

First Mataras: Maryam

Chapter One

Without warning, the door to Briel's guest quarters whooshed open. A trio of huge, dark-skinned men burst in, their expressions thunderous. Maryam jumped with a tiny shriek.

Beside her, Briel uttered a startled noise too, but she recovered quickly. Her deep-throated tone was casual as she greeted the glowering threesome. "Hello, my clan. You wasted little time getting here." She smoothed the long skirt of the flowing white-lace gown she wore, as if unconcerned.

Maryam marveled at her young Kalquorian friend's acting job. Seconds before, Briel had been jittery with nerves, pacing the space station's well-appointed guest suite until Maryam had insisted she sit down.

The man in the middle of the invading trio stepped forward, angling his large frame between two luxuriously upholstered bench seats. He regarded Briel, his jaw set. "Of course we hurried to find you. Our pregnant Matara runs away—"

"I didn't run away. I'm having a last fling of freedom before the baby arrives."

"This behavior is outrageous. I have a good mind to—"

"Lower your voice, Kels. Don't give my friend Maryam the wrong idea about Kalquorians. Earthers think we're awful enough as it is."

She'd called him Kels. That meant the speaker was the Dramok, the head of Briel's clan. Briel had described him to a tee, from the blue-black hair that spread in waves over his wide shoulders, to the ruggedly handsome features that hair framed. A trimmed beard did nothing to hide his strong jaw and chin.

An incredibly masculine example of the Kalquorian race, Kels was stunning even when grim with anger. His size made Maryam feel no more significant than an ant. The man was huge, over six-and-a-half feet tall. Not to mention muscled, stopping just short of being too developed, a fact that his clothing accentuated. He wore what was referred to as a formsuit, a black, body-hugging one-piece uniform that molded to his chiseled form. A belt wrapped around his waist. He and the man to his left wore percussion blasters.

Too late, Maryam reminded herself to not look too closely, and not because two of the three were armed with weapons. They showed no indication they would threaten her, despite appearing pretty irritated. No, her traitorous gaze wanted to revel in how well the clothing hugged the muscled frames. As an Earther female, she knew the dangers of doing such. It was risky enough that she visited their female clanmate's suite. Now that the men were there, she could get into real legal trouble. Being on the Soln-owned space station lessened her peril, but not by much.

Human women were put on trial for expressing anything remotely resembling sexual interest. Earth executed its citizens for brazen conduct, but only after horrific torture. Maryam's situation could be particularly precarious; Kalquorians were the worst of aliens, as promiscuous as Earthers were supposedly virtuous. They lived in foursomes, with three males to one woman...or only three men, as Kalquorian females were so few.

Most importantly, Kels and the other two impressive specimens were Briel's clanmates. Maryam had no business ogling her new friend's versions of husbands.

It was hard not to do so, even when she kept her gaze pointed north of Kels's wide chest. His features were carved perfection, right to the clenched jaw. His blue-purple eyes riveted on her, examining her intensely, bringing her senses alight.

Whew. Being in the men's sights put her every hair on end. When their gazes lingered for several seconds, longer than curiosity warranted, she felt like prey surrounded by a pack of hungry wolves. She wondered what they thought of her, with her frizzy red curls, the freckles scattered over her milk-white skin, and a robust figure that her father had countered her complaints as befitting "sturdy peasant stock".

The mood shifted when the trio took deep, steady breaths and bowed. Kel's delicious baritone held a hint of contrition. "Our apologies if we startled you, Matara. We were invested in reaching our clanmate."

He straightened, his gaze shifting once more to Briel. The blistering stare, akin to that of a father angry at his teenage daughter for coming home after curfew, would have burst Maryam into flames. Briel was unmoved. She settled back on the plush lounge as if she didn't have a care in the world.

"From now on, knock. You have better-than-average breeding, so try showing it." The Kalquorian woman's proud nose lifted in the air.

Kels blinked before glancing at Maryam and the pair behind him with palpable shock. In that breathless moment, Maryam almost pitied the man.

Almost? She bit off a rueful chuckle. Maryam had learned quite a bit about Briel in the last week, since the Amazonian-statured woman had dashed into the store where Maryam worked on Pelk Space Station. Her acquaintance with Briel assured Maryam that Clan Kels deserved a measure of compassion when it came to their much younger, impetuous bride.

Given what Briel had told her of her life on Kalquor, however, that sympathy went both ways. Briel had a point about her clanmates busting into her quarters without announcing themselves first.

With that in mind, Maryam offered a mild rebuke. "That was an abrupt entrance. Doesn't the door automatically lock and require admission by the guest assigned to it?"

Briel waved her arm, a well-muscled limb that would have put Earth bodybuilders in awe. "Dergan is amazing with locks, as most Nobeks are. My clanmates feel they can walk into any space where I happen to be, no leave required."

"We had no idea what sort of situation you might have gotten yourself into." Kels didn't seethe, and Maryam gave him points for that. She would have bet he was good at seething. He had the strong brow and presence for dangerous expressions. A curl of warmth in her belly informed her she was delighted by the notion, and she tamped it down.

Briel continued with the arrogant demeanor that Maryam knew disguised anxiety. "Let's at least pretend we have some decency, shall we, my clan? Maryam Nicholas of Earth, I present to you Dramok Kels, Nobek Dergan, and Imdiko Pana of Kalquor."

Eager to dispel the tension in the room—the gold-and-blue environs had seemed spacious before, but with the three glowering hulks, it had become confining—Maryam rose and offered her hand. She was aware her billowy blouse and tan ankle-length skirt were less than elegant compared to the gown Briel wore so effortlessly. "Hello, gentlemen."

After a moment's hesitation, Kels stepped forward and took the proffered hand, briefly holding it before letting go. It was as if he feared breaking her. Given he was so muscled, Maryam appreciated his caution.

"Again, let me apologize for startling you," he said in a soft tone.

“No harm done.”

The Nobek warrior, Dergan, bowed again. He was attractive, with a jaw so strong, Maryam thought he could chew metal. His long, sleek hair was pulled from his robust features in a ponytail. His body appeared strong, but not quite as brutish as Kels. His aura was that of a coiled cobra, ready to strike. The smile he offered eased the threat that apparently came standard with this Kalquorian.

Imdiko Pana, the clan caregiver, took her hand. He smiled, which alleviated the natural brooding aspect of his anxious eyes and pouting lips. Maryam caught herself smiling with more friendliness than was warranted. Pana had a boyish quality. His bone structure was nearly as delicate as Briel’s. Sweet, with a hint of something that suggested past tragedy, his mere appearance encouraged flirtation. Disappointment stabbed Maryam when he released her hand.

“Tell them what a good girl I’ve been,” Briel encouraged Maryam. When Dergan snorted, she shot him an imperious glare worthy of a queen.

“Briel has behaved in a respectable manner, by Earther standards. As you may have heard, those are quite strict. There has been no clubbing, no dancing, no outrageous behavior of any kind, outside of her showing up here on her own.”

“I doubt she’s been sitting in her quarters the whole visit,” Kels’s gaze narrowed.

“Of course not. She went shopping, which is how we met. We visited many museums and points of interest—”

“On your feet too much, my Matara.” Pana had resumed his brooding persona, all smiles wiped away. He scowled at the tray of double-fried sarxkass tubers and honeyed sweet drops. “Is that your dinner? You’ve barely touched it, which I suppose is just as well, because this is not the healthy diet for an expecting woman. Let me order you—”

He broke off, noting the *I told you so* look Briel shot Maryam. He gave both women such a hurt expression that Maryam almost apologized, though she wasn’t the one who’d rolled her eyes.

She shook her head at her young friend. Since the scene hadn’t devolved into angry shouts and accusations, she was content to let these Kalquorians work their own problems out.

“I’m going to my quarters. You have a lot to discuss with your clan.”

At last, Briel’s haughty control wavered. “But—”

“You said it would be fine.” Maryam addressed Kels. As the clan leader, he spoke for the rest. “It will be fine? You’ll handle this with the understanding she’s young and, um, energetic?”

Briel had not handled her end of the matter well, but she had a generous heart. That was why Maryam had agreed to be present when her clan showed up, to help blunt the men’s immediate anger at their runaway bride. With the state of affairs as pleasant as it would get under the circumstances, plus how well Briel spoke of them most of the time, Maryam was ready to let them figure their situation out. Without her.

She noted the interested gaze Kels leveled on her. “I don’t know what my Matara has said about us, but we have gone out of our way to be understanding of her *energy*.”

“That’s exactly what she told me. In fact, she’s been complimentary of the patience her much older clanmates have exhibited toward her attempts to gather life experience. I commend your tolerance for youthful drives.”

With that not-so-subtle hint of her regard for men who married—or clanned, as it was with the Kalquorians—a woman decades younger than themselves, Maryam winked at Briel. “Make sure to say goodbye before you leave. I’ve been working on a special present for the baby.”

Briel's miserable expression disappeared in an instant. She squealed and jumped up to envelop Maryam in a hug. Although she was nearly twenty years older than the Kalquorian, Maryam felt like a child in that embrace. The top of her head brushed Briel's chin, and the arms wrapped around her were twice the thickness of her own.

The illusion shattered as Briel released her, her smooth face beaming down at Maryam in girlish glee. "A present? Can I have a hint?"

"Not for a second. Good night, Briel. Gentlemen." Maryam stepped toward the exit, nodding to the men who bowed yet again as she left.

The gesture amused her, given how Earth's government portrayed Kalquorians to their people. For a bunch of barbaric demons, Kalquorians had quaint, old-fashioned manners.

Briel stared at the door, which had closed behind the Earther's exit. Her gaze shifted reluctantly to Kels. "Thank you for being nice to her. Considering how angry you must be, you went above and beyond decency."

Hearing the remoteness in her tone, an ache pulsed in Kels's temples. That was nothing new. For a little less than four months, tension headaches had been the norm—as had the knot of worry twisting his guts.

Stay in control. Briel is safe and secure. He drew in a deep breath, noting a myriad of fascinating scents: the heavy musk of his male clanmates, Briel's lighter scent—and the fresh, springlike fragrance that Maryam had left behind.

He cleared his throat. "I must remember to thank the Earther Matara for keeping an eye on you."

Briel's temper sparked. "Yes, yes, I'm such a baby, so naturally I need a nanny."

"You're not a baby. You're having a baby," Pana needlessly pointed out. He fussed about the room, straightening the untidy quarters. He gathered carelessly dropped clothing and dumped it into the laundry service chute. "How can we not worry when you run off without warning?"

A myriad of expressions floated over his face, changing it from fretting to furious to guilty. He turned on his heel before getting an answer, rushing through a nearby doorway that led to the apartment's kitchenette.

He'd been a wreck since they'd discovered Briel had booked passage to Pelk Station, located in Soln territory. Most of his distress was for his role in Briel's disappearance. He'd told her about the entertaining vacation the clan had taken decades before they'd met her.

Decades before she was born. Not for the first time, Kels worried he'd made a mistake in clanning Briel. The low side of eighty years was young for a Kalquorian. He and his male companions were far less than middle-aged. Yet compared to Briel's scant twenty years, it made for a sizable gap in experience and maturity.

Kels glanced at his Nobek, who'd been silent for the most part. Yet another guilty face. Dergan might never live down that Briel had snuck off, and he hadn't had a clue she was preparing to do so. It grated most especially because she'd taken off on them before.

Dergan wasn't the type of Nobek who dramatically lost his temper. However, he had made no secret of his self-inflicted rage for allowing Briel to fool him. It had shaken his confidence in himself as clan protector, though Dergan was as perfect a Nobek as Kels could ever wish for. The Dramok accorded grudging respect for his Matara's latest escapade. Dergan was not easily deceived, yet she'd managed to pull it off.

Faced with so much misery, Kels failed to keep his anxiety from turning biting. "I keep telling myself you'll learn to treat your condition with the responsibility it deserves—"

As was typical when Briel was upset, he wasn't allowed to finish speaking. Her purple eyes flared as she tossed the handheld down on the lounge. "My condition? It's called being pregnant. A perfectly natural state. You don't have to lock me in isolation just because I'm having a baby."

Dergan spoke up, at last drawn into the discussion. "These are perilous times, what with Tragooms, Bi'isils and warlike Earthers everywhere. Yet you run off to play on a space station that allows all of those problematic species access, without a thought to our child."

"Maryam says there hasn't been a dangerous incident on this station in the entire three years she's been here. As for her being an Earther, did she seem dangerous to you?"

"I'm referring to Earther men. Their women are repressed, frightened, subjugated creatures."

"Maryam? Subjugated?" Briel cawed with startling laughter.

"We're getting off the subject." Kels stared at Briel. Ancestors, she was beautiful, even when her dark face flushed darker. Her features were well-formed, her lips lush and full. A precious, fresh girl, with a buoyant personality. He'd counted himself lucky to have won her for his clan nearly a year and a half ago.

I am lucky to have her. Briel was a wonderful person. He only felt unfortunate when her impulses overrode her better sense.

She was the last Kalquorian female to have been born alive and healthy. And fertile. The child she carried was a boy, but it was possible she might have a girl in the future. Another healthy female, a new version of herself.

Twenty years since she was born. What were the chances another girl, unaffected by the genetic damage from the virus, could exist for the Kalquorian people?

Off the point. *Focus.* "Your behavior is unacceptable. Putting our child at risk is unacceptable."

"What risk? I took a trip that hundreds go on every day. I went shopping. I ate meals in restaurants. I saw shows."

"Did you take your vitamins? Eat food that wasn't garbage?" Pana brought in a plate boasting healthy portions of lean meat, leafy vegetables, and fruit. He set it on the table before Briel and returned to the kitchen, taking the other tray she'd picked at, his lip curled in disgust at the unwholesome fare.

She yelled after him, "I ate what I wanted, and I enjoyed it. Maryam claims her cravings were far worse than mine, and she indulged. She says most women she knew did so too, with no ill effects."

Pana returned with a cup of water that Kels suspected was vitamin-infused. "Matara Maryam is an Earther. She can drop dozens of babes effortlessly."

"Why don't you tell her that when you see her again? Be ready to duck when you do."

Kels returned to the most significant concern with dogged determination. "The point is, you're a Kalquorian woman. Your pregnancy is not only rare, but precious to our people. You can't behave like an Earther or an Adraf or a Plasian."

"No, I'm to be set on a shelf to collect dust. Unless you plan to put me under glass as well. Mother of All forbid I get smudged by a normal life." Her eyes brightened with tears that clawed at Kels's heart.

"Don't cry. No harm was done." Too late, he tried to de-escalate the situation.

"No harm? Really? 'Don't go there, Briel, it's too dangerous. Don't eat that, Briel, it's not healthy. Don't enjoy your life or do anything but sit quietly, because all that matters is that you

shove out a child for Kalquor.' I might as well be in a prison, doing nothing but breeding babies."

She jumped to her feet and stormed out of the room. The click of the lock to what Kels supposed was the sleeping quarters was loud in her wake.

As Kels met his male clanmates' gazes he saw his frustrations and confusion reflected back at him.

And guilt. Don't forget the guilt.