

## Do Not The Avali

An avali struggled to reach a shelf above their head. Despite standing on the tips of their digitigrade toes, taloned fingers could do nothing but scratch the shelf's surface.

A human man nearly twice the size of the avali approached them from behind. "Don't worry, Risikki, I got this..." He grabbed the bag on the shelf with little to no effort, handing it to the avali afterward. "There you go."

Risikki smiled and snatched the bag away. [Thanks, Sam!]

Sam's earpiece doubling as a translation device immediately processed the cheerful avali chirps, simultaneously emitting a robotic human voice into his ear. He smirked upon hearing it. "Ah, it's no problem. The infrastructure here isn't exactly designed for your kind, so let me know if you need anything else."

Risikki's feathered tail swayed behind them. [It's kind of hot in here, actually...]

Sam scanned his surroundings. The compact interior of the research outpost retained a utilitarian design meant to accommodate humans, which also included plenty of steel walls and automatic doors. A nearby air conditioner also ventilated the entire structure. However, almost everything remained significantly taller than Risikki, including the only doorway in the room.

Following this, Sam adjusted his sunglasses. "Hmm. I might be able to solve that problem, just gotta see if the others would care first. Just follow me and prepare to smile and wave."

[Okay!] Risikki said with their feathers perking up.

With that, the two exited the storage room. Risikki's talons clicked and clacked across the metal surface as Sam led them to a more expansive central room.

"What's that smell?" asked a human woman wearing a lab coat. She glanced over her shoulder upon hearing automatic doors open, spotting the duo entering the scene. "Oh, right. The avali."

Risikki frowned with their feathers folding against their body. [What?]

She dismissively waved with a free hand. “Ah, it’s not your fault, dear. All the ammonia in your biology means you’re always going to smell like rotten fish whether you like it or not!”

[I smell really bad?] Risikki asked, covering their mouth with both hands. [Oh my. Is it... severe?]

The researcher narrowed her eyes. “To me? Yes.”

Risikki’s tail drooped down. [Sorry...]

Sam crossed his arms. “About that, Angela...”

“What?” she asked in return. “I’m just stating the facts.”

“Could we... potentially get Risikki a private room?” he asked, sighing. “Turning down the temperature a tad might help too. Maybe both? They’re not exactly comfortable here.”

Angela put a hand on her hips, narrowing her eyes. “I fail to see how that’s my problem.”

“It’s everyone’s problem.” Sam said, making finger guns with both hands before pointing them at Angela. “We’re a team, after all!”

She rolled her eyes. “Right.”

[Wait...] Risikki, looking up at Sam. [Am I expected to sleep by myself?]

He shrugged. “There’s bunk beds for two people at most, but some folks prefer their privacy. It’s whatever you want.”

Angela smirked. “Which reminds me. You don’t have a bunkmate, do you Sam?”

Sam shook his head. “Nope.”

“Then why don’t you bunk with our new avari member?” she asked with a wry smile. “Surely you wouldn’t mind turning down your room’s temperature or smelling avari all the time. That’d solve the sleeping arrangement issue at least.”

He grunted, adjusting his sunglasses. “Perhaps, but that’d depend on what Risikki wants.”

[I’ll bunk with you!] Risikki said with a chirp, momentarily standing on their toes. They looked away upon making eye contact with Sam. [Well, if you wouldn’t mind, of course...]

Sam scratched the back of his head. “If that’s what you’d prefer, sure. Just might have to drag out the insulated sleeping bag and winter clothes before I sleep or something...”

Risikki closed their eyes and smiled. [Thank you!]

Angela pointed at a door down a hallway. “Sam’s room is the last one on the right, by the way. Feel free to make yourself at home inside of it!”

Risikki clutched the bag containing their possessions, nodded at Angela, then strolled away.

Sam himself spent some time observing their movements. Risikki’s partially avian biology similar to a feathered raptor allowed them to move with a great degree of delicacy and grace. Golden bands outlined the blue fur on their four fluffy ears while an underlying white coat highlighted everything else on their body.

“What’d I miss?” asked another man entering the room. He gawked as the avali vanished from his view, then a broad smile spread across his face. “Ooo! A chimken! Almost forgot they sent us one! Did we also get a deep fryer for the occasion?”

Angela snickered. “I’d advise against eating avali, even if they are carbon based lifeforms.”

In response, Sam adjusted his sunglasses before staring at the two. “Really, guys?”

“It’s just a joke!” said the man, raising his hands in the air.

“And I’m a woman.” replied Angela, grimacing. “Ignoring that, is there suddenly an issue now?”

“In a sense.” Sam said, crossing his arms. “Kind of getting annoyed by everyone else’s behavior since Risikki is really sweet and sensitive. I don’t think it’d kill either of you to act a bit nicer to them.”

Angela narrowed her eyes. “Well, he’s your responsibility now.”

“He?” said the other man. “I just naturally assumed the chimken was a chick!”

“I’m... not really sure myself.” replied Sam, rolling his shoulders. “I think you can tell based on the feather patterns, but eh. Angela probably knows.”

She shrugged. “I’m not entirely certain either. Aвали dimorphism is minimal as it is.”

Sam nodded. “Gotcha. Probably doesn’t matter for the most part unless they take offense to whatever others call them in the first place.”

“Maybe you should ask.” replied Angela as she leaned against the desk. “While you’re at it, go make sure your room’s ventilation and temperature won’t be an issue either. Ideally any aвали body odors are exclusively confined to your sleeping quarters!”

With a sigh, Sam started walking away. “I should probably check on Risikki anyway.”

The other man moved in the opposite direction. “Have fun with that.”

Angela scoffed. “Oh, don’t give me that look, Sam. You volunteered for this!”

Sam didn’t grace her with a response before moving down the hallway. He only stopped once he reached his room, finding the door unlocked. The moment he stepped inside, he found Risikki sitting on a lower bunk bed and staring at the ground with all their feathers slumping down. Something about their large, black eyes gave off a look similar to a sad puppy. They didn’t even respond to Sam’s presence as he entered the room with the automatic door sealing behind him.

He looked at Risikki’s bag placed on the ground. “Is there something wrong? Because you didn’t need to wait for me if you haven’t unpacked your bag yet.”

Risikki slumped over even more. [I know... I’m just thinking.]

Sam scratched his chin. “Uh... we still need to adjust the temperature too if that’s bothering you.”

[It's not any of that...] Risikki said, finally looking up at him with watery eyes. [You're the only human that's been nice to me so far. The others don't seem to like me, much less appreciate my presence here...]

He sighed. "They're just giving you a hard time is all. I like to think they'll warm up to you since they're nice folks once you get to know them, but they should probably knock it off. The last thing we need is another cultural misunderstanding with your kind."

Risikki made low-pitched chirps, breaking eye contact. [Then explain why you're the only human acting friendly! It makes no sense...]

"It's just..." Sam said, pausing for several seconds. "How I am? Ugh. I don't know. Although it all happened before I was even born, things have always been tense between our two species, so I suppose I wanted to make a good first impression in the name of humanity."

[But why?] Risikki asked with wide eyes.

"Why not?" he asked in turn. "It's mutually beneficial and all that. You avali look kind of cute too, so I don't really have the heart to be deliberately mean to any of you!"

Risikki's feathers fluttered up. [Cute?]

Sam took a seat on the bed next to Risikki, smiling. "Well, yeah. Not sure how else to describe you little guys. You got ears like rabbits, feathers, and the eyes. Us humans are wired to find that sort of stuff super cute!"

[That's funny...] Risikki said, closing their eyes and smiling. [I think some humans look kind of cute too!]

He laughed and adjusted his sunglasses again, moving them above his eyes. "How so?"

Risikki closed their eyes and leaned forward. Before Sam could process what was happening, the avali brought their snout next to his cheek. Something wet and cold pressed against his skin. Blood flushed his face. A faint sound similar to a smooch marked the moment Risikki gave him a quick peck on the cheek, bringing their head back afterward.

[Like whenever your faces turn red!] Risikki said with a toothy smirk, kicking their feet in the air.

He brought his sunglasses back down, if only to hide his emotions. “Ah... you got me there...”

Risikki made a sound similar to snickering. [Consider that thanks for helping me out today!]

“Gotcha.” Sam said, rolling his shoulders. “Hmm. Speaking of which, do you have a preference for a specific bed?”

[That depends...] Rissiki said, leaning forward. [Which one is yours?]

He patted his hand against the mattress beneath their butts. “The bottom. Top one is free and hasn’t been used as far as I know.”

Risikki nodded. [Understood. I shall sleep on the bottom bunk as well!]

Sam froze up a bit. “Uh... I know you avali are used to sleeping communally, but...”

[It’s not a problem!] Risikki said, standing back up. [I trust you. I prefer the cold, but sometimes human body heat sounds really nice!]

He let out a nervous laugh. “Very funny. It’s not even that cold in here!”

Risikki beamed up. [Oh yeah! Let me finally change the temperature real quick!]

Before Sam could respond or react, Rissiki approached a datapad mounted on a nearby wall. They stood on the tips of their toes once more to fiddle with the touchscreen. With a few simple taps, they adjusted the internal temperature of the room to something far more accommodating to avali as it gradually dropped over time.

Meanwhile, Sam’s face and nose scrunched up once Rissiki’s unique smell became more prominent. “Huh. They should have told me about this culture clash in the job description.”

Risikki let out an incomprehensible yet happy chirp, returning to the bed and grabbing their bag on the ground. Their feathers fluttered as they began unpacking it, making themselves feel at home.