

January 1

I opened my eyes. The first thought that came to me was: *I'm clanned.*

For a second, I forgot to breathe. A moment of panic filled me with ice. But as I gazed at a wall of muscled chest, I made myself take slow, deep breaths. It would be okay. My heart knew that for a fact. It would be more than okay. Sooner or later, my psyche would catch up with how amazing my life was going to be from now on.

I pulled my gaze from that amazing chest, forcing myself to look up, up, past the throat, stubbled chin, delicious mouth, and arrow-straight nose to stare into Seot's blue-purple eyes. He gazed at me with an expression of love that warmed me from head to toe and chased all my fears away.

"Good morning, Matara Shalia of Clan Seot," he murmured.

"Good morning, my Dramok," I said. Saying it out loud made it okay, somehow. I breathed easier.

Warm lips pressed against my ear. "How are you feeling? Besides desperate for coffee?" Cifa whispered in my ear.

I had to laugh, relaxing all the way. "You already know the most important thing about me," I said, turning my head to regard Clanmate Number Two, who was spooned tightly against me. "Shalia does not function without caffeine."

Cifa's open, adorable face split in a sunny grin. "We may have to invest in the coffee bean-growing enterprise. Your consumption alone will make us richer than ever."

Dark and intense Larten propped himself up to gaze at me over Cifa's shoulder. As dangerous as he appeared, wearing an aura of primal violence typical of Nobeks, the usual humor danced in his eyes. "How nicely you sidestepped our Imdiko's main question, my Matara."

"Now that the initial shock of realization has passed, I'm happy to be here," I assured them. I was happy. Day by day, I would make progress with the abandonment issues that had cropped up recently, almost derailing my happily-ever-after with the best clan on Kalquor.

Cifa stroked my hair. "When can I schedule a dinner to celebrate our clanning? We should invite everyone."

Seot crooked a brow. "Won't we be doing that for the formal ceremony?"

"Yes, but the ceremony will be too elaborate to have anytime soon. I have a lot to plan when it comes to that. *We* have a lot to plan," he amended when I gave him a pointed look. "I'm desperate to make a big deal out of this as soon as possible, so I want us to have a dinner too."

He was so sweet and hopeful. Who could say no to that? "It sounds great to me."

“I’m fine with it,” Seot said. “It would be a good for the rest of our extended family to meet Shalia and Anrel, if they can make it. We can com them and see who can get out here in the next few days.”

I thought about it. “I’ll com Joelle, Elwa, and my mom. I don’t think Mom will be able to come, but I’ll invite her anyway. I can invite Candy and Katrina when I go to pick up Anrel.”

Cifa had Larten grab his handheld off the bedside table. He tapped on it, making lists of potential guests, what we might prefer to eat, and locales for the celebration. “Don’t forget that we all plan to attend your first therapy appointment in two days. Should I avoid scheduling for then? If it works out for everyone else, we can have dinner arranged at a restaurant or catered by a food service company.”

While our Imdiko did his event planner thing, Seot started kissing me and doing things that made me moan. Larten complained to our caregiver. “If you’re concentrating on dinner plans, at least get out of the way so I can enjoy my mate.” He shoved at Cifa impatiently.

Cifa tossed the handheld aside. “Oh, are you awake enough for that, Shalia? No coffee first? This is a celebration I don’t want to miss.”

My first full day as their Matara definitely started off right.

It was late in the morning before I got to the complex to pick up Anrel. I also had to pack my belongings. I’d commed Katrina after fun time was done, still a bit breathless from wanton, newly-clanned sex. She laughed to hear me making excuses that I still had to shower and dress. The guys were zooming around the room, getting ready for work while I spoke. (Audio only, of course. Katrina was not ogling my naked clanmates no matter how close she and I are.)

“Don’t rush, clanned woman,” she said. “I didn’t expect to see you early anyway. What are those men thinking, working during an occasion like this?”

“So we can have a prolonged honeymoon later,” I laughed. “Though Cifa says he’s going to the office just long enough to attend a meeting.”

“Get here when you get here,” Katrina chuckled. “Anrel is fine, and I’m enjoying being with her. You’ve kept her away from me far too much lately!”

It was in a well-scrubbed and not quite so breathless state that I showed up at the complex a little more than an hour later. I was grateful to have been allowed to make myself presentable. Seot had sent a chauffeured shuttle for my use until I hooked up with Cifa later in the day, though I protested the extravagance.

“Don’t worry,” he assured me over the com as he took a break between meetings of his own. “We’ll buy you a craft of your own to use. That’s on my—what did you call it? The homey-do list?”

“Honey-do,” I corrected him. I hated to calculate of the expense of having my own shuttle, but I knew it was necessary. I need to be able to get around on my own. I resolved to put my foot down about anything too fancy. I don’t care how wealthy my clanmates are; just because it’s there doesn’t mean I have to spend it foolishly.

Back to my visit to the complex. Anrel squealed when I walked in the door of Katrina’s office. I squealed back and claimed my baby. Hugs, hugs, hugs. Kisses, kisses, kisses. You’d think I hadn’t seen her in a week rather than overnight.

“Good, you don’t appear too well rested,” Katrina teased. “I’d be disappointed if you were.”

“Evil woman,” I laughed. Candy chose that moment to walk in. More hugs and kisses for Anrel. We should register our fan club.

I noted the tear tracks on Candy’s face and sighed, handing off Anrel to her. “Here, you need the joy more than I do,” I said. “How long before Stidmun can visit again?”

“Too long,” my friend pouted. “I thought about stowing away in his travel bin as he packed it this morning. I’ve had it with these separations. I’m going to write a petition about allowing nontraditional clannings.”

“I’ll sign it,” I said with sympathy. “Maybe you can make something happen.”

“Ignore my mood,” Candy said, straightening in her chair and plastering a less-than-genuine smile on her face. “This is a day of celebration. You’re clanned!”

I grinned as she and Katrina cheered. Anrel added her voice to the happiness. “Yes, I am. Cifa is planning a dinner for us all in the next couple of evenings. You’re invited, of course.”

“We’ll be there,” Katrina said. “What about the ceremony?”

“He wants to take his time to plan it all out.” I laughed. “He’s more of a bride than I am, I believe. But I’m glad he’s taking the reins. I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

We yapped for a few more minutes before I took Anrel up to our soon-to-be former quarters. It was the prime hour for her nap, so I was able to work on packing up without having to worry. Not that there weren’t interruptions. Word had gotten around that I was an old clanned lady now, so a lot of my former shipmates stopped by to congratulate me.

There was one awkward moment when Megan stopped by. I hadn’t seen much of her since we’d arrived at Kalquor, so it was nice to reconnect. She hugged me and peeked in on Anrel. Then she knelt on the floor with me as I sorted and put things in bins.

“Shalia, I hope this isn’t too weird, but I contacted the first of my prospective clans. It turns out you were seeing them.”

I started. "Clan Aslada?"

"Yeah. Is that a problem for you?"

I waved her off. "Heavens, no. I've got my clan."

"Why didn't you choose them? Is there anything I should know?" Her voice was hesitant, as if she was doing something wrong by investigating my background with them.

"They're impossibly rich, terribly kind, and sexy as hell," I said. "They are going to do their best to sweep you off your feet."

Megan relaxed and grinned. "That good? Wow. Clan Seot must be gods to beat out a clan like that. Come on, be honest. What did you not enjoy about Clan Aslada?"

I thought about it. I didn't want to be critical of the three men who might have been my clanmates if not for the three Mr. Perfects I'd fallen for. "I'm too Plain Jane to be that wealthy. It was too extravagant for little ol' me."

She shook her head. "That's more you than them. Come on, they can't be perfect."

"Nobody is," I agreed. "If there was one thing that kind of got to me, it was how they tended to make decisions on my behalf. Some things I wanted to be consulted on, such as the clothes I would wear, the way I would look when we went out. It's not that they didn't care how I felt. They just had a tendency to choose for me."

"Oh." Megan sat and considered. "I don't mind that kind of thing much. The more I interact with these clans, the more I appreciate men who want to take care of me. I guess it sounds weird to someone as independent as you, who goes around beating up Tragooms and fighting off everything that stands in your way."

I snorted to hear her describe me with such attributes. "Hey, if we all wanted the same thing, life would be boring as hell. It would be outstanding if you were a perfect match for Clan Aslada. They'd be getting a wonderful Matara, and you'd be relaxing in the lap of luxury."

Megan laughed. "I could get used to that. Thanks, Shalia."

"Best of luck to you and them. You'd be lucky to have each other, if it works out."

I hope it does work for them. I think the world of Clan Aslada, and Megan is terrific.

I'd finished filling and locking up my bins when Cifa commed to say he was setting up the big dinner tomorrow night. That was assuming all the people I wanted there could join us. I commed Elwa and Joelle and got the go-ahead from them. Anrel woke as I finished talking to my sort-of

moms, so I took care of her needs. Then I tracked down Candy and Katrina and verified their availability.

“It’s a go,” I told Cifa a few minutes later.

“Terrific,” he said. “Want to meet me in the market for lunch? I’m considering Abbub’s. If you discover you’re fond of their food, we can have them cater the dinner. They have a great menu to choose from. Then we can shop around for anything else we need.”

It sounded great to me. I thought it made the most sense to walk from the complex to the market to meet up with him. I notified the pilot of my rental shuttle that I was done with him for the day. Anrel and I set out under a sunlit sky to connect with Cifa.

The walk was a relaxing one, and I even had an adult companion join me. Matara Hina, a Kalquorian woman whom I’d run across from time to time, was heading to the market as well. As I wandered past, she was leaving her lovely upside-down-bowl-shaped home. I stopped to let her catch up when she hailed me.

Hina is beautiful, as magnificent as one would imagine an Amazonian from Earth legend. She’s always dressed well, wearing gowns with an effortlessness I can’t hope to achieve. Her blue-black hair was braided down her back, reaching to her butt. Yet she wears a sadness that I can’t even imagine. The daughter she’d borne had been affected by the genetic damage that is the reason Kalquorian men work so hard to attract Earther mates. Hina’s baby girl did not survive long past the birth. Even with our casual acquaintanceship, I can tell it had affected the woman greatly.

“Hello, Shalia,” Hina said, her gaze lingering as it always did on Anrel. “You look cheerful.”

“Hi, Hina. Yes, I’m in a pretty good mood. I joined a clan yesterday.”

“Congratulations! Who are the lucky men? Maybe I’ve met them.” She fell into step with me, seeming to glide more than walk.

“Clan Seot. Are you acquainted? My Imdiko is one of the owners of the Cifiler line of ocean cruise ships.”

“Oh, I love those cruises. I don’t know the owners, and I’m afraid your clan name isn’t familiar to me, but I have taken three voyages on your Imdiko’s line. I have to say, they get better with each trip.”

I grinned at her. “You’ll have to try the newest ship. It’s small and intimate and goes to ports no other cruise line can access. We’re starting a big promotion for it soon.”

We chatted, as friendly as could be. I don’t believe that I’ve ever spoken to Hina so much. Usually, her attention is all for Anrel. Kiddo was friendly too. We were halfway to the market when Anrel held her chubby arms out to Hina.

“Oh, how sweet,” the Kalquorian woman said, an expression of wistful pain crossing her features.

“Do you want to hold her?” I offered, not sure if it would be more agony than pleasure for Hina.

Hina was delighted, however. She cuddled and hugged and adored Anrel, who was more than happy to have the attention.

We got to the first market square. Cifa was waiting for Anrel and me. It was with obvious reluctance that Hina handed the baby off to her daddy after I made introductions. We exchanged a few more pleasantries, and then Hina went on her way.

“Poor thing,” I sighed when she was out of earshot. “Her daughter died from the DNA damage.”

Cifa took my arm while holding Anrel in the crook of his elbow. “It’s nice of you to give her time with Anrel. She looked as if she enjoyed it.”

“I wish there was something that could be done for women like her.” The subject was starting to bring me down, so I changed topics. “Okay, where is this fantastic food you’re so excited about?”

It was a glorious afternoon from there on, with us planning not just our big dinner, but starting to plan our ceremony as well. Best of all, I didn’t have a single moment of worrying about abandonment. I didn’t act akin to an ass even once. I think Hina’s pain made me grateful for what I have, reminding me to appreciate my wonderful fortune.