

Iliana stood at the top of the grand staircase of Clan Syno's cliff mansion. Her stomach churned. Next to her, in a shimmering gown worthy of Cinderella, her friend Katelyn vibrated with nervous energy.

"I love this moment," Katelyn confided. "The anticipation, the instant before walking into the party with all eyes upon me...I might like this part best of all."

Iliana smiled wanly, unwilling to put a damper on Katelyn's delight. At least one of them enjoyed being courted by fawning Kalquorian men. "You'll knock them dead. You always do."

She looked at her friend and co-worker. It felt weird to call Katelyn her employee, which was their true working status. Iliana was uncomfortable with that imbalance of power in their relationship, though Katelyn didn't seem to mind. She was certainly a better salesperson than Iliana. Her exuberant, gossipy personality attracted admirers, both male and female, like moths to a flame.

"I have to have a good personality," she'd told Iliana once. "I'm not the beauty you are, after all."

Iliana almost snorted at the memory and stopped herself in time. Katelyn was a lovely woman who looked far younger than her thirty-four years. Kalquorian men were fascinated by her Rubenesque figure, all flowing curves and softness. Their own females, the few they had, were as muscular as the men, statuesque Amazonian beauties that made even Iliana at five-feet-ten feel miniaturized. Katelyn, standing six inches shorter in heels, was an effervescent bubble bouncing among them. People broke into grins wherever she went.

Katelyn checked her hair for the thousandth time in a wall-length mirror set in the warmly glowing corridor wall. She patted the loose chestnut curls that were her pride. Iliana diverted herself by admiring her friend's lovely cascading hairdo and perfect skin, shown by her gown's off-the-shoulder cut. Katelyn's cherubic face beamed at Iliana. "Well, off I go. Wish me luck."

"You don't need it." Iliana found a real smile as Katelyn giggled and floated to the top of the stairs.

The swell of voices on the ground floor quieted the moment she appeared. Iliana had seen the reactions to Katelyn at the two other acquainting parties she'd allowed herself to be talked into attending. Blue-purple eyes were riveted on Katelyn, a vision of breathless delight in shimmering pink and lace. Beams of appreciation were spreading over dark faces. Clans, three men in each, were leaning close together to whisper to each other as they watched Katelyn slowly descend. Clans surged towards the bottom of the stairs, eager to greet her with bows and compliments. Whichever Katelyn first acknowledged would cluster around her, desperate to shield her view from any other trio she might prefer.

Iliana grinned to herself. Katelyn would drift from clan to clan, gathering contact information, a month's worth of dates and passionate rendezvous before the next party on the tour. Katelyn was eager to join a clan, but with so many to choose from, she'd damn well audition all the candidates she could. Katelyn had adopted the Kalquorian way of sensual life with a gleeful vengeance.

Iliana's amusement faded, replaced with a weary resignation. She gathered herself for her own entrance. She couldn't put it off much longer. Just long enough for Katelyn to start her parade among her admirers, to gather a court of lovelorn Kalquorians desperate to earn her favors. The more clans Katelyn collected, the fewer Iliana would have to rebuff.

She glanced at her surroundings, searching for an escape despite having come willingly—more or less—to be courted and flirted with. Besides the gold-trimmed mirror, the light-paneled walls of the corridor were decorated with vid-portraits, no doubt the ancestors of Clan Syno.

Picture after picture of dark-skinned Kalquorians depicted full clans of three men surrounding a woman. Muscled aliens, so similar and yet quite different from Earthers. Sufficiently different that the species were currently at war with each other.

Iliana swallowed. Earth was in the wrong. It had declared war because an Earther had joined Kalquor's ruling clan. Jessica McInness had become empress to the race swiftly going extinct. But Earth had been a mess for centuries, a dystopian society ruled by religious fanatics. Iliana had divorced her feelings from her home planet years ago...or at least, she'd thought she had. It hurt that her people were currently killing and being killed by those she'd chosen to live with.

Conversation swelled on the floor below. The party was in full swing. The moment had arrived, and Iliana had to join it before someone came to fetch her. With a sigh, she plodded to the top of the polished stone staircase.

She paused before beginning her descent to gaze over the crowd.

It was a sea of well-dressed, black-haired Kalquorian men, interrupted here and there by smaller, brightly gowned humans. Very few women. Most of the Earther females who'd come to Kalquor had been snapped up by eager clans on the hunt for lifebringers to add to their three-man groups. Only a few dozen of the nearly two thousand humans brought to the empire had outright refused the clans Kalquor had chosen for them.

There were only two Kalquorian Mataras to be seen. Probably in the whole building. A virus had decimated Kalquor's population centuries before. The majority of females it hadn't killed had been left infertile. A living girl child hadn't been born on Kalquor in years, hence Kalquorians' desperation to meet and woo Earther women, who'd proven able to bear their children. Hence, the war with Earth, whose leaders were determined Kalquorians were devil spawn.

There were so many clans present, it was hard to see the black-and-white polished marble floor, the costly handwoven Joshadan rugs, or the art on the walls. Most were hidden by the press of muscled bodies. As for the rest of the richly appointed greeting room, Iliana took little note beyond where the open doors were that would lead to potential escape once she'd put up with as much as she could stand.

She paused only a moment as heads swiveled her way. She imagined in that instant what the attendees saw: a woman the absolute opposite of Katelyn's warmth. Long black hair no different from the Kalquorians', brushed and tucked behind her ears rather than artfully styled. A slender figure in an ankle-length sapphire dress that matched her eyes. Her gown was saved from utter simplicity by Iliana's own handsewn embellishments of embroidery and sparkling faux gems ringing her high collar. Her cold, disinterested stare lit on no face, greeted no smile.

Despite her blatant aloofness, there was a ripple of admiration. Movement drifted towards the bottom of the staircase as she hurried down rather than gliding gracefully. Iliana's goal was the same as ever; to get the night over with by quickly rejecting everyone in sight.

Some saw her reserve as a challenge to their charm. The poor bastards had no inkling they didn't have a chance in hell with Iliana Rossi.

Iliana kept her gaze on the Kalquorian women present: the hired event planner whose name she'd forgotten and Matara Deefa, widowed by the war a year ago and promised to Clan Syno. If clans were impatient to claim Earther Mataras, they were downright zealous to attract rare, fertile Kalquorian lifemates.

Halfway down the stairs, the men were already bowing to Iliana and calling compliments to her. She pasted on a vague smile that warned she wouldn't be impressed no matter what they did.

She did her best to ward off the guilt that came from changing their pitiful hope to disappointment.

Dramok Hanvel no sooner walked in the door of Clan Syno's mansion before he searched for Deefa. Instead, he and his clanmates were intercepted by Syno himself, along with his clanmates Nobek Drulapi and Imdiko Rema.

"Hanvel," Syno growled. His brow drew low over slit-pupiled eyes, and the lines in his face deepened. The elder Dramok exuded power. "What is your clan doing here?"

Hanvel beamed with good cheer, and more importantly, confidence. "We're here to meet Earther Mataras, of course. We have an invitation."

"Sure you do," snorted Drulapi. His humor was as ferocious as his anger, but he'd do his best to keep from causing a scene. He smirked at Hanvel's Nobek Cosdas, not fooled by the other warrior's bored countenance. "You wouldn't mind showing me that invitation, would you?"

"With all pleasure." Hanvel already had it on his handheld's display, which he triumphantly showed his hosts.

Syno barely accorded it a glance. "I'm at the end of my patience with you and your clan. Deefa has chosen. She'll become our Matara after the mourning period has ended."

"Her parent clan made that decision, not her. If you're so certain she wants to be your clanmate, why are you determined to keep others at a distance?"

"You'll stay away from my promised or—"

"Hanvel, I can always trust you to be late." Hanvel's mother Enia, the event planner for the evening, inserted herself between him and Syno. She beamed at the hosts. "Dramok Syno, thank you for greeting the attendees. You and your clan are among my better hosts. What would you charge to welcome guests at my other functions?"

Clan Syno bowed, their anger smoothed over in an instant to show respect. Imdiko Rema managed to adopt a friendly air. "Matara Enia, you've done an exemplary job on such short notice. You have our gratitude."

"You're too kind, Imdiko. My youngest son's clan is the last to arrive—as usual—so I can send you off to escort your intended and circulate among the guests. Be sure to have fun."

The trio bowed, glowered at Hanvel's clan, and turned to seek out Deefa. As soon as they were out of earshot, Enia rounded on Hanvel.

"Why? I don't care if that spoiled, selfish Deefa invited you. She only did it to feed her ego, so spare me the nonsense. You shouldn't be here, and you know it."

"It's nice to see you too, my mother. Besides, you've been at me for months to attend one of these matchmaking parties. I'd thought you'd be pleased."

Enia smiled her most dangerous smile, and Hanvel winced in anticipation. "You're on thin ice, my son. If you or these two start any nonsense, I'll take all three of you apart. Then I'll have your fathers take you apart. Then I'll speak to Cosdas' and Selbi's parent clans, and they can have their turns. Whatever's left of your selfish, insignificant hides, I'll tear into again. Are we clear, children?"

Hanvel and his clanmates bowed. "Excruciatingly, my mother."

"Excellent. Get out of my sight, and stay away from that spoiled brat."

Enia glided away. Her impressive ire was no longer to be seen, smoothed away by practiced charm. She smiled and complimented and laughed with the guests, her manner easy.

Selbi woofed out a breath. "The lady has a way with words."

“I adore her.” Cosdas’ gaze was admiring on Enia’s retreating back. “Every time we piss her off, I’m reminded of how lucky your fathers are.”

Hanvel chuckled, amused as always at how his Nobek worshipped Enia. Cosdas’ sappy expression was at odds with his rugged, bearded features. “She’s fond of you too.”

“Except when we’re crashing parties she’s in charge of.” Selbi’s boyish features pinched. Abruptly, his countenance transformed to delight. “There’s Deefa.”

Hanvel searched the room in the direction Selbi stared. His breath caught.

As always, she was magnificent. Tall and elegant, she stood with regal dignity near the bar, her midnight hair plaited with silver ribbons in a braid that reached to her waist. Her sparkling silver gown was daring, plunging beneath her ample cleavage. Clan Syno stood behind her. They glowered while she laughed and greeted those clans who neared her to speak.

Hanvel chuckled. “Flirting is part of her personality. If they couldn’t handle it, they shouldn’t have petitioned to clan her.”

“It’s hard to accept others fawning over your clanmates. But, Mother of All, she’s worth the jealousy and skinned knuckles from punching all those faces.” Cosdas’ tone had assumed a growl.

“She is indeed.” Hanvel’s vision filled with her proud, riveting visage as she looked over her subjects.

Arrogant, his brother had called her. A comment that had nearly led to Hanvel’s own skinned knuckles.

He drank her in, the Matara he was determined to win for his clan. Her high cheekbones and abundance of self-confidence made many characterize Deefa as haughty. They didn’t know her for the warm woman she was. How could they? She’d been clanned to much older clanmates, an arrangement plotted by her parent clan. How unhappy she’d been with her situation had become clear when her clanmates, on a diplomatic mission, had been killed in an encounter with an Earther battlecruiser. Though it had been a year since that tragic event, she’d begun courting suitors barely a month after their deaths.

Clan Syno was younger than her previous clan, but they were still old for her. As before, her parents had chosen their daughter’s clan for rank, rather than compatibility. Deefa was dedicated to a fault to pleasing her parent clan, so she’d allowed them to arrange yet another union rather than insisting on what she wanted...to join Clan Hanvel.

Hanvel tore his gaze from the ideal Matara to acknowledge his equally perfect Nobek and Imdiko. “Threats from old men and an irate mother aside, it would be unseemly to avoid greeting our hostess.”

Selbi’s grin was bright with mischief. Though only a couple years younger than Hanvel’s forty, he could have been a teenager taking him up on a dare. “We can’t insult Matara Deefa when she personally invited us to her party. I get the feeling she threw it just to see us.”

“I think you’re right.” Promised clanship or not, they had a chance to claim her. Hanvel entertained no doubts on that score.

“Lead on, but be ready to step aside if Nobek Drulapi challenges us.” Cosdas’ pleasant smile of anticipation said he hoped there would be a challenge, even if it meant Enia’s wrath.

They started through the crowd. As they went, Hanvel noted the Earther women talking animatedly to other clans. Bright, shining faces of all colors, from pale ivory to dark brown, lovely lifebringers the size of dolls, resplendent in gowns the colors of the rainbow. Hanvel admitted to himself that if Deefa didn’t exist, he’d have been as eager to woo one of them as other clans.

But Deefa did exist in all her perfection, and she loved his clan. No other woman would do. They were halfway across the room when she caught sight of them. Her blue-purple gaze was a lightning strike across the distance, a punch to his gut. His very being ached for want of her.

She waved, ignoring the glaring Clan Syno. She was aware of their displeasure. It was in her naughty grin, the I-dare-you expression she taunted Hanvel and his clanmates with.

Syno and Drulapi stepped forward.

Cosdas drew close to Hanvel's side.

Clan Lathen abruptly stepped in Hanvel's path.

Hanvel scowled at his older brother and his clanmates. "Do you mind? We wish to say hello to our hostess. Never mind; we'll just stomp over you."

If anyone could win an award for looking unimpressed, Lathen would have been a shoe-in. "I'd urge you to avoid being a ronka's ass, but it's too late for that. Besides, I'd hate to deprive you of the one thing you're good at."

"Move, Lathen."

"Seriously, Hanvel, what are you going to do? Start a fight with Clan Syno over *their* promised mate, taking the chance on aggression getting out of hand? Accidentally hurting the innocent women in the area?"

Hanvel glanced again at the other guests. At the tiny females scattered like flowers across the room. Shame swept over him.

His clanmates were similarly abashed. "We'd do nothing to harm them," Cosdas said.

"Good. Let's take some air, cool your heads." Lathen spoke loudly to get others' attention and ensure his younger brother's clan would comply.

The two clans left the main room. They went into an adjoining conservatory filled with lush, tropical plants. Hanvel noted Deefa's amusement as they walked out. He swore he heard her giggle over the hum of conversation.

The conservatory wasn't as crowded as the greeting room. Only a couple of other clans, along with Earther females, were in it. It was easy for Lathen, Nobek Usbek, and Imdiko Atrél to draw Clan Hanvel to a semi-private corner.

"She's playing you. She plays everyone." Lathen opened the festivities with that unwanted observation. His glare, so much like their Dramok father's, was for Cosdas. "You're the eldest, and you've been a Royal Guard who's seen plenty. I know Hanvel's an idiot, but you should know better."

"Deefa has made her personal preference for us clear. Her opinion carries all the weight I need." Cosdas wore his bored face again.

"Come on, you three." Atrél sighed, his eyes rolling so far up the irises damned near disappeared under their lids. "Do you really think you're the only clan she's stringing along?"

"Jealous?" Selbi was the smallest of the two clans and the least likely to throw a punch, but he was quick to verbally spar.

"Not for a second. She does nothing for me."

"Well, she does plenty for us," Hanvel said.

"When it comes to making fools of you, yes." Usbek was just as bored as Cosdas. He'd been a Royal Guard too. Such men were difficult to ruffle.

Hanvel threw his hands up. Until Lathen and his clan had their say, there would be no opportunity to speak to Deefa. No chance to stand close to her, hear her voice, arrange a private meeting...

“Go on with it. And make it quick. The night is wasting.”

“Oh, that’s your shop that sells the Earther merchandise? I had no idea. What sorts of things do you sell?”

Iliana maintained her pleasant smile for Clan—was it Otap? Or Opat? She’d forgotten as the parade of hopeful Kalquorians continued, with no end in sight.

It was wearing, but it could have been worse. Thus far, it was as painless a night as she might have asked for, without a pushy clan in the bunch. When she asked for their contact information and thanked them for their time and attention, they readily accepted her moving on. It was the request for com frequencies that did it; a hint that perhaps they’d hear from her again that allowed for a graceful exit. Only a hint, no promises.

Clan Whatever was every bit as agreeable as the rest. Handsome faces, attractive bodies, intelligent, courteous...worth a second look from a woman hoping for love. Something Iliana wasn’t capable of. She couldn’t imagine liking any clan well enough to spend her life with.

Where romance was concerned, that ship had sailed long ago.

After ten minutes...not too short so she appeared rude, not too long so she sent the wrong signals...Iliana asked for their contact information since she needed to speak to a few others. They happily complied, and she drifted away from Clan *Nopax*. Boy, had she been wrong about the name.

Iliana slunk between groupings without seeming to slink. She worked to avoid the next encounter as long as possible. Had she really only been there for half an hour? It felt like an eternity.

As she skirted a clan and an unsmiling Earther, one of the men took a sudden step backwards, nearly bumping into her. “Oh, excuse me, Mataras.” He reached to steady her. His hand froze an inch from her arm, and his gaze widened in recognition. His clanmates were similarly startled.

“Dramok Rykbi.” Iliana all but groaned the name. Of all the worthless creatures to run into, it had to be the clan she’d originally been slated to join. And had adamantly refused. Just looking at Rykbi made her hackles rise. “Still searching for a daughter to raise?”

He managed a brief bow, his face red. “You appear well.”

“Quite well, thanks. Oops, you scared off another one.” Their distraction had allowed the woman they’d been talking to the opportunity to slip away. “Still treating potential Mataras like brainless children instead of intelligent beings? Never mind. I don’t want to talk to you.”

Off she went before they could respond, happy to have had the chance to tell them off again, though not as powerfully as she had the first time. Some guys needed to be reminded often of what jerks they were. She felt she was the other Earther’s savior and actually smiled at those she passed, though she didn’t slow down for them to corner her in conversation.

The night was in a downward spiral, however. She caught sight of another clan she’d had a bad experience with: Clan Bas. Damn it, they’d spotted her too, and from their smiles, they still weren’t taking the hint she was unavailable.

She whirled and spotted an open doorway a few yards off. Weaving like a running back, she rushed to escape.