

Shalia's Diary Website Excerpt

March 21

It's got to be Nang. He must be here, watching me. Stalking me.

The nightmare began this morning. Of course, I was happy as I could be when the day started. I'd beaten Cifa to the baby for a change, enjoying the rare privilege of getting her ready. She burred, "Mom-mom-mom," at me, which made me happier. Hearing her talk to me never grows old.

We'd all slept in after last night's party. I'm pretty sure Elwa had kept Anrel up late, playing with her and enjoying time with her granddaughter. At any rate, the baby had slept well after daybreak, waking after all the rest of us. Nobody was working today, so it was a good morning to be lazy.

However, I'd tucked my com into my pocket out of habit, as I do most workdays. I'd put Anrel on my hip, turning to the door to carry her to breakfast, when it vibrated against my thigh, alerting me that a message had been left.

Cooing and smiling at my sweetheart, I fished the com out of my pocket. I didn't check for the frequency before I said, "Check message."

I looked at the readout, and all my happy went away. *Life isn't always sex on the beach. They'll never make you happy. Only I can. We'll be together soon.*

My heart boomed so loud, I believed someone was stomping down the hall. I couldn't feel my legs, and the one rational idea I had was, *don't you dare fall and drop the baby.* I tightened my grip on Anrel as I stared at my com.

I read the message again. And again. The words stayed the same, refusing to change. And the first sentence loomed the largest.

Life isn't always sex on the beach.

Nang had been there, watching me and Larten. Spying on our intimate moments, his prying eyes on us as we made love. *He'd been right there.*

Somehow, I moved my rubbery legs. Clutching my chattering baby close, my com in a death grip, those awful sentences burned on my retinas, I staggered down the hall to the kitchen where my clan assembled breakfast.

"My Nobek." My voice sounded ridiculously normal to me, too typical given the circumstances. Larten's honed instincts must have heard something off, however. He turned to me, his gaze intent and nostrils flaring as if to catch a scent.

"What is it?" He was in front of me, taking the com from my hand and reading the message before I could utter a word.

“It’s him. It must be Nang,” I said, my voice still weirdly regular, at least as far as I could tell.

Seot and Cifa rushed over to read the message too. My Imdiko cursed and pulled me close, sandwiching Anrel between us, as if to protect her.

“I’m checking the trace,” Larten said as Seot scowled and pulled out his own com and told it to connect with Officer Breft’s frequency.

By the time Breft and Raxstad arrived, Larten had discovered a few interesting and terrifying things. First of all, the message had been recorded the night before, but sent this morning on a delay. Second of all, it had been sent from the very beach where the business party had been held, while it was being held.

Everything was reported to the Global Security officers that I have had too much contact with. Breft asked me, “There is no one else who might be doing this, at least not that you can think of? It’s not that I doubt your opinion. I just want to make sure we’re not narrowing the field prematurely.”

“Not at all. Especially not someone who would tell me we were meant to be together.” The hair on my neck rose saying that.

Breft rubbed his forehead. “I agree. The reports I read as to Dramok Nang’s state of mind before he disappeared from Earth shows intent and an unbalanced mind. Okay, I’ll continue to try and find evidence that he’s gotten to Kalquor—but I’m going to operate on the premise that he is here and stalking you.” He glanced at Raxstad.

The musclebound behemoth nodded. “All law enforcement in the area will be alerted to look out for him. Local, territorial, ours—everyone. He’ll be found and arrested on sight.”

I almost told Nobek Raxstad that everyone kept saying that, and with the same conviction. Yet Nang hadn’t been caught on his way here. He’d made it to Kalquor. He had gotten in close enough to see me and Larten frolicking in the dunes.

If he got that close to me, how easily could he get to Anrel? Even with security and guards everywhere, trying to keep her safe?

I was scared. Yet I was also abruptly pissed off. I’d endured Anrel being snatched, though by someone who had regretted her actions and tried to make things right. I had no illusions Nang would experience any stab of conscience over devastating me in such a way. He had left his clan. He had dodged capture to make it to Kalquor. He meant to have ‘his’ family. Such an intense fixation could turn ugly. Deadly.

I didn’t want Nang hurt. I really didn’t. However, if it came down between him and Anrel, he would lose every fucking time.

I asked Breft, “How overt does the threat from Nang have to be for me to kill him through self-defense? Or to keep my child safe? What will land me in jail?”

The Nobek’s eyebrow lifted as he regarded me. “Could you do such a thing?”

“For my daughter? Without hesitation.”

“She’s trained for hand-to-hand, blades, and firearms,” Larten said, his voice filled with pride. “Not that I expect her to have to do so herself with me close by.”

“She’s killed dozens of Tragooms,” Seot added. “If worst came to worst, Shalia could hand this Nang his—”

“Baby,” Cifa warned, putting his palms over Anrel’s ears.

“Back end,” Seot finished.

Breft and Raxstad exchanged grins. Breft told me, “Matara, if Dramok Nang does nothing more than wave hello to you, you are welcome to blast his head off. Threat has been established. Feel free to defend yourself at the mere sight of him.”

Dear prophets, I hope it doesn’t come to that. But my priorities remain unchanged since I went to Oses to ask for training on the *Pussy ‘Porter*. Whatever it takes, I will defend my child.

Last came the usual suggestions. Breft and Raxstad delivered them with more insistence: Anrel and I must never be left alone. Report anything suspicious immediately. And Breft was doubling the security flybys over our home.

It should be enough. With my luck and Nang possibly slipping onto the planet under everyone’s noses, I fear it’s not.