

Cissy gripped hands with her identical twin sister Tasha. She tried to appear cool and calm for the Kalquorian attendants on board the shuttle. They didn't need to know how her heart raced or that her palm sweated as freely as Tasha's. She prided herself on always looking in control, even when possessing control seemed well out of reach.

They'd left the doomed Earth nine months ago on board a large transport, now in orbit around the planet of Kalquor. Most of the other women on board the transport had been taken to the complex that would house them until they found clans to join. Though Cissy and Tasha also planned to live in the complex, they were regarded as a special case. They had gotten a shuttle all to themselves, and it had just landed within a cliff. They stood now before the hatch, waiting for it to open.

To Cissy's surprise, the bay did not look like it was within a great rock jutting on the pink-sanded shore on the planet Kalquor. The vid viewer to the left of the Salter twins showed them a thoroughly modern landing area with soft illumination glowing from the walls and ceiling. Other shuttles and transports dotted the large area.

The vid also showed them the large number of people waiting for their arrival. Cissy thought there were easily fifty people out there, if one didn't count the red formsuited guards standing at attention all over the place. Most of those standing outside the shuttle were the dark-skinned, black-haired Kalquorian race. They were almost all male ... unabashedly masculine and muscular men. Judging from the blue robes worn by many in the group, they were also politically powerful men, the ruling elite of the Kalquorian Empire.

Cissy swallowed against the rush of nervousness that flooded her. Her cousin Jessica had clanned with the emperors of Kalquor. As a member of the empress' family, Cissy herself had been treated with deference throughout her journey here, deference that bordered on embarrassing. Still, the status she'd gained hadn't made a real impression until this moment.

Tasha sounded just as breathless as she felt. "Wow. It looks like half the Royal Council showed up along with the Imperial Family. You'd think we were important."

Cissy was glad she wasn't the only one feeling a bit off-balance. She whispered, "Who would have ever guessed we'd end up related to royalty? I am so underdressed for this."

Tasha emitted a nervous giggle as her long-lashed hazel eyes took in Cissy's denim trousers and black tee-shirt. At least she'd also thrown on a nice turquoise button-down blouse, which Cissy wore unbuttoned over the tee. "Better than flaunting all your wares like you've been doing on the transport." Tasha winked. "Everyone knows you hate pretension. No sense dressing like someone you're not, Cis."

Cissy eyed her twin. Tasha liked pretty clothes, so she looked perfectly presentable in her wraparound dress of purple. She'd put her dark brown waves into a tidy bun, except for the few tendrils that had artfully escaped from it.

Except for their clothing, the pair were nearly impossible to tell apart. They'd even gained the same amount of weight during their nine-month trip from Earth to Kalquor. Close to starved to death before finally admitting there was no choice but to turn themselves in to their former enemies, the pair's petite frames had made them seem more like children at first glance. Indeed, the rescue party of Kalquorians they'd given themselves up to had taken some convincing that the twins were in their early thirties.

Discovering that Cissy and Tasha were also first cousins to the Earther Empress of Kalquor had caused quite the sensation amongst the aliens. Though supplies in those last days of evacuating the dying Earth had dwindled, the Kalquorians had made sure the women had

everything they could give them. That included copious amounts of delicious food, which the sisters had availed themselves of without restrictions.

Cissy had laughingly referred to Tasha and herself as Chub One and Chub Two for the last couple of months. Tasha hated hearing that. She constantly insisted she was going to eat less and take up an exercise regimen. Yet the men on the transport that brought them from Earth to Kalquor had discovered how much the pair loved chocolate ... and pizza ... and pie ... and many, many other things. Edible gifts from those wishing to enjoy the twins' favors had abounded.

"Stop fretting," Cissy had told her twin more than once as they walked the corridors of the huge Kalquorian ship. "So we're curvy gals now. None of the Kalquorians are complaining. In fact, I keep hearing how deliciously soft I am."

"These men do seem to appreciate the extra cushion," Tasha agreed. "But I'm logging another mile before I take it easy this evening. Those fried mozzarella balls Dramok Niot brought me this afternoon are not adding another inch to my ass!"

"Didn't he already help you work them off?" Cissy teased.

"A lady doesn't discuss such things."

"A lady also doesn't yell 'Harder you beast' at the top of her lungs for all the Matara section of the ship to hear."

"Pig."

"Prude."

Thinking about all the eating they'd done following weeks of starvation made Cissy feel nauseous right now as she waited for the shuttle's hatch to open. If the Kalquorians on board the transport hadn't been devoted to showing her how much they approved of cuddly girls, she'd be even more nervous. Especially since her space-pale porcelain skin contributed to what she thought of as the doughy look.

*I hope the Earthers who got here before me convinced the Kalquorians to stock up on tanning spray. I'm not walking around like a living marshmallow.*

Tasha drew a deep breath. "Well, here we go. It's time to greet Empress Jessica. Are we supposed to curtsy or something?"

Cissy laughed harder than the statement warranted. She told her twin, "Jessica will break both your legs if you dare. You know that girl. No way living on an alien planet has changed her that much ... even if she is royalty now."

Cissy checked the vid to reassure herself. Their youngest cousin, standing there in the bay on the other side of the hatch, looked impatient as only Jessica could. No, she couldn't have changed much ... right?

Jessica's mother Tara had been the sister of the twins' father. While Jessica and her older sister Lindsey had lived in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, the twins had lived in Lower Matecumbe Key. Frequent visits had made them all fast friends ... and had gotten Cissy and Tasha detained by authorities when Jessica had been proclaimed Kalquor's empress.

None of that was important now. Cissy and Tasha would have given their lives for their cousin. Fortunately, it hadn't come to that. Now they would be reunited with the last living members of their family. Excitement made itself the equal partner to anxiety.

The Imdiko flight attendant on the shuttle stepped up to one side of the hatch and smilingly bowed to them. "Are you ready to greet your family, Mataras?"

Cissy drew a deep breath. "As ready as we'll ever be."

The young handsome Kalquorian smiled encouragingly. Though he'd kept in the background during the flight from the transport except to offer them refreshments, Cissy was

pretty sure he'd listened in on their conversations. His breed was dedicated to nurturing others. He'd have eavesdropped to make sure they had everything they needed. The Kalquorians Cissy had met, whether the solicitous Imdikos, the protective Nobeks, or the guiding Dramoks, were always kind to a fault to Earther women. She knew there were a number of the aliens who rejected the need for Earthers to breed with, but so far she'd not run across those people.

The attendant issued the open command, and the hatch slid away. Stairs descended beneath the opening, waiting for the women to disembark.

Tasha balked at the last moment. Since she was dressed nicer than Cissy, she was to have stepped out first, but panic asserted itself and she hesitated. Her hazel eyes wide, she told Cissy, "You're the brave one. You go first."

Cissy's heart thundered in her chest, and she attempted to cover her sudden terror with humor. "The brave one? I thought you said I'm the twin with no sense."

"That too. That's what makes you so brave." Tasha gave her a little push.

"Twit."

"Moron."

The women grinned shakily at each other. Then Cissy squared her shoulders and took a step forward. She'd always been the tough one of the pair. She'd protected her sweeter-natured sister when situations had called for it. She didn't like to think about some of the things she'd done to make sure Tasha would not be hurt.

Cissy led the way off the hatch, holding Tasha's hand at the small of her back as she might a small child. To keep her cool, she refused to look at the crowd of huge muscled Kalquorians, members of royalty and the elite. Instead, she looked at her cousins and aunt, seeking the old warmth of family thought long-lost.

Cissy needn't have worried about their reception or greeting Jessica with regal decorum. Like the exuberant children they had been, Jessica and Lindsey shrieked with delight at the twins' appearance. Cissy yelled back in a wordless shout of happy greeting.

The four women didn't run across the space separating them, but they didn't precisely walk either. Within moments they were in a knot of embracing arms, laughter, and joyful tears. Cissy thought they all spoke, saying each others' names and talking over each other, but she wasn't sure of anything that was said. The glee of full hearts overrode everything else, making words meaningless. Emotion ruled for several minutes.

At last the four women began to talk sense to each other, the first burst of exhilaration easing enough to do so. Jessica wasted no time in chortling and tugging on one of the belt loops of Cissy's jeans.

"There's my rough and ready tomboy cousin! You haven't changed one bit, Cissy!"

Cissy snorted, her face ready to split from its grin. "Well, you have. When did you get so fat and ugly?"

Jessica shrieked with laughter, knowing the joke for what it was. In truth, she looked spectacular. The years since Cissy had last seen her cousin had been more than kind. Jessica was almost thirty now. Maturity, along with a few extra pounds, had softened her once too-stark elfin features. Jessica was still tiny, especially compared to the Kalquorians standing nearby, but at least now she didn't look like a breeze would blow her away.

Elder sister Lindsey planted a kiss on Cissy's cheek. Bigger boned with classically lovely features, Lindsey looked just the same as when Cissy had last seen her. "We've missed you two so much!" she exclaimed. "I can hardly believe you're here."

"Can I join in?" came a melodious and calm voice.

Cissy and Tasha turned at once to see an older, shorter version of Jessica beaming at them. “Auntie Tara!” they simultaneously cried. They wrapped their father’s sister in a hug between them, kissing and exclaiming with abandon once again.

When they’d calmed once more, Tara jerked her chin towards the three men coming towards them. “Here are the rest of us. They’ve been almost as excited for your arrival as we have.”

One of the three emperors did not have the typical black hair of the Kalquorians. Instead, his shoulder-length locks were the color of dark steel. Cissy was amused to have an emperor bow before her and her sister before he shook a warning finger at them.

Blue-robed Dramok Emperor Clajak gave them a mischievous grin. The expression lit his broad, handsome face and crinkled the skin at the corners of his eyes. “Don’t you dare bow to us, you two. I am glad you made it here safely, my cousins. Welcome home.”

The heart-stoppingly gorgeous Nobek Emperor Bevau also bowed to them, his red robes doing little to hide the equally perfect body beneath them. “And if half the stories Jessica and Lindsey tell us are true, the Empire will never be the same.” His perfect features grew even more impossibly stunning as he grinned.

His comment brought laughter from everyone, including the often aloof Imdiko Emperor Egilka. As staid as the eldest member of the Imperial Clan often was, his smile offered pure warmth as he added his welcome. Cissy thought Egilka should smile more often. It made his sharp features soften.

Apparently, he was loosening up these days. He even hugged the twins, wrapping them in the softness of his emerald green robes. Leaner than his clanmates, Egilka’s body still felt like muscled granite to Cissy. Nice. Very nice. She had to remind herself not to grope her cousin’s Imdiko.

When he released her and stepped back, Cissy fixed Jessica with a glare. “Oh, so you’re telling stories on us, are you? I think we might have a few of our own to share about the empress and the Imperial Sister.”

There was more laughter and teasing fist-shaking from Jessica and Lindsey. “Put them in chains and throw them in the dungeons!” Jessica cried.

Clajak gave her one of his naughty grins. In a voice kept low so only their family could hear, he said, “We don’t have dungeons, my love. As for the chains, you know they are reserved for you.”

Cissy bellowed laughter with the emperors and Lindsey as Jessica turned pink. The small empress punched her Dramok none too gently in the stomach. He laughed harder, not reacting with the slightest hint of pain.

Tasha set about rescuing Jessica from being the center of attention. “Clajak, I am so sorry about the loss of your father Zarl. Jessica always had the highest regard for him, so I can only imagine how it’s affected you.”

Clajak’s hilarity fled, but his smile stayed steady as he bowed to Cissy’s twin. “Thank you. I miss him more than I can tell, but at the same time I am glad his pain is over. His life might have been cut short, but it was full and he was much loved. For that, I am grateful.”

Jessica waved her hands as her eyes filled with tears. “Oh, don’t get me started crying. I wish you could have met Father Zarl. He was wonderful.”

That started off a fresh round of hugs between the cousins and Aunt Tara. Cissy was sorry for Jessica’s pain, but at the same time it was good to see her cousin still had a tender heart beneath her fiery personality.

Clajak stroked Jessica's hair with a gentle hand. "All right now, my love. Zarl would hate to see you crying over him again. Especially at this happy occasion. More of our family has come home and we must be glad."

He bowed once more to Cissy and Tasha, deeper than before. As if given a signal, his male clanmates and the other male Kalquorians in the bay followed suit. In a strong voice that filled the space, Clajak announced, "Cecilia and Natasha Salter, cousins to our empress, welcome to your new home of Kalquor."