however, didn't treat him as if he were some sort of fossil from the past. She seemed genuinely interested in his stories and opinions. And, since he was being honest with himself, it felt good to know that there was an attractive young woman on board who was interested in what he had to say. Being dedicated to his work as a healer and a warrior was satisfying, yes, but there were some needs that work could not fill. The need for simple friendship was one of these. So he understood why *he* looked forward to their meetings.

But he was not sure what she got out of it.

At their last meeting, they had agreed to bring things to sweeten their next one. This time, each had arrived with a little something extra. Niala had arrived with a container full of brownies she had managed to find time to make. Kered had arrived with Saurian brandy. It had promised to be a good evening, and it had been, filled with talk, and song, and speculation. Now Kered sat

watching Niala as she slept with her head on the table and her lips slightly parted. He was momentarily distracted from the initial question that had occupied his thoughts by a new one: what did her lips taste like? Which taste would be stronger: the taste of the chocolate pastry she had been eating, or the taste of the alcohol she had been drinking? He could smell both aromas from where he sat and watched her, since his sense of smell was so much keener than a human's, but still, he wondered. For a moment, he considered leaning down and finding out. She was asleep. Would she even notice a kiss in her sleep? Then, he decided against such an action. He would not taste her lips. Waiting until she was asleep seemed too much like stealing, and Kered was not a thief. If he were ever going to kiss Niala, he wanted her to be wide awake and eager. With that settled, he allowed his mind to return to his earlier question.

Why had Niala tried to tickle him tonight?

Was it because she'd had too much to drink?

She was definitely weaving back and forth by the time she'd slowly stood up from where she'd been sitting across the table from him. Somehow, Niala had managed to cross the short distance from her side of the table to his without coming into full-body contact with the floor. She had looked directly into his brown eyes, her expression challenging him, but not in the way he had expected when he'd seen her freeze, look at him sharply, and then get up from her seat. Niala's eyes were twin brown cauldrons of pure indignation when she got up. She seemed to be daring him to do something about whatever it was she was planning to do when she reached his side of the table. She took a slightly wide-legged stance in an attempt to balance herself, and lit into the hide of the ship's doctor, pointing her right index finger at him for emphasis, her words flitting between eloquence and slurring.

"You know, I am so tired of hearing you go *on and on* about how frail humans are. Klingon-human hybrids are beginning to turn up more than they used to, and the majority of their mothers are human. *Obviously* humans, especially women, aren't as weak as you think."

Kered was taken slightly aback by the vehemence in Niala's voice. He was not trying to offend her. He was merely stating a well-known medical fact. Humans were weaker. They could show courage and tenacity, true, but medically speaking, they simply were not as strong as Klingons, could not take the same levels of physical damage a Klingon could take. That fact had very real implications when it came to romance and sexual relations. Klingons injured each other during the act. He had never treated any humans who had been brave enough, or foolish enough, to pursue a relationship with a Klingon, but he supposed the injuries could be quite severe. Kered took a long look at Niala, wondering if he had somehow damaged their friendship. He had no idea she felt so strongly on the subject. Well, she was right to a degree. There *were* more hybrids now. And that did suggest that there were couples willing to find ways to adapt to the differences between the two species. He supposed he could concede that point.

“Well, you are correct about that, Niala. But those humans were clearly warrior types: strong, well-muscled, and naturally aggressive. Those types of women would be best able to handle the passions of a Klingon male.”

Surely Niala could understand his argument, no matter how drunk she might be. However, upon hearing his well-meaning explanation, she frowned even more.

“There’s no way *every* one of those women was the Amazon-type. I bet there are some Klingon men out there who like their human women feisty, but normal sized. And even a woman my size can be sexually aggressive, Kered.”

Kered had his doubts, and the look he gave her said so. Although, verbally sharing those doubts with Niala did not seem like the wisest thing to do tonight. Then again, Kered mused, it seemed downright unethical to let Niala weave her way back to her own side of the table under the impression that someone like her had a... How did the humans phrase it? *A snowball’s chance in hell?* Yes, that was it. It was wrong to let Niala collapse on her own side of the table under the impression that she had a snowball’s chance in hell of getting through a night with a Klingon male without receiving serious injuries. Kered remembered Niala’s height and weight from one of their earlier conversations. She was 1.651 meters tall, and weighed 61.2349 kilograms. In other words, she was tiny when compared to someone like himself, who stood at 2.2 meters and weighed 136 kilograms. Why, the first thrust alone... Kered halted himself in his thoughts of a first thrust between a waiting pair of female thighs. It had been a while since he’d enjoyed the company of a female, and currently there were no females on board that he thought would be suitable for his idea of passionate sex. Maybe an Andorian female would transfer aboard at their next stop? That would help make the rest of his posting bearable, but it would do nothing for him in the present if he did not find a way to get Niala off her chosen subject. He took a deep breath and tried to think. Unfortunately, his effort to shake his head and remove the image of shapely female legs brought his head back in the path of Niala’s glare. The indignation was still there, but he could see something else lurking in her eyes as well. What was she up to?

Taking in the entire specter of his drunken colleague, he found himself noticing that Niala was wearing the *very* short dress-type uniform Starfleet allowed. That was definitely not an improvement. Instead of an image of shapely legs in his mind, he was now staring at an actual pair. Kered shifted his line of sight from Niala’s legs back to her face. He poured himself another glass of brandy and downed it in one swallow. He was grateful for the burn of the alcohol down his throat, as it helped him bring his attention back to the conversation at hand. Niala was correct that there were more hybrids these days. And that was proof that it was possible for a human female and a Klingon male to move together gloriously. Kered shook his head again. The images his fertile mind kept conjuring were best left unexplored. It was time to find out *why* Niala was on this particular subject in the first place. That was probably the key to dissuading her of such ideas.

“Fantasies are harmless, but reality is seldom the same. Do you even *know* any humans who have chosen Klingon mates?”

Lack of actual testimony would be the way to cure Niala of her line of thinking. Show her how rare such a thing was, and she would leave it the realm of dreams. Just the same, Kered narrowed his eyes and smiled in a very masculine way, now knowing what some of Niala’s dreams were made of. She was usually such a quiet woman. He would have never guessed she thought so... boldly.

Niala, who was still standing in front of Kered, grew quiet as her thoughts seemed to turn inward. Her stance became less aggressive. She leaned a bit in the general direction of the table and Kered’s face, and spoke in a tone that was a near whisper when compared to her earlier one. “No. I’ve never known anyone who took a full Klingon as a mate. But, I do know a woman who took a hybrid as a mate. I know her and her hybrid mate very well. She’s certainly no Amazon, and he’s definitely much bigger and stronger than she is. To my knowledge, he’s never seriously hurt her. A dislocated finger, a broken rib, or something minor like that, I’m sure, but nothing serious. And I’m willing to bet it was the same with his parents. His father was half-Klingon. His grandfather was a full Klingon. I’ve seen photos of his human mother and grandmother. Neither of those women were what you say a human woman would have to be in order to endure her mate’s passions. He told me once that I’m a lot like his grandmother in size.”

Niala’s voice held tones of reverence as she spoke about the hybrid and his lineage. She was clearly impressed by these people. This was not what Kered was expecting to hear, but it did explain her insistence that sexual relationships between the two species could be harmonious. Now he was curious. How did she meet this couple? How did the couple meet and fall in love? Niala’s drunken rant was generating enough questions to keep them talking in the mess hall after midnight for at least another six months. If relations between the Klingon Empire and the Federation continued to go well, perhaps someone needed write a manual on sexual safety between the two species. Kered knew that he wanted to know everything she knew about this couple. Interviewing Niala’s friends could provide a wealth of information. Kered felt the majority of his earlier sexual tension drain away as he began concentrating on the task of writing the manual, rather than concentrating on the task of getting laid. He started thinking of exactly which kinds of information such a manual should contain. If his friend, Niala, and others like her could not be persuaded to abandon the idea of bedding Klingons, then he could at least provide them with the knowledge necessary to end with night with minor, rather than major, injuries. Thus was the job of a healer.

“So you say, Niala, so you say. But I would have to talk to these friends of yours before *I* would start seeking human companionship. And I think you should spend your free time flirting with some of the humans on board, instead of fantasizing about Klingon warriors. It would be much safer for you. Besides, how would you even get a warrior’s attention? None of the...pick-up lines, did I say that correctly?”

Niala nodded, finding it far easier to that than trying to talk and make sense at the same time.

“None of the pick-up lines I hear you humans saying to each other would even work on a warrior.”

Kered was quite serious. In his heart of hearts he was convinced that a sexual relationship like the one she'd been talking about was a complete mistake. Which was a shame, because now his earlier half-imagined thought of Niala's legs had morphed into wondering what it would feel like to have those legs wrapped around his waist.

Kered started to wonder if maybe he had also had too much to drink. His thoughts were definitely going into territory they had never ventured into before. Perhaps it was time to consider ending the conversation for the night. Niala swayed as she moved in very close to Kered. Out of habit, he checked the location of her hands quickly to see if she was armed. She wasn't, but they did seem poised for something. Her smile was a very confident one.

“Trust me, I have my ways. If I wanted a warrior to notice me, he'd notice.”

It was such a cryptic remark that made it him cautious. His senses readied themselves for detecting an attack of some sort. More concerning, however, was the light scent that he was becoming aware of now that Niala was closer to him than she had been. He'd never caught that particular scent coming from her before, but he'd caught one very similar to it many times during his long life. Was it possible? Kered was now confused, which caused him to leave himself open.

It was at that moment, while Kered was trying to recall from his alcohol soaked memory if he had ever read anything about humans communicating through scent, that Niala struck. She reached out and made contact with the considerably vulnerable area below his ribcage. Had he still been in the Klingon Defense Force, that area would have been covered by armor. Kered was not in the KDF anymore, so he was not wearing his armor as he sat in the mess hall. He was wearing his armor-less Starfleet uniform, and he felt the gentle, teasing touch of Niala's fingers against his abdomen. At first, he wondered if she were trying to scratch him, which made no sense. But then, it registered. She was trying to tickle him.

Kered had no idea how he should respond. Reflexively, he grabbed her hands and held onto them. He looked into Niala's face. Her teasing glare was gone, as if she were shocked at what she'd done.

“That was unwise, Niala, moving suddenly like that. If I had thought you were a true threat to me, you would be incapacitated by now.”

“I'm sorry, Kered. I'm not sure why I did that. You couldn't possibly understand...”

Slowly, he released his grip on Niala's hands. She backed away from Kered, not afraid, but more like embarrassed. Free of his grip, she wobbled back to her seat and sat down heavily. Her face

still appeared dazed. Kered raised the bottle of brandy, offering her another drink. Niala held out her glass, accepting it. He poured himself another drink, this time sipping it slowly as he watched Niala.

“Why were you trying to tickle me, Niala?”

But Niala didn't respond to Kered's question. She seemed lost in her thoughts as she drained her glass. In fact, she wasn't even looking at him anymore, but at a spot somewhere only her mind could see.

Kered began to feel a bit worried. He drew in a deep breath through his nose. Niala's scent had changed again. What had he missed?

What had been a raucous conversation now turned into silent contemplation, with Niala lost within her own mind, and Kered wondering what had caused things to change. Soon after the silence began, Niala's head dropped to the table and her eyes fluttered shut.

Kered was left with his question unanswered.

It was while he was still watching Niala sleep that one of the younger crewmembers came into the mess hall. It was the female Caitian, F'Rsa. He remembered Niala saying that the two had been roommates at Starfleet Academy. Perhaps she could help him make sense out of Niala's behavior?

And so Kered asked F'Rsa to come over and help him get Niala back to her quarters. The Caitian obliged. The two talked about Niala as Kered carried the sleeping woman in his arms. Talking helped him focus on something other than the feel of Niala's head against his chest.

“She tried to what?” F'Rsa was clearly surprised and amused at her friend's behavior.

“She tried to tickle me,” Kered repeated. He truly needed to know why F'Rsa found this so amusing.

F'Rsa stopped laughing and looked Kered squarely in the face.

“You honestly have no idea? All right, I know you are being honest with me, but Doctor, surely you can guess why?”

Kered was beginning to lose the pleasant buzz the alcohol had given him. Frustration was not far behind if he did not resolve this mystery.

“If I understood why she did it, I would have responded appropriately. Or at the very least, I would not have responded in the way I did. Niala appeared embarrassed. I did not wish to make my friend feel that way.”

Kered watched as F'Rsa flinched from the growl that was beginning to creep into his voice. He took another deep breath to calm himself.

“Very well, Doctor. This is what I remember from our days at the Academy. Niala tickles males as a way to flirt intensely with them. It allows her to get very close physically. If the male is from a species that relies on scent, then the male in question would be able to scent her interest in a discrete manner. If he's human, then the fact that she's touching him invites a similar response. My guess, Kered, is that Niala is very interested in you, and was trying to initiate further contact. Since you said she said she didn't know why she did it, I would guess that the amount of alcohol you two have been drinking pushed her to reveal something she would have normally kept to herself.”

Kered was speechless.

The pair arrived at Niala's quarters. Kered used his medical override to open the door. Together, he and F'Rsa got Niala settled into her bed for the night. As they turned to leave, F'Rsa looked at him for a while, and then asked him a question.

“Did Niala say anything else tonight?”

Kered was still unsettled by F'Rsa's information. Could there possibly be more to shock him?

“She talked at length about a woman she knew that mated with a human-Klingon hybrid.”

Kered watched as F'Rsa seemed to be considering something. F'Rsa nodded her furry head.

“Doctor, I think you should check Niala for alcohol poisoning. Surely she drank quite a bit trying to keep up with you.”

Kered suddenly felt sheepish. What kind of healer was he if he neglected to make sure those under his care remained in good health? He reached into the small pouch he kept on his belt at all times and took out a simple medical tricorder. He tried to scan his friend, but something seemed to be wrong with his device. It was that, or he was drunker than he imagined. He looked over at the Caitian.

“I believe your device is working just fine, Doctor. What is it telling you?”

“It is telling me that Niala's blood alcohol content is within safe levels. And it is telling me that Niala's DNA contains elements that should appear in readings on one of my people.”

“Now it seems you have another mystery, Doctor. Shall we leave Niala to her dreams?”

Kered followed F'Rsa out of Niala's quarters. He took a final glance back at the sleeping woman, wondering if he might have been in her dreams if he hadn't embarrassed her.

Kered devoted himself to a crash course in human courtship customs and behaviors over the next few days. He was surprised at what he discovered. Human courtship customs were as complex and varied as those of his people. He also started looking into Niala's medical records. He had never treated her for anything, so there had never been a need to review them. He found the answer he was seeking. Niala didn't just know the couple she'd mentioned. She was their granddaughter.

Kered thought about all he'd learned. He understood now why Niala had continued to meet with him. She was genuinely interested in him. He probably reminded her of men she'd known all her life. He reviewed his own thoughts that night. The alcohol hadn't created them. It had merely set free what was already there. It was always better when he was honest with himself. He was interested in Niala. But what could be done about it?

It would be an entire two weeks before Niala and Kered would encounter one another in the mess hall.

When Niala entered the mess hall after midnight, she wasn't surprised to see Kered. She was surprised to see him working, however. He was busy: entering information into a PADD, checking the information on another, and occasionally checking handwritten notes. What was he doing? She was curious, and her curiosity was far greater than any lingering embarrassment she might have been holding on to.

"Kered, what are you working on?"

Niala moved up closer to where the doctor was sitting.

"Something our conversation gave me an idea to write."

He declined to elaborate, which was odd for Kered. He was usually very quick to lecture about the projects he worked on. Frowning, Niala positioned herself next to Kered. This way she could read his notes without sitting down across from him.

She was close, so close. Very faintly, he could smell her. He wasn't used to analyzing the scents of humans, but he had gotten to know Niala's basic scent. Layered over her basic scent was the one he'd caught before. It was very subtle. Kered made a decision.

He could have simply put his arm around Niala's waist and pulled her close, but he decided against it. That would have been a very human thing to do. This situation required something as unique as the woman herself. Reaching out, Kered brought his arm down to Niala's knees. Once there, he swept her legs out from under her, causing her to start to fall. Reflexively, Niala reached out with her left arm towards Kered's shoulder, trying to grab onto him to stop her fall. It wasn't enough; she continued to fall backwards. Confident that he could control the path of her body, Kered moved his arm up to Niala's back, catching her, and then towards his own body,

effectively scooping Niala from a certain collision with the floor. He neatly deposited Niala's body so that she sat on his right leg, and put his arm around her waist.

Certainly this was far more effective.

Kered continued to work on his notes, but it was with one arm around Niala's waist. Niala relaxed her left arm and allowed it to rest comfortably around Kered's left shoulder. Finally, Kered spoke.

"They are your grandparents, not just a couple you know."

"Yes."

"And that is why you feel so strongly about Klingon-human relationships?"

"That's exactly why. If one hadn't been successful, I wouldn't be here."

Kered stopped looking at his notes and turned to face the woman sitting on his leg.

"And are you hoping to repeat their success with me?"

"I'm not thinking that far ahead just yet, Kered. I just know that right now, I'm comfortable. Sitting here with you like this feels good. I want to be held by my friend."

"And your friend is content to hold you for as long as you wish. However, I believe I owe you something."

Using the hand that was still around Niala's waist, Kered began tickling her in her midsection. Niala started laughing hysterically and squirmed to get away. The no-so-old warrior was reluctant to let his prize get away, so he abandoned his notes, shifted his position on his chair, and took a two-handed approach to holding and tickling the struggling woman.

Struggling was not a good word to describe Niala's actions, Kered realized. The entire time she 'struggled' to get away from his tickling fingers, she continuously exposed her neck for being kissed or smelled. And she was continuously pressing her bottom into his crotch as she moved from one of his legs to the other to escape his hands. If her aim was to actually get away from him, she was failing miserably. However, if her aim was to excite him...it was working.

"Enough, Kered, enough; no more."

The battle ended with a nearly exhausted Niala sitting in the warrior's lap, and Kered completely wrapped around her, her breasts resting in his hands. He briefly imagined Niala saying the exact same words for an entirely different reason. Reluctantly, Kered stopped tickling her, but he did not unwind himself from around her. Instead, he leaned down and spoke softly into her ear.

"Your Klingon ancestor, how tall was he?"

Niala was still winded from the struggle, so her answer was breathy. “He was about the same height as you. And before you ask, his mate really was my size.”

“They were content together?”

“I was told they were together for nearly 100 years.”

Kered was quiet as he thought about all that must have gone into keeping such a relationship alive for so long.

“Niala, I cannot promise you that you and I can be what your ancestors were to each other.”

“I would never ask you to. You’re you, and I’m me. They lived in a different time. I just know that it *can* happen, not that I expect it to with us. So don’t start thinking that I’m expecting to take the Oath of Marriage afterwards.”

Kered laughed. ‘Afterwards’ meant that something happened before, and therein lay his hesitation. “Niala... This would be my first time with... someone your size.”

Now it was Niala who laughed. “I notice you didn’t say ‘with a human.’ Now that you know what’s in my blood, you don’t consider me human anymore?”

Truthfully, Kered wasn’t sure what he meant. This was all new to him, but he wanted to take the risk: the risk involved in learning something new. He drew Niala’s scent deeply into his nose. She still smelled like a human woman. But now he knew there was something else locked in the fibers of her being, something that looked, and thought, and behaved just like he did. No, he would never be able to look at Niala again and see just a human woman anymore. He opened his mouth to say that, but Niala touched two of her fingers to his lips.

“I’ll guide you. That’s how we do things in my family. Let’s get your stuff, go back to your quarters, and start to figure things out.”

Kered nodded his head in agreement.