

Dramok Rajhir, son of Clan Gegra, sat across the desk from his Dramok father. He avoided fidgeting despite the hour growing late. A certain lovely Matara had combed him earlier to let him know she was in Kalquor's capital city. Women were difficult to find, and a promised date was never to be missed. He got more than his fair share of Kalquorian female companionship compared to other men his age, but such encounters amounted to perhaps only four a year.

He knew better than to hurry his father. Gegra did everything with precision. At that instant, the elder man's focus was locked on the message he composed for a client.

They sat in the office Rajhir's mother had allotted to Gegra to work in after he'd lost his bid to remain on Kalquor's Royal Council. The election had been tight to the very end, finishing twenty consecutive years of Gegra's presence there. It said a lot for the charm of Dramok Ledsin, now Councilman Ledsin, that he'd managed to slip past Gegra's high approval rating to take his seat.

Gegra was in his prime, far from ready to sit at home and wait for the end. Only in his eighties, his life wasn't a third done. His ebony hair was tied in a severe braid, baring a strong-featured face. He appeared hale and hearty, his shoulders broad and muscled. His gaze was shrewd, quick to see what others missed.

He seemed like royalty himself, even in a lawyer's office. Rajhir's mother's practice was well regarded beyond the Eastern Seaboard Territory's jurisdiction. Matara Nivere's firm took up two floors of the cliff dwelling that overlooked the pink sanded beaches and emerald sea of the coast. The stone ceiling had been polished to a marble sheen. Gegra's desk gleamed with the soft green interior of Kalquor's native sudked hardwood.

The dyed and patterned rugs scattered over the rock floor were hand-woven. They softened the floor, which was polished as beautifully as the ceiling overhead. The vids behind Gegra were huge, showing a live feed of the pink stretch of sand from the nearby beach. White-foamed green waves crashed belligerently against the shore. Other walls were scattered with stills of Gegra's long political career.

"Send message." He gave Rajhir a droll gaze. "I'm aiding your mother in a case against a group opposing the government setting aside revenues to reintroduce former convicts into society. Can you imagine the stupidity? Why would anyone argue against job training and ongoing mental health care for felons after they've been released? What do these fools expect former criminals to do without help, except return to their lives as criminals?"

"It's good you were tapped for such a case."

That opened the door for Gegra's favorite mantra. "It's all about duty to the empire, to keep it strong and sustainable. All other considerations are secondary. Which brings me to why you're here."

Rajhir knew what was coming. He'd hoped to avoid the big speech for a few weeks longer.

Gegra looked at him with visible pride. "My son, on the threshold of your future. Schooling and internships completed, ready to begin service to your people. I've offered my congratulations?"

"Even if you hadn't spoken them, the shuttle you gave me would have sufficed."

"You're enjoying it?"

Rajhir's recent Imdiko dates had been impressed with the sleek vehicle, the newest model fresh from the factory. The Matara he planned to enjoy the night with would be delighted to be escorted in such finery too. He couldn't restrain a grin. "Very much."

“I thought so. Imdiko Iresh’s father contacted me a couple days ago to remind me that his son, as infatuated as he is with you, is already promised to another Dramok. He requested you stop turning Iresh’s head with expensive dinners and fine shuttles.”

“He isn’t clanned yet. Imdiko Iresh can enjoy his freedom while he has it.” Rajhir kept his tone controlled. “Besides, I’m not chasing him. We were only having a night out, as far as I’m concerned.”

“It’s time to get serious about your future. While we’re on the subject of Imdikos, you’ve been of clanning age for two years. No prospects yet?”

“Nothing of note.”

To gain a female as a permanent mate required Rajhir to first clan a male from each of the other breeds. He needed a Nobek and an Imdiko in place for a year to prove the unit was stable enough for the responsibility of a lifebringer and children. He hadn’t met many men he was attracted to where a permanent arrangement was concerned. Certainly, there’d been none he wished to spend his two hundred-plus remaining years with.

Gegra had other ideas. “You need to find a clan caregiver if you intend to have one your own age. Imdikos become almost as rare as women after their twenty-fifth birthdays.”

Rajhir was only twenty-seven. His life was just starting. He had to think about a career in the coming months and so much more. He felt he could delay clanning for a while yet.

“I’ll keep an eye out.”

Gegra’s purple eyes narrowed at Rajhir’s nonchalant tone, as if he suspected his only child’s ambivalence. Rajhir countered with a noncommittal expression.

His father let it go. Rajhir’s relief was short-lived, as he took up another subject the younger man had hoped to avoid.

“With the last elections, there are several new councilmen searching for aides. I’ve lined up an interview for you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Rajhir’s heart sank. His plans to spend the next few weeks in shameless debauchery and fun evaporated.

“The council has issued an open call for aides. I sent you a schedule and memo regarding that weeks ago.”

“I must have forgotten.”

“Councilman Teken’s assistant resigned. That’s the interview you’re to go to.”

Rajhir swallowed a groan. Teken was a good man, but only a so-so councilman. He should have retired ages ago, having hit the two-century mark almost three decades before. He hated alterations in legislation, resisting even change most agreed would benefit the empire. He dozed off during council meetings. He kept getting re-elected because he was like everyone’s favorite uncle, whom they felt an affectionate duty to keep around.

Rajhir was eager to be in the middle of the brutal arguments that sometimes resulted in actual physical fighting between councilmen. He craved to distinguish himself, which meant working for someone who’d do the same.

“I shouldn’t apply to anyone but Councilman Teken?”

Gegra surprised him. “Apply to anyone you think worthy, if only for the practice. Just be sure Teken receives your highest consideration. I have no doubt he’ll offer you the post. We go way back.”

“You’ll regain your seat in the next election. Once the people realize your opponent was all charm and no substance, they’ll beg you to return.” Rajhir couldn’t resist adding, “You have my word I won’t approach Dramok Ledsin for an aide posting. Unless you’d like me to spy on him?”

Gegra snorted at the joke. “Ledsin is an ass. The district will realize that without our help. Perhaps after the next election, I’ll steal you from Teken to work with me.”

“I do wish to learn from the best.”

Gegra’s smile faded as his gaze flicked over Rajhir’s shoulder. His features hardened in an instant. “Good afternoon, my Matara. Is your workday over?”

Rajhir twisted in his chair. His mother Nivere walked into the room. Her lovely face was as distant as Gegra’s. “Shall I wait for you or go home on my own, my Dramok?”

Gegra busied himself with his computer. “I’m nearly finished if you can wait a few minutes.”

“That isn’t a problem.”

Nivere turned her attention to Rajhir. Delight spread over her fine-boned features. It lifted his heart.

She’d clanned young, and she barely seemed older than the women he dated. Her thick black hair waved gently to her knees, but for the crown of braids that circled the top. Her purple gown matched her almond-shaped eyes, bringing their light shining forth. The dress was custom-sewn for her, a sleeveless light sheath that reached her slippered feet. She held out long, toned arms to Rajhir.

He stood, pausing to bow before accepting her hug. As always, he experienced a tug of pain over the distance between his parents. He understood Gegra’s coldness. Perhaps it was disloyal to love Nivere so much, but Rajhir couldn’t help his devotion. Hers was the first smile he remembered as a child, and her voice had offered the first encouragements. No wrong she’d committed could remove his adoration.

Rajhir hugged Nivere and dropped a kiss on her smooth forehead. Her arms tightened briefly before she released him. “Are you joining us for dinner tonight?”

Gegra answered for Rajhir. “Of course he is. We can conclude our discussion over the meal.”

Rajhir managed to keep disappointment from his expression, though he’d hoped to have dinner with the visiting Matara Itdoma. Eating hadn’t been foremost on his mind anyway. He could still lure her into sleeping with him tonight. After all, he’d begin working tomorrow, so she should have pity on him. He couldn’t imagine a better way to enjoy his last night as a carefree youth.

As hard as he tried to betray nothing, Nivere picked up on his reluctance. She gave him a secretive look. “It’ll be a light meal. Our Imdiko has his presentation to the fellows tonight at a late dinner party we’re to attend.”

Gegra sighed. “I’d forgotten about that. Perhaps Rajhir would care to hear his father’s talk on the growing concerns of Nobek childhood education?”

Rajhir could have groaned. Not only was dinner with a willing and delightful female off the table, but he’d miss out on the chance for a good fuck.

Once more, Nivere read his mind. “I’m sorry, my son. As much as you prefer to support your father’s efforts, the auditorium will be filled to capacity. Perhaps you can attend Utim’s next speech?”

Rajhir gave her another hug. “I’d be delighted to hear my father’s next presentation. Please make sure I’m on the invitation list?”

“Of course.”

Gegra came around his desk to join them. He offered his arm stiffly to Nivere. She just as stiffly placed her hand on it, barely deigning to look at her mate. She tucked her other arm into Rajhir's, drawing him as close as she kept Gegra distant. They walked to the shuttle bay.

Rajhir had worried one of his parents would opt to ride with him. Dedicated to appearing proper, Gegra and Nivere rode home together. It allowed Rajhir the precious opportunity to com Matara Itdoma.

The lovely lady laughed off his profuse excuses as to why he couldn't see her until after dinner. "Rajhir, the role of parent clans is to interfere with their children's fun. That's their whole reason for being."

"You sound like you know a bit about the situation."

"Try being a female with protective parents. You don't know smothering until you've been born with a vagina."

Rajhir laughed out loud. "I can imagine how uptight my parents would be if I were a daughter. Thank you for understanding."

"Com me when your elders let you out to play, and I'll tell you where to pick me up. I've been looking forward to seeing the most sexually inventive Dramok I know."

Rajhir promised he'd do so, still chuckling over her vagina comment. Itdoma was fun to be around, even when sex wasn't involved. Had she not already been promised to a clan, which she was scheduled to join the following year, he might have considered putting together his own so he could claim her.

In a matter of minutes, he left behind the seaside cliffs. He piloted inland to the marshes that fed the ocean. He noted that the tide was in. Clear water covered the blackish-brown mud that housed the succulent ytor shellfish he'd often harvested as a child. The flavor of the ytor always reminded him of home.

Higher ground became islands of waist-high grasses at high tide. Trees of tremendous height grew there. His parent clan's home nestled in such a tree, tiers of living space built into the mammoth trunk and branches.

Nivere had come from the more temperate Western Valley Territory, a landlocked area of Kalquor's largest continent. When she'd arrived to join Clan Gegra, the young woman had pined for the flowered expanses of the gardens of her girlhood home. Rajhir's fathers had arranged for two of the marsh islands to be built up and their soil enriched. These islands were linked to that where their home towered within the branches of its tree.

The altered islands enabled Nivere to plant the flowers of her native land in artistically designed landscapes. While unnatural to the local ecosystem, they were stunning to view. Nearly thirty years later, she tended her gardens, finding relaxation amongst the beauty of her far-off home.

One of the great trees near that which housed Clan Gegra had died decades ago. Rather than allowing it to rot, Rajhir's fathers had hollowed it out and coated it with a substance that preserved the old trunk and its lowermost branches. It was within this old remnant that Rajhir landed his shuttle, amongst those of his parents.

He emerged to find Gegra and Nivere waiting for him. Once more he took his mother's arm. She and his father didn't touch. With no one around to watch and comment, there was no need.

They climbed winding steps set into the massive home trunk. Within a few seconds, the trio entered the first tier of the home, which housed the kitchen, greeting, and dining rooms.

The long table that owned most of the dining room's space had already been set. Someone had been looking out for Gegra and Nivere's arrival, because an extra setting had been placed for Rajhir. The kitchen staff brought in platters of steaming food as the trio entered.

Rajhir's other fathers greeted them. Imdiko Utim and Nobek Astef first saw to Nivere's welcome. The pair placed gentle but quick kisses to her cheeks.

"Greetings, my Matara. How was your day?" Utim's hair, caught in its customary neat queue, gleamed in the warm light of the wall panels that offered the room its illumination. The youngest of the three men of his clan, he projected the greatest maturity despite possessing a face as unlined as Nivere's.

She offered him a genuine smile. "Fine, thank you, my Imdiko."

Nobek Astef was the eldest, but young for a Kalquorian at eighty-eight. His scarred face, while not handsome, was riveting. The most vicious of the scars, which ran from his forehead to his jaw, had come from battling a group of illegal arms dealers. It had taken the sight from his left eye. The eye, as white as the teeth the Nobek bared when angry, was his most prized mark of honor.

He smirked at Nivere's offhand answer. "A fine day, huh? Sounds boring."

She shrugged, but her smile grew. "You would find it so. Contract disputes, mining declarations, and the like."

Utim beamed at Rajhir. "It's good to see you. What's the occasion?"

Gegra bustled to his seat at the table. "We're in the midst of discussing aide interviews at the Council House tomorrow."

Everyone else took their seats at the low but large round table, settling onto the seat cushions on the floor. Nivere assumed her place to Gegra's right, with Utim on her other side. Rajhir sat between Utim and Astef, as he had during his childhood. He wondered if grown men always felt like small boys when they visited their parents.

Kitchen staff ladled food onto his dish. He would have been more comfortable selecting his own portions, but dinner in his parent clan's home was a formal affair.

Astef speared a morsel off his plate without waiting for the man waiting on him to finish filling it. He arched an eyebrow at Rajhir. "You're diving into career so soon? You've barely finished your education."

Gegra answered for him. "Rajhir's ready to assume his responsibilities. Tomorrow is the open application and interview day. He can't miss it."

Rajhir didn't want to dwell on bowing to duty sooner rather than later. He turned to Utim. "What about this important speech tonight?"

"Not important. I'm updating the latest findings for educators and trainers of Nobek younglings. I'll report it, most will yawn in boredom, and the hotheads will challenge the results with the same old arguments." He added in a plaintive voice, "Please tell me you aren't coming."

Nivere said in a firm tone, "He isn't."

"Good. It's a waste of everyone's time. I interrupted my nap yesterday to devote all of five minutes to pulling the report together." He fed Nivere a bite.

Astef's lips quirked with amusement. "If your research on Nobek education is so nonessential, then why is it your specialty?"

"It pays ridiculous amounts of money for little work. They're getting a good return; I'm excellent at doing little."

Rajhir joined in with Nivere's quiet snickers. Utim possessed an intellect that made most appear to be plodding fools, but he never boasted about it. Indeed, he poked fun at himself when possible.

Gegra wasn't amused. "Your research is invaluable to the empire. It's far from inconsequential."

Utim's expression warmed at his gruff appreciation. "Thank you, my Dramok."

Rajhir let their conversation flow over him. He felt warmth for his parents, each different and yet tied by love or honor. Sadness was an ever-present twinge as he noted Gegra and Nivere sitting side by side but never looking at each other.

He hoped he wouldn't end up with clanmates he could barely stand to share a room with. When he did clan, it would be with lifemates he could trust.