

Dramok Korkla took a deep breath. With effort, he forced himself to sit still on the plush lounge in his Plasian quarters. He didn't try to be calm, however. There was no point in that when his heart drummed fiercely, trying to pound a hole as if to escape his chest. Waiting was a bitch on the nerves, especially when one was excited, hopeful, and nervous all at once.

His clanmate Raxstad stood to one side of the lounge, as absolutely still as only a Nobek could be. In the soft light of the floating lighting globes overhead, the huge warrior looked like a boulder with legs and midnight-black dreadlocks. His heavy brow furrowed as he stood silent and still.

Korkla studied the clan protector in the dancing light. Flames crackled from the firepit that sat in the center of the room. The fire moved the shadows over Raxstad's rough, almost brutish features. One would be foolish to think the man was as thick as his tree-trunk thighs, however. Raxstad was as wily and cunning and resourceful a man as had ever graced Global Security, the law enforcement entity he worked for on the planet Kalquor. Intelligence shared equal space with the feral intensity present in his purple eyes.

The Nobek's stoic display didn't have Korkla fooled for one moment, however. Korkla knew Raxstad was every bit as hopeful and anxious as the clan leader. A tendon in his jaw jumped from time to time; his one concession to tension. The fact that Raxstad stood, rather than draping his beefy frame on the other overstuffed lounge or the nearby chair, also spoke to his anticipation.

Their other clanmate Govi didn't try to hide his agitation. The gentle Imdiko paced back and forth in front of them, his booted feet sinking into the deep white pile of the cushioned flooring. He'd managed to wear a path in the carpet. One could see the circuit he'd made around the firepit, past the waterfall basin, and alongside the dimmed-glass windows that normally looked out over the gardens. And past the door, of course. There Govi always paused, as if listening for steps outside. Even now as Korkla watched, the Imdiko glanced at the door that led to the corridor outside the quarters. Any moment now, they should have their visitor. Or would they?

Govi's face, as beautifully formed as it was kind, betrayed his anxiety. He knew the stakes better than anyone. He'd worked with traumatized Earther women back on Kalquor. In fact, he had made it his focus as a psychologist. Seeing his concern only worried Korkla more about their chances with the unique lady they waited to meet.

For the third time in the last ten minutes Govi muttered, "Maybe she's not coming."

Korkla restrained an urge to grab the Imdiko and make him sit down. "Israla said she is bringing her in the next few minutes."

"Israla also said the girl has great difficulties with facing others who know what she is. We know."

"And she told us she'd drug Michaela to get her here if necessary. Calm down, Govi. You're making me nervous."

Govi halted in front of Korkla. The clan leader looked up at his clanmate and swallowed. By the ancestors, the man was stunning. With high cheekbones, full lips, and perfect symmetry, Govi's face was breathtaking. Even filled with angst, he couldn't help but be beautiful. Korkla quelled the urge to drag his Imdiko down so he could kiss all that perfection.

Ignorant of Korkla's silent worship, Govi continued to fret. His hands closed and opened.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" he said, as if he wasn't treated to his own gorgeous countenance every time he glanced in the mirror. His expression lit with wonder as he looked between the other two men.

Raxstad slowly nodded. His broad face lit with real pleasure. It softened his strong features, giving him his own version of attractiveness. His voice a deep rumble in that massive chest, he confirmed, "She's the loveliest of her kind that I've seen."

Govi's excitement faded to be replaced once more with worry. "She has so many issues with self-acceptance, though. After what Israla told me, I'm not sure I can help her. I've never had to deal with someone with this level of esteem issues."

Korkla smiled at his concerned clanmate. "You are the best at what you do, my Imdiko. There is no one on Kalquor more qualified to help this poor woman." He sounded sincere because he was. Govi, unable to settle his own worries, was amazing when handling the agonies of others. It was why he'd been made the head of Earther Matara psychology in the Empire.

Right now, his Imdiko's emotions ran the gamut. The mild-tempered psychologist actually scowled at Raxstad, an expression rarely seen on Govi's face. "By the ancestors, how can you be so still? So controlled? It's like she had no effect on you at all."

Raxstad arched a heavy brow at him. "You saw very well the effect she had on me." He snorted and looked at his crotch. Even in the dim light Korkla could see how lively Raxstad felt. The Nobek had enjoyed watching Michaela Blake and Jessica McInness do a presentation of belly dancing. They all had. Korkla could still detect the spicy scent that betrayed their combined arousal.

The Nobek shook his head. "The way she moved. That lush, young body. Mother of All, how could I not react?"

While Raxstad's arousal didn't surprise Korkla, it did worry him. His tone tense with warning, he said, "Both of you be calm. On top of everything else, she is an Earther. They are repressed like no other species. Blatant arousal will probably send her screaming from us."

Govi fretted, "Yet she needs to know we find her attractive. It's going to take a careful balancing act, my Dramok."

Korkla's tension increased at his Imdiko's words. How were they supposed to do this? He and Raxstad knew nothing about Earthers, and Michaela Blake's situation was beyond anything Govi had ever encountered.

He forced himself to take another deep, steadying breath. "We will do our best. That's all we can do."

But would it be enough to charm a frightened, self-loathing Earther woman? A woman who was also male?

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Michaela Blake felt as if she floated down the intimately lit corridor of Plasian leader Saucin Israla's home. It was like drifting in a happy dream, where peace filled the world and something wondrous waited just around a distant corner.

It didn't matter that the feeling was a falsehood and that Israla drew her towards devastating rejection. The leshell Michaela had drunk had taken away all the tears and terror she'd felt only moments ago. It would dull the coming pain, putting it on the back burner for later ... unless she could convince Israla to give her a lifetime supply of the potent intoxicant.

The Plasian's long-fingered hand wrapped around Michaela's. The grip was firm for such a willowy creature. Like the rest of her species, Israla was a tall, slender humanoid. Her flawless skin was bronze. Her hair, instead of the usual olive color of the residents of Plasius, had been dyed in gold and silver hues. Her eyes looked made of black marble with gray and white veins running through them. She was regal and stunning. With her famed appetite for young men of all

species, no one would ever suspect Israla was old enough to be Michaela's great-great-grandmother.

Michaela's mind was not on her hostess and savior's age or sexuality. It was on the hopes and fears of what lay ahead. Even with the calming influence of leshella, she knew the awfulness ahead of her.

Her voice seemed to float from her mouth, which made her want to giggle. "You said this is an important clan?"

Israla could be aloof with many people, but she always treated Michaela with the greatest kindness, like an adored younger sister. Her smile bright, the Plasian said, "Dramok Korkla is the personal aide of Crown Prince Clajak of Kalquor. Korkla's Imdiko is a top psychologist and his Nobek is part of the Empire's Global Security force. They have great rank."

Michaela tittered, the frothy effervescence of the drink in her system coming out in that breathless trill "So there's a psychologist in the clan. He'll have his hands full with me, won't he?"

Her next thought stopped her dead in her tracks. The sudden halt yanked Israla backwards for a momentary lack of grace. The Plasian gasped, then straightened and looked at Michaela with serene composure as if nothing had happened.

Michaela asked, "If this clan is so important, why are they seeing me? Why aren't they meeting with Jessica who is – normal?"

Israla started to frown and stopped herself. Michaela had noticed her hostess was militant against anything that might mar her seemingly ageless beauty.

The Plasian's tone managed to be both exasperated and reassuring. "You are the one they want, Michaela. Your unique circumstances are quite entrancing for the Kalquorians."

"That can't be. No one would want a freak." Michaela was grimly assured that a mistake had been made or Israla had bribed the clan into meeting with her.

Israla shook a finger at her. "If you say that horrid word one more time, I will be cross with you, young lady. I will tell Nobek Raxstad you need to be disciplined. Trust me, Kalquorian men are very effective when it comes to punishing naughty girls. They are always happy to spank a bare bottom."

She followed up that nugget of information with a girlish titter. Then she turned and resumed her course down the hall, dragging Michaela along.

Michaela didn't know which shocked her more: the idea that the alien men might like to spank her or that Israla liked being spanked. After all, the Plasian Saucin was the most powerful female Michaela had ever met. She gave orders with the ease that most breathed air.

To be spanked by a man ... what would that be like? Israla had a look on her face that told Michaela the Plasian regarded such as more reward than punishment.

Michaela thought about it, her leshella-soaked brain giving the issue a warm tinge. She thought of lying across the big muscled thighs of one of the Kalquorians she'd danced for earlier tonight, her ass bare. Of a large calloused paw rising above her vulnerable flesh. Of it coming down, moving fast towards her waiting buttocks...

Before she could finish the fantasy, Israla halted her before one of the doors in the guest wing. She peered closely at Michaela. "Let me have a look at you. Good, no sign of any crying. You look beautiful."

A stab of fear broke through the hazy intoxication that kept Michaela feeling safe. She sucked in her lower lip. "Do I? I don't look – wrong?"

Israla grabbed her shoulders, reminding Michaela of how broad they were. Too broad for a woman, even though her frilly blue blouse was cut to minimize the look.

The Plasian spoke firmly. "Michaela, Clan Korkla knows exactly what you are. These men are excited to meet you and have the opportunity to court you for their clan. Stop thinking like an Earther. This is the rest of the universe, and you are not an oddity."

Not an oddity. If only that was true.

Michaela said, "I'm different from the rest of my species."

"Which makes you all the more a treasure," Israla insisted. "Let's see your smile."

Michaela put it on dutifully. She adored Israla and had never been able to refuse the Plasian anything except sex. Michaela was not attracted to females.

As hard as she tried to smile for the Saucin, the uplifted position of the corners of her mouth felt fake. Still, she put her best effort into it.

It managed to satisfy Israla, who turned from her to rap on the door. In the next few seconds, Michaela felt as though she waited for her doom.

Could someone like her really find men who would accept a freak? Was it possible they could even love her? No. That was a fairy tale, the dream kept in the deepest corners of her heart. It would never be real.

Time ran out for her to turn tail and run. The door slid open and the shadow of a huge man fell over Michaela.

The big man spoke in a voice much softer than she had expected from a giant Kalquorian who stood nearly a foot taller than her. As he bowed, he said, "Good evening, Saucin Israla."

Two more men stood behind him, and Michaela goggled at them. They were also giants. One bulged with so much muscle she couldn't help but stare.

She recognized them from the belly dancing exhibit she'd put on with her friend Jessica only an hour earlier. There had been four Kalquorian clans present at the show, four potential groups of men to seduce into taking the women off Earth-blockaded Plasius. These three fellows had sat at one end of the stage. They'd been the most appreciative of the clans, howling and applauding her dancing with unrestrained enthusiasm. Michaela had caught herself doing her most salacious moves for them, too caught up in the dance of *Raqs Sharqi* to be inhibited.

Now she stood face to face with them, shaking as the leshell's effects waned before her terror.

The one who had answered the door had shoulder-length black hair that was almost like a cloud with its frizzy texture. All that soft-looking cotton candy hair framed a face made of sharp angles, the bone structure finely cut. It wouldn't have been a handsome face, except for the warmth that exuded from his expression and cat-pupiled eyes. The kindness in the Kalquorian's features made him appealing.

As for the body covered in the clinging black formsuit the alien male wore ... that was sheer perfection. Michaela's mouth went dry to see such blatant muscularity, the likes she'd never seen except on Earther soldiers who'd been fed steroids. Even they couldn't compare with the gorgeous, balanced physique of this man.

Israla's smooth voice barely registered as Michaela looked at the masculine vision before her. "Good evening once again, Dramok Korkla. I've brought someone to meet you."

Dramok. That means he's the leader of the clan, Michaela thought, one of the few things her brain spat out with clarity. The Kalquorian looked at her, his dazzling blue-purple eyes taking her in. Her, he looked at her. At Michaela, not the beautiful, powerful, and sexually adventurous Israla. How could he stare at her as if the Plasian did not even exist?

He bowed once more, this time to Michaela. She was aware of the other two doing so as well. For the moment, her sight and hearing were all Korkla's as he spoke.

"Matara Michaela, this is a pleasure. I cannot begin to express how much we enjoyed your dance tonight."

By some miracle, she remembered how to speak. Her voice managed to be more than a whisper, though not by much. "Thank you. I'm glad you liked it."

"Please do come in." Korkla and the other two stepped back to allow her entry.

When Michaela hesitated, Israla slipped an arm around her. The Saucin gave her a gentle but firm push towards the room beyond.

The leader of Plasius said loud enough for all to hear, "I have other duties to attend to. Take your time getting acquainted." Then she leaned to whisper in Michaela's ear.

"Do you smell that spicy scent?"

A sharp aroma teased Michaela's nostrils. "Like cinnamon? Oh, I guess you don't know what cinnamon is."

Israla was content to know she had picked up the singular scent. "That's the aroma of a Kalquorian's arousal. So now you know they are very interested in you."

Before Michaela could absorb that little nugget of information, Israla turned and swept away, leaving her alone with the three alien men. Michaela watched her go, her mouth hanging open. It occurred to her that perhaps running after the Saucin might be a good idea.

A large but gentle hand closed around Michaela's upper arm and pulled her towards the clan's quarters. Her brain still sputtering like a dying engine, unable to think properly, she crossed the threshold. The door shut behind her. She stood in the room, alone with three big alien men.

Dramok Korkla waved his hand towards the huge lounge, a piece of furniture that resembled a plush sofa. "Please, sit down, Matara."

One of the other men asked, "May I offer you a drink?"

Michaela's pounding heart skipped a little as she took in this man. Only a couple inches shorter than Korkla, he smiled at her.

Oh wow. He's even more gorgeous than I remember, Michaela thought.

"This is my Imdiko, Matara. His name is Govi," Korkla said in his warm voice.

This would be the psychologist Israla had told her about. Govi was a shrink with perfect, masculine features, as stunning as a male could be. His face was not angular like Korkla's, nor cherubic like Michaela's. He struck a perfect line down the middle, making his jaw and dimpled chin strong without being stark. His cheekbones were well-formed without being haughty. His long black hair lay smooth as glass halfway to his chest.

What a chest it was, delineated beneath that body-hugging outfit they called a formsuit. The attire certainly suited Govi's form. His body was just a shade less perfect than Korkla's, a bit more elongated and slender. Not that Michaela would hold that against Govi. No, he was just flat-out too stunning to be torn down by comparison.

"A drink, Matara?" The man's soft voice roused her from her contemplation.

She blinked, trying to escape the spell of the man's beauty. "Oh. I don't know if I should. Israla already gave me some leshell. I may have had too much already."

Yes, she'd blame her tongue-tied reaction to the handsome Kalquorian on the drink. It was as good an excuse as any to hang blunders on.

Govi smiled, making Michaela's world tilt. As if he wasn't handsome enough, he had to go and do that, increasing his appeal to the most ridiculous degree ever.

He said, "Shel is a derivative of leshella, but not quite as potent. A small glass of that shouldn't hurt."

Stunned by the gorgeous man in front of her, Michaela mumbled, "Okay, I guess."

While he fetched a glass into which he poured a light blue liquid, Korkla steered her over to the mammoth lounger. Michaela perched on the edge of it, her feet dangling a few inches from the flooring. Korkla sat next to her. He didn't touch her, but he was close enough for her to feel his body heat and note the waft of cinnamon-like scent coming off him.

Israla had said it was the aroma of Kalquorian arousal. Could that really be true? Why in the universe would this man find her attractive? Maybe Israla had lied when she'd said this clan was fully aware of Michaela's true form.

Govi came over with the glass of shel. He handed it to her and sat close on her opposite side. That left the third member of this group to look at ... as if Michaela could miss someone that big.

Michaela had never seen such wide shoulders on anyone before. The dreadlocked Kalquorian was the epitome of the word 'huge'. All muscle, he made her feel as fragile as crystal waiting to be shattered.

He bowed as Korkla introduced him. "This is my Nobek, Michaela. His name is Raxstad."

Raxstad straightened and smiled. "I hope I do not frighten you. I sometimes have that effect on people due to my size."

She smiled back in self-defense. *Be nice to the big Kalquorian ape-man and maybe he won't swipe your head off your shoulders*, she thought. Her heart pounded fit to jump out of her chest.

To cover her unease, Michaela said, "Your shoulders are almost as wide as you are tall. You're like a damned gorilla."

Raxstad's brows lifted. "I am not familiar with the term 'gorilla'."

Crap, he probably thought she had insulted him. Michaela curled a little into herself. "It's a big animal. Not as big as you, but pretty big. Strong too," she added, hoping he'd take it as a compliment.

Raxstad crouched down before her, putting his face on the level of hers. His features were broad, almost to the point of being brutish. His face matched his body. Michaela would not have called him handsome, but the Nobek was certainly a compelling sight.

The fierceness of his face eased with the smile he gave her. Something loosened in her chest to see him look at her with warmth. "I am intimidating you, little one. Is this any better?"

Govi hurried to add, "Only Raxstad's enemies need fear him, not lovely little Earther girls."

But I'm not really a girl, Michaela's mind whispered. She was only a pretender, an abomination of a human. These men had come to Plasius to clan a woman, not a freak of nature. She'd teased them with her dancing, making swaying promises with her body that it could not uphold. Now they looked at her in a certain way, as a fully female creature. She had lied, not with words but with the dance. They did not know what it was they looked upon.

Michaela drew in on herself again, tears filling her eyes. A sob tumbled from her lips.

The three men moved in close as their faces registered alarm. Korkla's arm closed around her waist. Raxstad's hands covered hers where they clutched at her glass of shel. Govi stroked her cheek with a careful hand.

The Imdiko coaxed her gently. "Easy, Michaela. It's all right. We only wish to talk to you tonight. Nothing else."

Korkla added, "There is nothing to be afraid of. Tell us about your dancing. Who taught you?"

While they spoke, Raxstad lifted her hands with her glass, pressing it to her lips. She obediently took a sip, trying to steady herself. The shel wasn't as good as leshella, but she still liked it. The simple act of drinking helped her find her equilibrium.

When Raxstad lowered the cup again, Michaela drew a shuddering breath. "My mother. It was my mother who taught me *Raqs Sharqi*."

"Is it a popular dance on Earth?"

Michaela shook her head. Govi was the handsomest of the three, but it was Raxstad who knelt in front of her, commanding her sight. His strong features, while brutish and fierce, possessed a nice quality that she found she liked. The Nobek had a directness to him that appealed to Michaela. She had the feeling that no one ever wondered where they stood with Raxstad.

She told them, "No, belly dancing was not indigenous to the people of the North American Bloc, where I lived. My mother's parents were from Saudi Arabia in the Middle Eastern Bloc. The dance is outlawed on all of Earth now."

As Govi drew a breath to speak, Raxstad looked towards him. Feeling as if she'd been released by the commanding Nobek, Michaela looked at the stunning face of the Imdiko.

Govi said, "I imagine it would have been outlawed. It is quite seductive, and I've found Earthers tend to be repressed in their intimacies. Being that ... blatantly sensual ... would be far beyond most of your race's capabilities."

Michaela's gaze drank in the perfectly shaped eyes, nose, and especially the mouth of the psychologist. She said, "The funny thing is, the dance didn't originate to be salacious at all. It started as a form of child birthing exercises."

Korkla snickered. "Really? I can imagine it often led to the occurrence of child birth itself."

Michaela now had to look at the clan leader as she laughed. Once again she was struck by how the warmth of the Dramok's smile made his angular face so entrancing, almost as much as Govi's.

She enjoyed ribald humor. The unexpected suggestiveness of Korkla's remark delighted her. "Yeah, well you can see why it got outlawed on Earth. Heaven forbid sex be something anyone would want to do."

Michaela was even getting used to Raxstad's more primitive physicality. She had no trouble turning her smile in his direction as he joined in her laughter. The Nobek told her, "You do not appear to be so repressed. I was concerned we would never get you to even speak to us."

They seemed nice. Perhaps it was the leshella still in Michaela's system that made her dare to be blunt. More likely it was the need to get the worst of this meeting done and over with. If these three men were going to reject her, it needed to happen now before she could entertain any thoughts that would lead her to liking them too much.

Michaela told the clan, "As a man, I got away with being crass on board our ship in ways that no woman could. Swearing, telling crude jokes, acting like I thought with my cock ... Earth turns a blind eye to some things that men do. I could be a foul-mouthed asshole and even make some sexual jokes. As long as I didn't act too outrageous in front of my superiors, there was no problem."

Korkla studied her closely. "But you prefer presenting yourself as a female. That is correct?"

None of them had reacted to her profane language or overt references to having masculine qualities. They didn't even exhibit morbid fascination, which had been the best Michaela thought she could hope for. She checked the three faces surrounding her, searching for a hint of disgust. She saw only kindness and patience.

She said, "I feel more female than male, even though I'm both."

Govi reached up to stroke a curl. "It must have been hard for you to pretend otherwise, to have lived your entire life in fear of discovery."

Raxstad touched her knee, a finger tracing a crease in her skirt. "Would they really have killed you for being born a – I'm sorry, Michaela. I've forgotten the word."

"Intersex. Some would call me a hermaphrodite, but I like intersex better." She barely contained a shiver to feel them touching her. It made her feel warm inside. Her attitude felt lighter ... was that hope? Did she dare to anticipate they would actually consider her a viable mate? "Yes, they would have euthanized me at birth if the truth had gotten out. If they had found out later, I would have been executed as demon spawn."