

Rajhir, son of Clan Gegra, sat across the desk from his Dramok father. He took care not to fidget despite the growing late hour. A certain lovely young Matara had combed him earlier today to let him know she was in Kalquor's capital city. Rajhir knew better than to squander such an opportunity. Even with his family's status, women were not easy to find. A promised date was never to be missed. Rajhir got more than his fair share of Kalquorian female companionship compared to other men his age, but such encounters amounted to perhaps only four a year.

However, the young Dramok knew better than to hurry his father. Gegra did everything with precision, which meant with all of his attention. Right now the elder man's focus was locked fully on the message he composed for a client.

The two men sat in the office Rajhir's mother had given Gegra to work in after he'd lost his bid to remain on Kalquor's Royal Council. The election had been tight to the very end, finishing 20 straight years of Gegra's presence there. It said a lot for the charm of Dramok Ledsin – now Councilman Ledsin – that he'd managed to slip past Gegra's high approval rating to take his seat.

Gegra was still in the prime of his life, not ready by any means to sit at home and wait for the end. The man was only in his eighties, his life not even a third done. His ebony hair was tied back in a severe braid, baring a strong-featured face. He looked hale and hearty, his shoulders broad and muscled. His gaze was shrewd, quick to see what others missed. It had been what made him so effective against opponents in the council.

Rajhir's Dramok father looked like royalty himself, even in a mere lawyer's office. True, it was a nicely appointed room. Rajhir's mother's practice was well regarded, not just in the Eastern Seaboard Territory's jurisdiction, but all the Empire. Matara Nivere had built her clientele with none of Gegra's impressive contacts, relying on her own legal expertise and acumen. She handled not just contracts but criminal cases as well. Prosecutors knew they had a serious fight on their hands when they faced Nivere of Clan Gegra.

The offices of her firm took up two floors of the cliff dwelling that overlooked the pink sanded beaches and emerald sea of the coast. The stone ceiling had been polished to a marble sheen. Gegra's desk was not handcarved, but it had the look of it with well-turned legs. The piece gleamed with the soft green interior of Kalquor's native sudked hardwood.

The dyed and patterned rugs scattered over the rock floor were hand-woven. They softened the floor, which was polished just as beautifully as the ceiling overhead. The vids behind Gegra were huge, showing a live feed of the pink stretch of sand from the nearby beach. White-foamed green waves crashed belligerently against the shore. Other walls were scattered with stills of Gegra's long political career.

With exaggerated ceremony, Gegra announced, "Send. And off this one goes." He drew a breath and gave Rajhir a droll look. "I'm aiding your mother in a case. It's against a group that opposes the government's right to set aside revenues for reintroducing former convicts into society. Can you imagine the stupidity of not wanting job training and ongoing mental health care for felons after they've been released? What do these fools expect former criminals to do without help except return to their lives as criminals?" He shook his head.

Rajhir gave him a slight smile. "It is good you were tapped for such a case."

That opened the door for Gegra's favorite mantra. "It's all about duty to the Empire, to keep it strong and sustainable. All other considerations are secondary. Which brings me to why you're here."

With practiced ease, Rajhir restrained the sigh that wanted to escape. He knew what was coming. He'd been waiting for it these last couple of days. Still, he had hoped to avoid the big speech for a few weeks longer. He should have known better.

Gegra looked at him with visible pride. "My son, Dramok Rajhir. Here you are, a young man on the threshold of his future. Schooling and internships completed, ready to begin your journey into a life of service to your people. I have offered my congratulations?"

Rajhir bowed his head in respect. "Yes, my father. Even if you had not spoken them, the new shuttle you gave me would have sufficed."

"You are enjoying it, I presume?"

Rajhir thought of how impressed his recent Imdiko dates had been with the sleek vehicle, the newest model fresh from the factory. He thought the Matara he planned to enjoy the night with would be quite delighted to be escorted in such finery too. He couldn't restrain the grin that spread over his face. "I'm enjoying it very much."

Gegra snorted. "I thought so. Imdiko Iresh's father contacted me two days ago to remind me that his son, as infatuated as he is with you, is already promised to another Dramok. He requested you stop turning the young man's head with expensive dinners and fine shuttles."

"He's not clanned yet. Iresh can enjoy his freedom while he has it." Rajhir kept his tone even. "Besides, I'm not chasing him. We were only having a night out as far as I'm concerned."

"Good. Because it's now time to get serious about your future. While we're on the subject of Imdikos, you have been of clanning age for two years now. No valid prospects yet?"

"Nothing of note."

Rajhir was in no hurry to settle down, not even with the end goal of having a guaranteed female in his bed. He enjoyed the few Mataras available, both their company and their bodies. His family's connections and high rank had allowed him the rare opportunity to bed the scant few in the territory. Rajhir knew six such women, and to judge by how they always commended him when they visited the area, he knew they enjoyed him too. The one who had contacted him just today had not asked him if he had time to visit. She simply let him know she expected to see him tonight. He looked forward to the diversion.

To gain a female as a permanent mate, to even court one seriously, required Rajhir to first clan a male from each of the other two breeds. He needed a Nobek and an Imdiko in place for a year to prove to the Empire the unit was stable enough for the responsibility of a lifebringer and children. Rajhir had not yet met many men he was particularly attracted to so far, at least not where a permanent arrangement was concerned. Certainly there had been none he wanted to spend the rest of his 200-plus remaining years of life with. Besides, he was having fun with the various men and women he took to dinner, events, and his apartment.

Gegra had other ideas. "You need to get to work on finding a clan caregiver, especially if you intend to have one your own age. Those Imdikos become almost as rare as the women in a dozen years after their twenty-fifth birthday."

Rajhir nodded absently. He was well aware that next to Mataras, Imdikos were the rarest breed. There were half as many of them as the warrior-protector Nobek breed, which also outnumbered the Dramoks.

An Imdiko male was usually clanned before he reached the age of 30. An unclanned Imdiko over the age of 35 was damned near impossible to find. The young Iresh that was so infatuated with Rajhir was only 21, still underage to clan without parental permission. It was no surprise to know he had been promised to another Dramok before his fifteenth birthday. Fortunately, Rajhir

was only 27 years old with plenty of time to find clanmates, even of the rare Imdiko variety. He was pretty sure snagging a fertile Matara wouldn't be so hard either if he gathered enough status and rank for himself. He already had a leg up on the competition with his family connections. Surely he had little need to take on the responsibility of a clan just yet.

It felt to him like his life was just starting. He had to think about a career in the coming months and so much more. Rajhir felt like he could delay clanning for a little while yet. He was more glad than ever that his parent clan had decided to not force any arranged clannings on him. Groups with the status of Clan Gegra usually did, determined to form alliances that would benefit their children.

Gegra's clan had learned the hard way that arranged clannings were not always destined to be successful ones. They had taken the lesson to heart.

Rajhir sat back in his seat. "I'll keep an eye out."

Gegra's purple eyes narrowed at the nonchalant tone, as if he suspected his only child's ambivalence over starting a clan. Rajhir countered with a noncommittal pleasant expression.

His father let it go. Rajhir's relief was short-lived, however, as Gegra took up another subject the young man had hoped to avoid.

"Now, as to your work. With the last elections, there are several new councilmen looking for aides. I have lined up an interview for you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Rajhir's heart sank. He watched his plans to spend the next few weeks in shameless debauchery and fun begin to evaporate.

"The council has issued an open call for new aides. I sent you a schedule and memo regarding that two weeks ago."

Rajhir ducked his head at Gegra's gaze. "Oh. Apologies, my father. I must have forgotten."

Gegra sighed and continued on. "Not only are the new councilmen looking for aides, but Councilman Teken's aide has also resigned. That's the interview you're to go to."

Rajhir's heart sunk even further. Dramok Teken was a good man, but only a so-so councilman. He should have retired ages ago, having hit the two-century mark plus almost three decades. The man hated alterations in legislation, resisting even change that most agreed would benefit the Empire. It wasn't that Teken didn't care; he was simply set in his ways. He kept getting re-elected because he was like everyone's favorite uncle, one they all felt affectionate duty towards. Rajhir believed the ancient Dramok would probably die in his private chambers. His clanmates long dead, Teken had nothing but the Empire to devote himself to now, though he often dozed off during most council meetings. No one had the heart to retire him.

Rajhir didn't want to be the aide to an old man who had outlived his usefulness in the council. He wanted to be in the middle of negotiations and the brutal arguments that sometimes resulted in actual physical fighting between councilmen. Rajhir wanted to distinguish himself, and that meant working for someone who would do the same. The twinge of guilt he felt over not wanting to take care of Teken couldn't quash his desire to be on the front lines of the political fights. Damn it, if he was going to have to start his career, it should be something that fired him up.

This was about what Gegra wanted, however. Teken was the second representative of their territory and a guaranteed in for Rajhir to get a foothold in the highest workings of the Empire. The young Dramok steeled himself for the duty required of him.

"Okay. I take it I shouldn't bother applying to anyone but Councilman Teken?"

Gegra surprised him. "Apply to anyone you think is worthy, if only for the practice and to get to know something about them. Such information is always valuable to the man you report

to. Just be sure Teken receives your highest consideration. I have no doubt he'll offer you the post." The elder Dramok sighed. "We go back so far."

For a moment, Gegra's expression reflected unspeakable sorrow. Rajhir's heart throbbed with sudden sympathy for his father's loss in the election. Law practice was fine, but it couldn't approach the thrill of the fighting and dealing that went on in council chambers and on the floor, especially when the Imperial Clan was present.

He told his father, "I'm sure you'll regain your seat in the next election. Once the people realize your opponent was all charm and no substance, they'll beg you to return." Rajhir couldn't resist adding, "You have my word I will not approach Dramok Ledsin for an aide posting. That is, unless you'd like me to spy on his doings?"

Rajhir only joked, of course. There was no way Ledsin would hire his opponent's son as an aide. There was also no way Rajhir would work for the bastard.

Gegra snorted. The man who'd won his seat had done so by a mere two-digit margin of the popular vote. Rajhir was sure his father knew the next election would have Gegra back in the Royal Council.

The elder Dramok supported that belief with his statement. "Ledsin is an ass and the district will realize that without any help from us." He gave Rajhir a sly grin. "Perhaps after the next election I'll steal you away from Teken to work with me."

"I do want to learn from the best, my father."

Gegra's smile faded as his gaze flicked over Rajhir's shoulder. His features went hard as stone in an instant. "Good afternoon, my Matara. Is your workday over?"

Rajhir twisted in his chair to see his mother Nivere walking into the room. Her lovely face was as distant as Gegra's as she answered. "It is. Shall I wait for you or go home on my own, my Dramok?"

Gegra busied himself with his computer. "I am nearly finished if you would be kind enough to wait for a few minutes."

"That is not a problem."

Nivere turned her attention to Rajhir. Her smile, the loveliest thing he knew in his life, spread over her fine-boned face. It lifted his heart.

Rajhir's mother had clanned young, and she barely looked older than the women he himself dated. Her thick black hair waved gently to her knees, but for the crown of braids that circled at the top. Her purple gown matched her almond-shaped eyes, bringing their light shining from her face. The dress was custom-sewn for her, a sleeveless light sheath that reached her slippered feet. She held out long, toned arms to Rajhir, inviting his embrace.

Rajhir stood, pausing long enough to bow respectfully before accepting the gift of her hug. As always, he experienced a tug of pain in his heart over the distance between his parents. He understood Gegra's coldness towards Nivere. Perhaps it was disloyal to love her so much, but Rajhir couldn't help his devotion. Hers was the first smile he remembered as a child, and her voice had offered the first encouragements. No wrong she had ever committed could remove the adoration he felt for her.

Rajhir hugged Nivere close and dropped a kiss on her still unlined forehead. Her arms tightened briefly before they released him and she backed up a step. They stood gazing at each other with such sappy looks of devotion that it would have made a Nobek groan.

Nivere's throaty voice was filled with pride. "My son, I am always glad to see you. Will you join your parents for dinner tonight?"

Gegra answered for Rajhir. "Of course he will. We can conclude our discussion over the meal."

Rajhir might have loved Nivere with all his heart, but he would give her no ammunition against his father. He managed to keep disappointment from his expression and did not voice a complaint, though he'd hoped to have dinner with the visiting Matara Itdoma.

Well, eating food had not been the foremost thing on his mind anyway. He thought he could still arrange to lure Itdoma into sleeping with him tonight. After all, Rajhir would begin working tomorrow, so she should have pity on him. He couldn't imagine a better way to enjoy his last night as a carefree youth.

Yet as hard as Rajhir tried to school his face to betraying nothing, Nivere picked up on his reluctance. She gave him a secretive look before saying, "It will be only a light meal. Our Imdiko has his presentation to the fellows tonight at a late dinner party we are to attend."

Gegra sighed. "I'd forgotten about that. Perhaps Rajhir would care to hear his father's talk on the growing concerns of Nobek childhood education?"

Rajhir could have groaned. Now not only was dinner with a willing and delightful female off the table, but he'd miss out on the chance for a good fuck.

Once more, Nivere seemed to read his mind. "Oh, I'm sorry, my son. I am sure as much as you wish to support your father's work, you'll understand that the auditorium will be filled to capacity. Perhaps you can attend Utim's next speech?"

Her wink sent a grateful smile to cover Rajhir's face. He gave her another hug. "I would be delighted to hear my father's next presentation. Please make sure I'm on the invitation list?"

"Of course I will," Nivere chuckled.

Fearing Gegra might think he'd conspired with Nivere to get out of a long night of duty to his parents, Rajhir turned to his father. "There has been some discussion in the council about this issue, has there not? What is their stance on the schooling of Nobek younglings?"

Gegra came around his desk to join them. He offered his arm stiffly to Nivere. She just as stiffly placed her hand on it, barely deigning to look at her Dramok mate. She tucked her other arm into Rajhir's, drawing him as close as she kept Gegra distant.

As if she didn't walk between them, Gegra answered Rajhir's question over her head. "The early teaching of Nobeks is always of great concern, given their high intellect versus their primitive urges. Nothing is more important than the welfare of our most numerous breed, especially the youngest ones."

As they left the office for the shuttle bay where their vehicles waited, the younger Dramok only half listened to his father expound on the need to educate feral Nobek younglings. His mind was busy with making plans for his and his date's night together. Rajhir wanted to continue to be the first man his female friends contacted when they visited the area, so he had to make every second of lovemaking as exciting as possible.

His thoughts deliberated on the latest sexual instruction tapes he'd downloaded a week ago, hoping to glean some new techniques to amaze his companions with. The idea of a sweet body splayed on his bed, perhaps bound or immobilized in a harness, made his cocks twitch.

Rajhir calmed his thoughts, remembering he was in the presence of two of his parents. He nodded and made noises at the appropriate times as Gegra talked on. He hoped dinner wouldn't take too long.

Rajhir had worried one of his parents would opt to ride in his shuttle with him. However, tuned in as they were to what looked proper, Gegra and Nivere rode home together. It left Rajhir with the precious opportunity to com Matara Itdoma.

The lovely lady laughed off his profuse excuses as to why he couldn't see her until after dinner. In her sexy, smoky voice Itdoma told him, "Rajhir, the role of parent clans is to get in our way of a good time. That's their whole reason for being."

He grinned at her teasing voice. "You sound like you know a thing or two about the situation."

"You think you have it bad? Try being a female with protective parents. You don't know smothering until you've been born with a vagina."

Rajhir laughed out loud at that. "I suppose it would be suffocating. I can only imagine how uptight my parents would be if I was a daughter and not a son. Thank you for being so understanding."

"Just come with me when your elders let you out to play and I'll tell you where to pick me up. I've been looking forward for months to seeing the most sexually inventive Dramok I know."

Rajhir promised he would do so, still chuckling over her vagina comment. Itdoma was fun to be around, even when sex wasn't involved. Had she not already been promised to a clan, which she was scheduled to join next year, he might have thought about quickly putting together his own so he could claim her.

In a matter of minutes, Rajhir left behind the seaside cliffs where his mother's offices were located. He piloted further inland to the marshes that fed the ocean. He noted that the tide was in. Clear water covered the blackish-brown mud that housed the succulent ytor shellfish that Rajhir had often harvested as a child. The flavor of the ytor always made him think of home wherever he might travel.

Higher ground became islands of waist-high grasses at high tide. Trees of tremendous height grew here. When Rajhir stood at the foot of one, he was unable to see to its top even though winter might strip it bare of leaves. It was in one of these great trees that his parent clan's home nestled, tiers of living space built right into the mammoth trunk and branches.

Nivere had come from the more temperate Western Valley Territory, a landlocked area of Kalquor's largest continent. When she'd first arrived to join Clan Gegra, the young woman had pined for the flowered expanses of the gardens of her girlhood home. Rajhir's fathers had arranged for two of the marsh islands to be built up and their soil enriched. These islands were linked to the one where their home towered within the branches of its tree.

The altered islands enabled Nivere to plant the flowers of her native land in artistically designed landscapes that while not natural, were stunning to look at. Nearly 30 years later she still tended her gardens, finding relaxation amongst the beauty of her far-off home.

One of the great trees near the one that housed Clan Gegra had died decades ago. Rather than allowing it to rot, Rajhir's fathers had hollowed it out and coated it with a substance that preserved the old trunk and its lowermost branches. It was within this old remnant that Rajhir landed his shuttle amongst those of his parents.

He emerged to find Gegra and Nivere waiting for him. Once more he took his mother's arm, though she and his father did not touch this time. With no one around to watch and comment, there was no need.

Using a path made of treated planks cut from the upper part of the dead tree, the trio crossed from that island to the one that held the home tree. They climbed the winding steps set into the massive trunk. Within a few seconds, the trio entered the first tier of the home. The kitchen, greeting, and dining rooms were housed in this part.

The long table that took up most of the dining room's space had already been set. Someone had been looking out for Gegra and Nivere's arrival, because an extra setting had already been placed for Rajhir. The kitchen staff brought in platters of steaming food as the trio entered.

Rajhir's other two fathers had apparently also been advised of their arrival, because they stood ready to greet them. Imdiko Utim and Nobek Astef first saw to Nivere's welcome. The two men took turns to place gentle kisses on her cheeks, displaying much more warmth than Gegra. Yet there was still an air of formality and distance. The kisses were delivered quickly, each man stepping back from Nivere to establish space between her body and theirs.

Utim bowed. His hair, caught back in its customary neat queue, gleamed in the warm light of the wall panels that offered the room its illumination. The youngest of the three men of his clan, he somehow projected the greatest maturity despite possessing a face as unlined as Nivere's.

Some of his studious air dissipated with his smile. "Greetings, my Matara. How was your day?"

She offered him a smile that while small, was genuine. "Fine, thank you, my Imdiko."

Astef also bowed. The Nobek was the eldest of them all but young for a Kalquorian at only 88. His scarred face, while not handsome, was still riveting to look upon. The most vicious of the scars, which ran from Astef's forehead all the way down to his jaw, had come about from his work in the law enforcement entity known as Global Security. That particular injury was a result of taking out a group of illegal arms dealers. It had also taken the sight from Astef's left eye. The eye, as white as the teeth the Nobek bared when angry, was Astef's most prized mark of honor.

Being half-blind had taken the Nobek out of active duty, but Astef still sat on the new recruit selection board for Global Security. He also trained would-be officers. Rajhir's fight-hardened father was a force to be reckoned with. Only a fool would threaten Astef or those dear to him.

One side of the Nobek's mouth lifted at Nivere's offhand answer. "A fine day, huh? That's not much in the way of description, my mate."

She shrugged, but her smile grew. "It was the same as ever. Contract disputes, mining declarations, and the like."

Utim beamed at Rajhir. "And here is our son. What is the occasion, Rajhir?"

Nivere grinned outright. "He's humoring me by joining us for dinner."

Gegra bustled to his seat at the table. "Not at all. We are in the midst of discussing his round of aide interviews at the Council House tomorrow."

Everyone else took their seats at the low but large round table, settling onto the seat cushions on the floor. Nivere took her place to Gegra's right, with Utim on her other side. Rajhir sat between Utim and Astef, as he had for all his childhood. Sometimes he still felt like a mere boy when he took meals at his parents' home. It came from years of having a nurturing Imdiko father on his left to make sure Rajhir ate what he should and a disciplinarian Nobek father on his right to keep him from acting up. Rajhir wondered if grown men always felt like little boys when they visited their parents.

Kitchen staff ladled food onto Rajhir's dish. He would have been more comfortable selecting his own portions, but dinner in his parent clan's home was a somewhat formal affair unless Gegra was off traveling as the territory's councilman. Since he'd lost the election, that wouldn't come up too often, Rajhir realized.

Astef speared a morsel off his plate, not waiting for the man waiting on him to finish filling it. He arched an eyebrow at Rajhir. "So you're diving into career so soon? You've barely finished your education."

Gegra answered for him. "Rajhir doesn't dawdle. He realizes it's time to assume his responsibilities. Tomorrow is the open application and interview day. He can't miss that."

Nivere held off Gegra's offering of food from his utensil. Their relationship might have been impersonal, but they held to the practice of male clanmates feeding their Matara. She paused the Dramok long enough to speak.

"That's right. Teken is hiring, isn't he?"

Gegra's lips thinned as she took the offered food. Rajhir stifled a grimace. His mother always knew everything of importance going on. She seemed especially determined to know the things that would be most important to Gegra. Rajhir had no doubt she had deliberately divulged information her Dramok had wanted to share.

For that reason and because Rajhir didn't want to dwell too much on having to bow to duty sooner rather than later, he diverted the conversation.

He turned to Utim. "What about this important speech tonight, my father?"

The Imdiko waved a hand as if shooing away an insect. "It's not important at all. I'm just updating the latest findings for educators and trainers of Nobek younglings. I'll report it, most will yawn in boredom, and the hotheads will challenge the results with the same old arguments." He eyed Rajhir and added in a plaintive voice, "Please tell me you're not coming."

Nivere said in a firm tone, "He's not."

"Good. It's a complete waste of everyone's time. I interrupted my workday nap yesterday to devote all of five minutes to pulling the report together." He fed Nivere a bite.

Astef's lips quirked with amusement. "If your research on Nobek education is so nonessential, then why is it your specialty, my Imdiko?"

Utim grinned. "Because it pays ridiculous amounts of money for little work. I suppose they're getting a good return; I'm very good at doing little."

Rajhir joined in with Nivere's quiet snickers. Utim possessed an intellect that made most appear to be plodding fools, but he never boasted about it. Indeed, he made it a point to poke fun at himself when possible.

Gegra was not so amused with Utim's tendency to downplay his importance. "You devote much to your work, which is invaluable to the Empire. Nobeks are our most numerous and troubled breed. Your research and recommendations are far from inconsequential."

Utim's expression warmed at Gegra's gruff appreciation. "Thank you, my Dramok."

Astef nodded his agreement. "The protocols put in place from your studies two years ago do seem to be having some results. I refer in particular to the pairing of established Nobeks with younglings in a work setting."

Utim's interest was immediately piqued. "On that note, how is your assigned apprentice doing, my Nobek?"

Astef snorted. "Opinionated, aggressive, and easily distracted. Typical for his age. That being said, I think he is getting some benefit out of the assignment of following me around at Global Security's offices."

Rajhir let the conversation flow over him, looking at his parents. He felt warmth for all four, every one of them different and yet tied together by love or honor. Sadness was an ever-present twinge as he noted Gegra and Nivere sitting side by side but never looking at each other.



They listened to Utim and Astef's conversation, occasionally interjected their opinions, but refused to engage in their own dialogue.

Not for the first time, Rajhir hoped he would not end up with clanmates he could barely stand to share a room with. Now that he was old enough to clan, he was happier than ever that his parents had not foisted any arranged unions on him. When he did clan, he was determined it would be with lifemates he could trust.