

September 4

Whew. I just had my first run since the Tragoom attack. I pushed myself to do a mile, and I feel like shit right now. But I didn't have to listen to Resan while I did it, and I really needed a run after this morning. At least now I'm not feeling all angsty like I was.

The *Pussy Porter* is such a mess. Due to initial cleanup efforts, I had some clear corridors to run around in today. Wow, this place is trashed. So much for poor Katrina's plans for a clanning ceremony on board.

Candy and I went with her to our dance club after breakfast to see if it could be put back together in time. The promenade area took a pounding from the fight. It wasn't nearly as bad as the training and rehab section, but it wasn't pretty. It was only yesterday that anyone besides the clean-up crew was allowed in there because of safety concerns.

The gorgeous hologram that depicted Kalquor space in the middle of the promenade was missing. A lot of the ceiling panels were gone, leaving the area with half its usual illumination. But the floors were cleared and only slightly buckled in a few places. We headed into the club with high hopes.

It was a sad sight but not as bad as it could have been. Three-quarters of the mirrors that lined the walls were shattered or cracked. All the alcohol dispensers and most the booze had crashed and broken on the floor. But only a couple of tables had broken. The flooring, walls, and ceiling were intact. Our sound system cranked up without a problem. Structurally, the room was still sound.

Yet we didn't have the mirrors to replace our broken ones. Candy clucked over the loss.

"We could hang up fabric to hide the bare walls where they show," she suggested. "Cleaning up will probably take, what, a couple of days? Decorating two or three days. Hmm, make it four. But no booze. The dispensary says they lost almost everything in their stock."

Katrina said nothing. Her face was despondent. It was no surprise; the club had been her project and she'd spearheaded it from start to finish. It was also what had brought her together with Clan Wotref. Seeing it even just cosmetically in ruins broke her heart. I knew before she spoke that she couldn't face having her clanning ceremony in there.

"It won't be right," she sighed. "No matter how we sweep and clean and decorate, it won't be right."

It wasn't just that the club was damaged. Katrina is mourning the soon-to-come separation from her new clan. I know because I'm starting to mourn too.

It doesn't help that every window-vid that still works on the ship is powered up and showing Kalquor as we approach it. The distant greenish-blue marble gets bigger all the time, signaling the end of our journey. It's a constant reminder that I'll soon say goodbye to Beta and Oses and the other friends I've made on this ship. I must have passed twenty of those vids on my run this morning.

I've done this heartbreak before. I dread doing it again.

The run did help though. I had a shower afterward and then went to fetch Anrel from Beta.

As usual, there were a few women hanging about his office. Beta always has company when he's keeping Anrel. Even with excitement rising over our impending arrival at Kalquor, time is always taken out to coo over the baby and ogle the hot man playing with her.

On the other hand, my arrival is usually greeted by groans. I never feel more unpopular than when I show up to claim my kid. Let's face it; I'm not as precious as my daughter or as smoking manly as Beta. Plus I take the smaller of the two away and herald the larger one's getting back to his duties. I'm a killjoy.

I got the typical catcalls of 'spoilsport' and 'party pooper' as I squeezed through the throng at Beta's office door. I blew the whole batch a good-natured raspberry. They in turn laughed at me and dispersed to do more organizing and packing and comming their assorted beaus on Kalquor.

Beta lay on the floor next to Anrel, holding a tiny stuffed bunny in front of her avid eyes. Raising it up and down, he enticed her to push up on her arms as she followed the toy's progress. She squealed with delight, her purple eyes riveted on the favored plushy. That bunny is permanently drenched with her drool, except when I steal it from her to give it a good wash.

"Look at my sweet girl doing her pushups," I cheered. "Just like Mommy does them."

Beta grinned at me from the floor. "She'll be crawling before you know it."

"And then walking and getting into everything. Yippee," I said with pretended angst.

I sat down next to them. My arrival diverted Anrel's attention from her bunny, and she babbled at me. My heart expanded to know she welcomed my arrival. I picked her up and smooched her sweet round cheeks. She grabbed my hair and tugged until my eyes watered. Strong girl.

"How did the club look?" Betra asked as I put Anrel back on the floor. I laid her on her back and she immediately flipped over on her stomach.

"Beyond help before we can get to Kalquor," I sighed. "Katrina is heartsick."

"That's too bad," Betra said with a sympathetic frown. "She should have the ceremony on Haven."

"Haven?" The place sounded familiar, but it was an Earther word.

"The farming colony the Empire is setting up in our territory for Earthers," he reminded me.

"Oh yeah. Katrina's son Matthew mentioned going there before she horrified him by joining a clan."

Betra snorted, but he made no comment on the matter. We all think Matthew is a self-righteous putz.

I seized on the idea of another venue for Katrina's clanning since the transport was such a wreck. "Is Haven nice? Worth having a ceremony rather than Kalquor itself?"

Betra shrugged, smiling at Anrel. She'd managed her get her fist around the bunny's leg. She tugged, and he let her win the toy from him. It immediately went in her mouth to be slobbered on.

"I don't know anything about it except we're making an unscheduled stop there. I think someone mentioned it was to be developed for off-planet farming before the war. It would have produced alien crops that we'd never plant on Kalquor, but are popular with our people."

I nodded, having heard a snippet or two myself. "The Empire decided it would make a good place to settle Earther evacuees. It's probably also a play to get more of our women closer to your planet."

Betra grinned. "I wouldn't be surprised. With Haven in the early stages of construction and terraforming, they might have some equipment we can use to keep this poor ship going."

"I suppose with transports to-ing and fro-ing between Haven and Kalquor, someone's got to have parts."

"We may get lucky and not need too much from them. Before we get to Haven, we're docking for a couple of days at a military space station. They have a repair facility, but it's only small-scale. It probably won't have all we need to make it home."

I gave him a suspicious gaze. "Why do I feel like we're running on a wing and a prayer?"

"Because we are." He grinned. "The space station will give you a chance to see how Nobeks really train. You'll see how easy Resan was on you all along."

I stood and picked up Anrel. "You spoke the name I will not hear. On that note, I'll be leaving."

Betra stretched before getting to his feet. "I need to get to work anyway. See you tonight."

I gave him a kiss, reflecting yet again how short our time together was becoming. My mood plummeted as I carried Anrel to the dining room for our lunch.

I'd arranged to com Clan Seot after lunch. Now that we can talk in real time, we like to take advantage of it.

I was a couple minutes late connecting to their frequency, but I'd had to change Anrel's diaper. I tried to hurry through it, but she was so cute that I had to take time to give her kisses. She squirmed nonstop, determined to roll over. Busy baby.

Finally I was seated on the floor with Anrel, feeling my tummy get all squirmy the way it always did when I was about to see Clan Seot. They flip my switch.

The instant the vid of the three delicious hunks popped up, I gave them a frantic wave. "I'm sorry I'm late!"

They smiled at me, each man sinfully gorgeous in his own way. Hunky Seot, adorable Cifa, and sexy Larten. They make me believe the prophets love me and want me to have nonstop sweaty sex.

Yes, I am going to Hell. But if that road is paved with Clan Seot, I will skip straight down.

Cifa, who has younger siblings he used to babysit, was the first to speak. "Babies and children will always make you late. But that is okay because you are worth waiting for," he cooed to Anrel. "Oh, you too Shalia." He winked to let me know he teased.

I laughed with the other two men. Clan Seot is always busting each other's chops. I was apparently now to be included in that.

"By the ancestors, woman, what have you been doing to your arms?" Seot's tone was admiring.

I looked at them, confused as to what he was talking about. I wore a tank top, so they were bare. "What? What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing. Look at the muscle you've got now."

I huffed a disparaging breath, though I was secretly pleased. My arms had gone from sickly little sticks to toned in the last few weeks. I don't want to give credit where it was due though. My former trainer was persona non grata. "Please. You guys have the arms. Boy, do you have the arms." I ogled with a lascivious leer.

"You look amazing," Seot asserted. His gaze ran up and down my body. He was just as overt in his appreciation of me.

"Gorgeous," Cifa sighed.

Larten had said nothing thus far. "The Nobek remains silent," I joked. "He is not so easily impressed."

The dangerous-looking brute cocked an eyebrow at me. "If you were here I'd throw you down and show you how good I think you look," he said, one corner of his mouth sliding up to give me an evil smirk. "Words would not be necessary."

I pretended horror, covering Anrel's ears. "Larten!"

He grinned, unrepentant. His usual slightly sinister look softened as he looked at the baby. "Speaking of strong women, look at this one pushing herself up."

"She is!" Cifa was always delighted with all things Anrel. This time was no exception. "She'll be crawling in no time. What a big girl you are, Anrel."

"The two of you are finally thriving," Seot said. "What was this report I heard about you taking on an entire squad of Tragooms though?"

"Oh no," I groaned. "Trust me, the story has been exaggerated to a ridiculous extreme. I didn't fight an entire squad by myself, and I made so many mistakes I shouldn't be alive to talk to you. I had more luck than skill." On the heels of that, I realized my humiliation kept me from showing proper appreciation to one of the men who deserved thanks. I told Larten, "One of the things I did do right was the trick you showed me when facing a bigger opponent. That definitely saved my skin."

He beamed with pride. "I am glad, Shalia. Did you blood your knife?"

I'd never heard that phrase before, but the meaning seemed clear. "Twice."

"Yes!" Larten howled, making Seot and Cifa wince. He pounded his feet in quick succession, and I recognized the rhythm of an ancient Kalquorian tribal dance. I had a moment of fear that he would slap the snot out of his Dramok or Imdiko, as that usually happens during such displays.

Instead, he straightened with the happiest smile I've ever seen a Nobek wear. Seot and Cifa chuckled at him. Then the Dramok turned to me. "How many Tragooms in total did you kill, Shalia?"

I cringed. I didn't want to tell him the number. It was embarrassing, more an admission of stupid luck than any real skill. But Seot has a way of looking at me that doesn't brook any hemming or hawing. When the man asks a question, he expects an answer.

So I told him, "I was credited with 14."

Cifa's jaw dropped in comic shock. Larten's grin got bigger, though it didn't seem possible it could. However, Seot nodded, his expression serious though gentle. "Quite the count. You are to be commended."

"Commended?" Cifa spluttered. "She deserves the rank of commander."

"Shalia doesn't want a lot of attention for this matter, as much as she warrants it." Seot's tone held a hint of warning for his clanmates. "She's ready to move on and leave that part behind her."

I heaved a breath of relief. With just a few short words from me, my Dramok beau understood how I felt about the matter. He got it without me laying it out. I could have kissed him for his understanding ... but then, I could kiss Seot just for standing around and looking gorgeous. Still, I was grateful to him for shutting the conversation down.

To underscore that, I asked Larten, "You do the historical demonstrations? Are you part of that ancestor appreciation society?"

He'd gone back to his dashing and slightly dangerous look. "I am. I can trace my lineage all the way back to Itness, father of Princess Gamrec and slayer of The Big Boot during the War of the Breeds."

My knowledge of Kalquorian history is next to nil. Most of what came out of Larten's mouth might as well have been spoken in Adraf for all I understood. It was clear this was a matter of pride for the big guy, so I nodded and made impressed sounds.

"It's good you know your ancestry," I said. "I have no clue about anyone in my distant background except a little about my grandparents."

"Tradition and honoring our ancestors is good. Thinking about you getting here soon is even better." Larten gave me a looking-over to let me know his plans for our future.

I wagged a finger at him but couldn't keep the naughty grin off my face. "Do I need to cover Anrel's ears again?"

The rest of our conversation settled into tame catching up, however. While Clan Seot gives me all sorts of dirty thoughts, it is nice getting to know them outside of rampant lust. I know I like these guys. I know

they'll be a good fit for me and Anrel already. Still, they do have some pretty heavy competition from Clan Aslada. I also worry I'll need time to get over Betra and Oses before I can truly commit to a clan.

Clan Seot tempts me to jump in headfirst, but I'm going to be smart about this. For once, I'm going to think things through.