

October 1

I was sore after my fun with Dusa and Esak. Imagine that. So I wandered over to Medical this morning to check in with Dr. Dad. Nayun was as sweet as ever, but of course he wanted to know why I needed a hit of pain inhibitor.

I have no doubt I was red as a lobster as I stuttered. "Um ... strenuous activity."

He looked at me kind of funny. "Have you started a new exercise regimen?"

Yeah, it's called Fuck the Pounds Away. Sheesh. How am I supposed to tell my dad (even if he's my unofficially adopted dad) about my sex life? I'm going to raid some of the empty dorms to see if any aspirin was left behind by previous inhabitants so I don't have to go through this again.

I scowled and told him, "I had a date last night with Dusa and Esak."

It was Nayun's turn to blush. As he went to get my pain inhibitor I heard him mutter, "I'm going to have a talk with those two about being so rough. Maybe I'll get a bit rough myself."

Yep. He's my alien father, all right.

When he came back, I took the opportunity to catch up on all the latest gossip. "So what happened to Mom's abductors and the people they were working with? Are they being interrogated?"

I've heard how harsh Kalquorian interrogation methods are. They are supposedly as brutal as Earth's old regime when it comes to torturing suspects and the convicted. Not that I felt very charitable to the people who had kidnapped and traumatized Mom, but she had come through her ordeal as intact as someone with dementia could hope to. She'd been all smiles as she boarded her shuttle to daycare this morning. I felt kind of cringe-y when I thought about men and women being beaten and stuff, even though a part of me yelled they deserved it.

Nayun placed his palm against my cheek, comforting me. "The Empire is not holding any Earthers liable for their post-Armageddon actions unless it is a direct attack on us. Kalquor is leaving that duty to the Galactic Council."

My heart skipped a beat. "So Nang let loose the people who took Mom?"

"Of course not. They are being held in guarded seclusion until Galactic Council lawgivers arrive to take charge of them. The Galactic Council will determine what punishments are warranted. The kidnappers will still have to answer for their crimes against their own people, but their punishment is not up to Kalquor to determine."

"How long will it take for the Galactic Council to get here? They're almost as far away from Earth as Kalquor, aren't they?"

Dad nodded. "Yes, but since we were at war, there was a contingent of the neutral lawgivers shadowing our fleet and yours to make sure atrocities were not committed against prisoners. That being said, this site and your mother's kidnappers are not a big priority right now. The representatives for the Galactic Council should arrive in a couple of weeks, at the latest."

"The women who took Mom away will be held responsible too? Or do you lovelorn Kalquorians give them a pass? Can they score freedom for a kiss or a roll in the hay?"

Dad chuckled. "I like the way you think. I'd sign up for invoking punishment in that case." He patted my shoulder. "The women involved in all this have committed a crime, especially the ones who lured Eve away. They must answer for that just as the men will. Those females are locked up and awaiting extradition as well."

I felt a lot better. No one was being tortured, but the evil Pageant Trio was getting a little of theirs back. Good enough. "So it will be a couple of weeks before the Galactic Council takes them away. It seems to me you guys are stretched plenty thin without having to babysit the kids who can't behave themselves."

Dr. Dad gave me a little frown. "Speaking of going, have you decided on the destination for you and Eve? You'll need to put in your immigration status soon."

I grinned. "I know where we're going, all right. Kalquor, where Mom can get her procedures and have a real life restored to her."

Nayun was thrilled. "Excellent! So you'll be entering the lottery?"

A little of my happiness dimmed. "Yeah, well that's part of the package, isn't it?"

He patted my arm again. "I know you've gotten close to Dusa and Esak. But even if they had an Imdiko and were established as a clan, they are young and without much rank, Shalia. In the lottery, clans are given a battery of tests to determine their worthiness to clan Earther Mataras. They also have gained standing in their careers and community. They have achieved a certain standard of living, so that their mate and future children will be well provided for."

I arched a brow at him. "So they come with a dowry, is what you're saying."

Nayun looked confused. "Dowry?"

"Nevermind." I huffed a breath. "What about love? Hasn't that got anything to do with clanning?"

Dr. Dad's eyes went wide. "Are you in love with Dusa and Esak?"

"I didn't say that." I shook my head at him. "I care about them. I adore them, so yeah, I suppose you could say I love them. They are absolute sweethearts. But I wouldn't call it 'in

love'. I'm definitely not ready to clan with anyone, not even them. Not after all the shit I've been through recently."

Nayun looked relieved. "Thank the Mother of All. They are good men, but not ready for the responsibility of a Matara. As for your readiness, the trip from Earth to Kalquor takes nine months. Your mind may change about being ready to settle down by then."

I wasn't so sure about that, but I didn't say anything. Instead I prodded him. "You still didn't answer my question."

He smiled at me with such warmth I could have hugged him. I really do adore Nayun like the father I should have had. "To me, love is an essential ingredient, Shalia. I certainly would never have clanned without it. I hope you do find a clan who inspires you to give your heart. It is a lifelong commitment, after all."

His look was wistful. I had to ask, "Is your clan going to find a Matara?"

Nayun chuckled and his color deepened again. "We are getting too old to clan a fertile Matara. I do not expect we will find any woman to join us."

"Why not?" I scowled at him. "Just because a woman can't have children any longer doesn't mean she's ready to be put to pasture. Mature women like good men to share their lives with, you know." Or at least, that's what I hoped. After my real dad left and before the dementia kicked in, Mom had often commented how much she missed sex. Privately, of course – women didn't go around on Earth yapping about getting it on. I'd thought she was crazy at the time, but my sexual expertise before Dusa and Esak had been with men who blackmailed me into their beds.

Nayun shrugged. "Maybe we'll meet someone. I suppose anything is possible."

"Of course it is," I said cheerfully. "An intelligent, nice man like you is bound to attract some lucky lady. That is, if your clanmates aren't complete jerks."

That got Dr. Dad laughing. I couldn't help but grin. I love his deep, rolling guffaws.

"No, my Dramok and Nobek are good men," he said when he'd recovered enough to speak. "Perhaps you are right, and we will find a woman who likes us."

I left him still chuckling over the idea his clanmates might be jerks. I'm glad to know he's got a good Dramok and Nobek. My Kalquorian dad deserves the best.

I suppose I should register my intentions to go to Kalquor now. I also need to line up Mom's procedures. I bet I have all sorts of forms to fill out for myself since I'll be going into the lottery. Lots to do, and I'm not thrilled to start on any of it. You'd think since the world has ended, there wouldn't be any more paperwork. Ha! So much for that. At least I have dinner with Dusa and Esak to look forward to tonight.