

March 28

This morning Oses and Betra showed up in my room in Medical at the same time. Betra smiled as sweet as sugar at the Nobek as he greeted him with a cheery, “Good morning, Commander.”

Oses nodded, his expression as noncommittal as its normal fierce set ever gets. “Hello, Betra.”

I noticed that Oses’ gaze lingered on Betra’s face longer than politeness required. In fact, he looked long enough that my liaison flushed a little bit. Boy, I hope they don’t start butting heads again over the fact Betra doesn’t screw guys and Oses is dying to screw Betra.

Betra came in and dropped a kiss on my forehead. “How are you feeling, Shalia?”

“Sane.” I gave him a brave smile.

He stepped back to allow Oses to also kiss me hello. The Nobek’s intense stare was all for me now. “Are you still having nightmares?”

I shrugged. “I probably will for some time yet. I haven’t hid in any closets for a couple of weeks though. Dr. Feru is happy about that. Baby steps, you know.”

Speaking of baby, I was reminded to rub my belly. I’ve got definite bump now as my hitchhiker grows. Tep has warned me that when I start having sex again, it is time to be cautious.

Oses caught my motion and put his hand over mine on my stomach. “I hope this little one is doing all right as well.”

“He ... or she ... is active. Healthy too, they say. We’ll know if it’s a girl or a boy soon.” I felt a flutter of nervous anticipation about that news. The more evidence I had of my child being something real, the more anxious and excited I got.

“Sixteen weeks, right?” Betra asked.

“Or seventeen. Tep still can’t quite pin it down,” I said. “The sizes and pace of development of hybrids vary too much for him to be sure.”

“I do hope you have it before we get to Kalquor,” the liaison enthused. “I want to meet your child.”

Oses looked at Betra again. Out of the clear blue, he suddenly asked, “Why did you never tell me your uncle abused you?”

Betra started. His eyes went wide in shock, and he seemed unable to answer at first.

“I told him, Betra,” I said to give him time to recover. “I thought Oses should know why you reject his advances.”

The Imdiko frowned. “I reject his advances because I do not have any interest in sex with other men. That my uncle forced himself on me has nothing to do with that.” He looked at Oses and sighed. “It does have everything to do with why I’m so uncomfortable with the least little indication of physical intimacy with men. I realize I’m overly sensitive about that.”

“Like when I touched your hair while we played with Shalia?” Oses pressed.

Betra smiled sadly. “Exactly. I know I went overboard in my anger. As for why I never told you ... I’m not sure.” He shrugged. “I’ve kept it secret from everyone but Shalia. Talking about it takes me back to that time and how guilty it made me feel. I felt like it was I who did something wrong.”

“You know that’s not true.”

“I know it in my head, but it’s not how I felt when it happened. I guess that’s why I didn’t tell you. Since you didn’t know all that, you must have believed you could convince me to relent. I apologize for not explaining myself.”

Oses blew out a breath. “I am the one who should beg your pardon. I have been pushing at you to see me as a potential clanmate, or at least a lover, for months. I thought I could seduce you into changing your mind. You said no, you said it plainly, and that should have been good enough to make me stop pursuing you. Instead, I ignored your insistence that we would never happen simply because ... simply because.”

I remembered that Oses had said Nobeks did not profess their love to other men. It hung in the air though, a huge thing that could not be spoken but was understood.

It affected Betra deeply. His eyes went bright and he swallowed hard before putting his hand on top of Oses’, which still covered my hand.

With obvious difficulty, Betra said, “How can I tell you what’s in my heart without giving you hope for what will never be? If a man can love another without sex playing a part, then we would

be lifemates. Oses, you are important to me, more than you can possibly grasp. But I can't offer you more than a platonic relationship. I just can't."

The Nobek nodded. "I understand that now, Betra. It is less by far than what I wanted for us, but I would not harm you for all the Empire. If I can only have a small part in your life, then I will take it." He chuckled then, but it was an empty sound. "In these last weeks, I have learned that even the tiniest rewards must be appreciated. I will accept what little fate has chosen to bestow and be grateful for it."

With that, Oses turned away and left us to stare after him.

"At least he won't be chasing you around anymore," I offered weakly.

"No. I do hope he meant it when he said he would remain a part of my life, though." Betra looked at the empty doorway, as if hoping Oses would return.

When he did not, we talked about things that wouldn't make either of us sad: the baby, messages I needed to reply to, my potential suitors and the lottery, and anything else we could think of that had nothing to do with my abduction or Oses. Betra stayed until Candy and Katrina showed up to make me laugh with tales of their latest sexual conquests. I think the gals make up half the stories they tell me, but it's still great fun just to be silly.