

October 12

I don't know which was worse to wake up to this morning: the world's most incredible hangover or remembering Oses and Betra were gone.

I vaguely recalled Candy sending me 'home' to my small quarters in the Matara Complex. She insisted Anrel spend the night with her, which was probably a good thing. It was late in the morning, if not afternoon already, by the time I woke up.

It occurred to me that Katrina was supposed to start work as the complex's liaison today. She'd been sucking down the booze as hard as I had. I wondered how she was coping with that plus her first day without her men. At least I'd been able to sleep in.

Worrying about Katrina and thinking about Anrel staying with Candy helped me not reflect too hard about the huge void in my world. In my heart. It helped me ignore how naked and unprotected I felt without the presence of two particular souls nearby.

I stumbled into the kitchenette where the kindly Kalquorians in charge of the complex had made sure to lay in supplies of pain inhibitor. I took a hit and was grateful that the horrendous pain in my head passed. Unfortunately, my stomach was not relieved, and I barely made it into the lavatory to empty out my guts. I hung over the toilet until the nausea passed and wondered what the hell I'd eaten that was colored orange.

No more grief drinking for me. It's not worth it.

While I was in the bathroom, I figured I might as well shower. I could smell the sour tang of old bohut that seemed to come out of my pores. Gross. It made me want to heave again. I dragged my sorry self into the shower. Turned on the warm spray. Hung my head. Cried as if my eyes hadn't passed oceans of tears the day before.

By the time I got out, I felt a little better. Not good, not by a longshot. But no longer sick or drowning in sadness. I thought I might pass for a living human in a year or so.

I even felt normal enough to have a cup of coffee. Clad in a bathrobe, my hand gripping the elixir of life, I commed Candy. "I'm awake."

"I'm impressed. I thought you'd be in a coma the whole day. Do you want me to bring Anrel, or do you need more time to convalesce?"

“Bring her. I need something sweet and precious to look at.”

“Aw, thanks. Anrel is cute too.”

It warmed my heart immeasurably to see my baby girl, her adorable face wreathed in smiles when she saw me. I hugged her close and kept from sobbing, though a few tears escaped.

“I’m a leaky boat today,” I sighed to Candy. “Do you have any idea how Katrina is coping?”

“Barely, I think. She’s trying to hide how bad she feels from her new bosses. Fortunately, she can attribute her agonies to missing her clan.”

“Tell me something good. Did we ever get around to talking about you and Stidmun last night?” I sat on the lounge and tickled Anrel to make her giggle. She was my reason to smile on this first hard morning.

“Nope.” Candy relaxed on some seating cushions. “It was all about you and Katrina. You two needed to mourn.”

“And you?” I knew she seemed to have fallen hard for the unclanned Nobek who was stationed near the border of Empire space. It was still up in the air as to whether it was silly infatuation or something much more awfully serious. Candy was supposed to be finding a clan, but she had made it clear she wasn’t in any hurry to do so.

“Oh, we’re going to try to meet up on Haven in a few weeks. He has a brother working security there.”

“Candy,” I sighed.

“Shalia,” she sighed back, mocking my maternal tone. “I’m meeting with a clan in a few days. I don’t hold out any hopes for that, but I’m going to go through the motions on the off chance I’m being foolish.”

“Well, at least you’re doing that,” I said. I looked at her, trying to detect any reckless impulses. She looked back, her expression amused but far from ridiculous.

“Okay,” I said, giving up. I’m the last person in the universe qualified to tell someone else how to live her life. All at once, I felt a huge rush of love for my friend. I needed her to know I was there for her, no matter what. “All I care about is that you’re happy. If Stidmun is your path to that, then I’ll support you. Whatever you want to tell me, I won’t judge. I might bring up facts you don’t want to hear, but I’m in it for your benefit.”

Her smile stretched wide. “Thanks,” she said. “I needed to hear that, because I’m pretty sure I’ve found who I want.”

I stifled another sigh. Poor girl. All I could do was wish her luck.

It was well after lunch and I was alone with Anrel when the com went off, wanting my attention. When I saw the frequency, I was glad I had decided to slap on some makeup and dress decently. I was still hung over like nobody’s business, but I thought I could fake being normal for Clan Aslada.

Imdiko Meyso’s handsome, muscled self erupted in front of me when I answered the vid enabler. Paging Dr. Gorgeous, I need an emergency injection, ha-ha-ha. Jeez, even feeling the effects of too much booze doesn’t knock my nymphomaniac libido off. But then, Meyso is delicious. He deserves unrestrained lust.

He gave me a bright smile, one that was less formal than I’ve gotten used to from him. “Hello, Shalia. Am I coming at a bad time?”

“Not at all, but I just put Anrel down for her nap. You don’t get to moon over her this call.”

Meyso pretended to pout, but he’s a little too serious to pull it off that well. “I hope to see her soon, and in person. Her mother as well. I know I scheduled our conference about your mother tomorrow, but I had some free time this evening. I thought you might want to get it out of the way.”

When he said ‘this evening’, I automatically checked the time. Meyso was on another continent and several hours ahead of me. “I can talk now.”

“Terrific. Let me show you exactly what the two surgeries entail.”

“Are you going to do both at the same time?” I asked.

“It will be best for your mother,” Meyso assured me. “Cleaning out those plaques and protein deposits causing her dementia will take the longest amount of time, several hours. The scans done on Earth show moderate to severe build-up. Putting in the chemical regulating device that will treat her bipolar disorder will go quickly once I have that done.”

He showed me a bunch of visual aids, including the scans done of my mom’s brain, a virtual tour of the regulating device implantation procedure, and a simulation of how the brain would begin to respond over time. It was fascinating, but I was cross-eyed with an overload of information before we were halfway through.

“Tell me I don’t have to take a test on everything you explained,” I said when he was done.

He laughed. “It looks like a lot, doesn’t it? I’ve done these types of procedures several times, so I swear to you that she’s in good hands.”

He was so self-assured that I had to trust him. “Okay. Are we still on for you doing this next week?”

“I’ll be doing a preliminary exam and several deep scans in the next few days. Unless I see something surprising, late next week is my plan.” Meyso considered me and got super serious. “Shalia, you should know what to expect once the operation is done.”

I got a bad feeling. “What should I expect?”

“Anything and everything.” He offered a comforting smile. “Brains are never predictable, because they’re attached to the most unpredictable of all creatures: people.”

“You’ve got a point there. So what are you telling me?”

“It could be Matara Eve wakes and is able to talk and act normally right from the start. It’s more likely she’ll have a few issues as her brain fires back up and adjusts to the changes. She could be groggy for a week or so in that scenario. Then again, she may experience a much longer time to re-acquire her faculties.”

“Her age and overall health is a consideration too,” I opined.

“It is. You Earthers have a saying; hope for the best, but plan for the worst.” His hand moved as if to give me a comforting pat, but he remembered we spoke through vid. He snorted at himself. “I wish I could be more reassuring than that.”

“Honesty is best,” I said. I was glad he was being upfront about what lay ahead. “When do you want me to get there?”

“I’m not sure. Let me do those deep scans and I’ll get back to you. Once I have the surgery date locked down, you’ll need to plan on being here about two months, and keep that time frame loose.” He threw up his hands. “As far as I’m concerned, you could come right away. However, I want to check on Aslada and Jaon’s schedules. Hey, speaking of the two rogues—” his gaze shifted to one side and he grinned at someone I couldn’t see.

Dramok Aslada and Nobek Jaon stepped into view. Rawr. Hot multiplied three times over.

They bowed and smiled at me. Aslada was the first to speak. “Hello, Shalia. You look stunning today. Did you have a good visit with your friends these last two weeks?”

I ignored the stab of grief as best I could, reminded of my long goodbye to Oses and Betra. “It was wonderful. We took a whirlwind tour of Kalquor and had the best time.”

“And Anrel? Where is that sweet child?”

“Napping,” Meyso said in an overly sad tone. He winked at me. “We were just discussing Matara Eve’s procedures. I’ve tentatively scheduled them for next week pending everyone’s schedules and tests.”

“I’ve managed to shift some of my work for the next several weeks,” Jaon said. “I should be available as long as no emergencies pop up.”

“I have also lightened my schedule as much as possible,” Aslada said cheerfully. “We are at your service, Shalia. Name what you need in place before you arrive.”

I had a sudden thought. “If I could get someone to oversee my training while I’m there, that would be wonderful. Physical conditioning, blade work, and fighting.”

Jaon's demeanor shifted. "You're on Kalquor now. Besides, you'll be with me much of the time. There is no reason for you to have to train, particularly in blades and fighting."

He almost seemed offended. Did he think I was insulting his ability to keep me and Anrel safe? Had I run afoul of his macho sensibilities?

Hoping Jaon wasn't about to start thumping his chest, I tried a diplomatic smile. "I feel safe knowing you'll be there. However, I enjoy training. I like feeling confident I can face whatever comes at me. So I'd appreciate you finding the best possible instructors while I'm there for my mother and while we get to know each other."

Jaon's brows drew close together. He couldn't have been more obvious that he was not on board with my request. He wanted to play protector to my damsel in distress.

My first ladylike reaction was to play nice, but the grownup part of me insisted his ego was not my problem. I was on the verge of pointing out I don't do the helpless lady bit, not even for a delicious piece of ass like him. That's when Aslada stepped in.

Smooth as silk, he said in an easy tone, "That's not a problem. Is it, my Nobek? You'll be able to secure excellent instructors for Shalia's continued training while she's here."

Aslada's demeanor was casual, his words spoken with an effortless smile. Yet I could damned near taste the command in his statement. It wasn't overt, no definable hint in tone, expression, or posture. But it was there. My hair rose on my head as I sensed it in all its power. It was like hearing a distant rumble of thunder, only to have lightning strike inches away.

Jaon wasn't happy, but he nodded to Aslada. "Of course. If it means so much to you, Shalia, I will secure the training."

"Thank you." I was still watching Aslada. My respect for him had rocketed right off the charts. He had that Dramok thing down to perfection.

We talked about other things, like what sights they could take me to see and what entertainments we could enjoy during my visit. I have to give Jaon credit; once we dropped the subject of my training, he let it go without any sign he'd been affronted. He was as conscientious and attentive as he'd ever been to me, even asking if he could pick out my soaksuit for relaxing in their lake. His grin was a naughty leer that sent my pulse racing. Wet and wild times are ahead, apparently. Yow.