

A SCI-FI ALIEN ROMANCE

A close-up, chest-up portrait of a muscular alien man. He has dark, long hair, a small goatee, and a silver lip ring. His skin is dark and glistening with sweat. He has extensive, intricate tattoos in shades of gold and brown on his chest and arms. The background is a dark blue space with glowing, ethereal light patterns.

A REDEMPTION FOR
ULREIK

TALLEAN MERCENARIES
BOOK EIGHT

LYNNEA LEE

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A Redemption for Ulrek – Tallean Mercenaries

Book 8

By Lynnea Lee

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Chapter 1

Delaney

Delaney pulled her wheeled luggage through the Reka 5 docks, smiling as she turned her face to the gentle breeze that cut through the sweltering late summer heat. Today was a new day, a fresh start, and it was one she welcomed.

Today, she was starting her dream job on one of the sleek, shiny, state-of-the-art...well, actually, she didn't know what type of ship she'd be on. She looked around at the hangars, some with their doors and roofs wide open, showing... warships? Really? She dug into her pocket to check her comm.

Yup, this was the right place. She hadn't realized the job was on a warship. That must be why they'd started her salary negotiation so freaking high and then tacked a little extra hazard pay on top. She'd thought the hazard pay was simply because it was up in space.

That was okay, though. Reka 5 and the outer planets were going through a time of peace, had been since they'd beaten back the Dominion two years ago. Life here was good.

It would have been even better if Delaney hadn't been stuck with her husband.

Delaney wasn't sure she'd ever really loved Craig to begin with. They'd shacked up simply because they were two lonely souls on a new planet, a galaxy away from home. She'd been desperate then, still terrified of Tallean males. They were huge and had fangs and giant toe claws.

The females had fangs and toe claws too, but they were smaller and much less prone to violence. Certainly nothing like the hulking beasts the males were.

When she'd first arrived at Reka 5, they'd told her that the Tallean men here would respect a human marriage and keep their distance from a married woman unless she happened to be their mate. So she'd made the deal with Craig.

They'd used their first paychecks to buy the gaudiest, tackiest ring they could find, and she'd worn that cheap-as-fuck thing on her finger like some sort of Tallean male repellent. Pastor Jim, the only human officiant on Reka 5 at the time, had married them that very day.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but Delaney realized her mistake early on when Craig became more and more controlling. She stayed because she was too afraid to leave, and she also couldn't afford a place of her own. She'd become isolated: over the years, she'd drifted away from friends she'd made in her early days on Reka 5. They probably wouldn't even remember her now.

Enough. Delaney was done being a door mat. She was done tiptoeing on eggshells and catering to the asshole's whims. Today, she'd leave all that behind.

She'd taken that course, telling Craig that it would help her earn more at her current job. And when the opportunity came up for a position managing the greenroom on board a ship, food and board included, with amazing pay, she signed that contract faster than you could say boo.

By the time Craig realized she was gone, she'd be squirreled away on her new spaceship home. Maybe she'd even get one of the Tallean men on the crew to take a picture with her on his lap and post it as an update. She grinned to herself. *That* would give Craig a fucking aneurism.

She took a deep breath as she looked at the imposing battlecruiser in front of her. This thing looked scary. Usually, battlecruisers didn't have greenrooms; they focused mainly

on heavy firepower and speed, sacrificing things like comfort and entertainment for those inside. Maybe she was at the wrong ship.

She rechecked her comm. Yup. This was it: the *New Horizon*.

The ship was impressive. The hull gleamed in the Reka 5 sunlight as if someone had spent hours polishing it. It was clearly very well taken care of. According to the job listing, it had a mixed Tallean-human crew, but unlike Craig—who still had a hate-on for the aliens they shared a colony with—Delaney had no issues with that now. She'd been working alongside Talleans for years and had gotten to the point where she thought the guys were kind of hot.

She couldn't believe she was about to start work on an honest-to-goodness spaceship. Sure, she'd been on them before. That was how she'd gotten here. Reka 5 wasn't her first non-Earth planet either. She'd visited several back when she'd been a Dominion slave.

Delaney had been lucky; they'd put her to work in one of those large chain hotels catering to those who made their fortune near the edge of Dominion space. Sure, they'd worked her to the bone, but at least she hadn't been gifted to a Dominion captain. Those were the worst. Monsters, every last one.

But that was all in the past, just like her life on Earth. Now, she was a Reka 5 colonist through and through. She'd fought, literally gone to war, for this colony, and it was home.

She looked at the ship again and realized there was no name on the actual hull where it should be. There had been, but someone had removed it. She squinted at the faint outline. There on the side of the ship, etched in by sun exposure, was the word...wait... *Revenge*? Really? She could read just enough of the alien glyphs to do her job adequately but still needed her comm to translate sometimes.

A human man who looked to be in his late thirties was polishing the area and erasing the lingering traces of the name. The *Revenge* sounded familiar, but Delaney couldn't figure out where she'd heard it before. Maybe the *New Horizon* had moved hangars, and she was at the wrong ship after all.

The man noticed her and slid over a partition, hiding what was left of the ship's name. "Ho! Are you here for the greenroom technician position?"

"Yes. I think. Hi. I'm Delaney." Okay, so she *was* at the right place. She stuck out her hand for a handshake. It wasn't the custom here, but old habits died hard.

The man wiped his hand on his pants, getting it as clean as he could before shaking hers. "Gavin. I'm so glad you're here. Our last technician retired, and we don't really have anyone onboard who is good with plants. Half of them are dying. And I'm being generous when I say that."

"The recruiter mentioned it was in need of some TLC. Bad enough that they warned me I might have to start over." She was up for the challenge. Anything to leave her mess of a life behind.

Delaney had started out in one of Reka 5's many greenhouses doing grunt work. Trim this, water that, move this over there. But this job was an actual career. She'd be managing a ship's greenroom, the jungle that produced oxygen and purified the air of top-tier Tallean ships.

One planetary orbit on the *New Horizon*, and she'd make enough to get a place of her own, not just a rental. She wouldn't need to shack up with another asshole. And hopefully by then, Craig would've forgotten all about her.

That was very likely, considering she'd found out a few weeks ago that he was cheating on her. She'd welcomed the news. It was the final nail in the marriage's coffin. It was what she'd needed to move full steam ahead with her plan.

“Come on in.” Gavin started up the gangplank. “I’ll take you to meet the captain.”

“Wait,” she said, just to be sure. “The job is supposed to be on the *New Horizon*.” She gestured to the half-erased name that was now hidden.

Gavin waved his hand dismissively. “You’re at the right place. We go by several names.”

Hmm. Strange. Maybe it was common for ships to change their names occasionally?

The inside of the ship was just as impressive as its exterior. She’d been worried it would be dark and dingy, but it was well-lit, and the corridors were spacious. It didn’t look anything like the images she’d seen of the inside of warships.

As they walked, Gavin explained that their captain had added lots of creature comforts to make their ship a great place to live since they spent so much time on it. Aside from the greenroom, the *New Horizon* boasted the latest training simulators from Hullean Vision, a mixed human-Tallean tech that turned the Tallean training simulator into a virtual-reality gaming console.

“The food’s decent too, for space fare. He says it’s because he wants to feed his crew well, but we all know that it’s because he’s a foodie himself. Either way, we’re not complaining.” Gavin gestured toward a door that slid open as they approached. “I’ll be outside where you found me if you want a full tour of the ship later.”

“Thanks, Gavin.” Delaney smiled and stepped inside.

Then her blood froze. There, sitting at the desk, was her sworn enemy. The very Dominion captain who’d abducted her and thousands of others like her from Earth.

No. Fucking. Way.

The captain grinned. “You must be Delaney. Welcome.”

The way he smiled at her accented his trademark Tallean cheek creases. He didn’t bother to hide his fangs, and the

predatory glow of his bright green eyes bore into her soul.

He wasn't wearing a Dominion uniform anymore, and his dark hair was tied back off his face with a few braids scattered in it, a style not worn by the Dominion militia. But it didn't matter how he presented himself; Delaney would recognize Ulrek of the *Stellar Fortune* even if he was dressed up like a clown complete with a red wig.

He stood and started toward her, the giant claws on his feet tapping on the ship's floor. She took a step back, but the door slid closed behind her, trapping her in the office.

"Welcome aboard the *Revenge*."

Chapter 2

Ulrek

Ulrek didn't miss the look of recognition on the female's face. She knew exactly who he was. Almost everyone in the galaxy did, Tallean and human alike. That was why they'd had to hide the true identity of the ship while they were docked on Reka 5.

His face had been all over every broadcasting channel since the day he graduated from the academy. Who wouldn't recognize Captain Ulrek of the *Stellar Fortune*? That had been his ship for years when he'd worked for the Dominion. He'd been their most decorated captain, the best of the best.

Captain Ulrek had been feared and revered everywhere he went in Dominion space. Young males wanted to be like him when they grew up, and females of every species just plain wanted him. The fiercest pirates retreated at his approach, and merchants offered gifts to be in his good graces. Sagas had been written of his bravery, and on the outer planets, his name was used to scare wayward youngsters into behaving.

But that was another lifetime. He wasn't that male now.

Ulrek glanced down at his portable personal computer. According to the document on the PPC's screen, the female's name was Delaney Torres—humans had second names called last names they really didn't use for daily interactions. She didn't have any actual experience on a ship but otherwise had all the qualifications necessary for the job.

"You must be Delaney. Welcome aboard the *Revenge*."

Oh. Right. He kept forgetting they'd changed the name. Delaney had officially been contracted by the *New Horizon*. Oh well, she'd get used to it. The whole crew still called it the *Revenge*, and he doubted that would ever change.

Her dark hair was tied up in a neat bun at the nape of her neck. She only came up to his mid-chest, but judging by the confidence with which she was directing her vitriol his way, her brown eyes flashing, one would think she towered over him. She looked ready to challenge him to a fight. How amusing.

She was pulling a single piece of luggage. Was that all she'd brought?

"You!" She pointed a finger at him accusingly. "I know you."

Ulrek inclined his head in acknowledgment. There was no point denying it. He had a policy of honesty with his crew, and if Delaney was going to be a part of it, he had to start immediately.

"Welcome. I'm Ulrek, captain of the *Revenge*." He stuck his hand out as per the human custom. He'd picked up a few alien gestures and habits since some of his current crew were from Earth.

The female glared at his hand but didn't make any move to take it. "How dare you recruit here? Does Ryek or Holden know?"

Of course they did, as did anyone else who needed to know.

"The colony directors are aware, yes."

This was exactly the reaction Ulrek had been worried about. Most people in the outer planets hated him for what he'd done in the Dominion's name back in the day. It didn't matter to them that more recently, he'd spent years risking tooth and claw for them or that he'd freed as many slaves as he'd taken. No matter how hard he tried, his past was like a noose around his neck. Ulrek was sure it would haunt him to his last breath.

Now that he'd switched alliances, Ulrek was hated by both sides equally. The Dominion had shamed him and put a ridiculously huge bounty on his head. Worse still, his own mother, the only family he had left, had disowned him. The announcement had been made public and broadcast to all corners of civilized space.

If it weren't for his friend Kean and the few crew members loyal to him personally rather than to the Dominion, he'd already be dead. The only reason he was still alive was that he had a talent for inspiring loyalty in those who gave him a chance.

Now if only the little female who looked ready to stab him with the nearest sharp object would do the same. It didn't seem likely, though.

"Oh really? They're *aware*?" She put her hands on her hips, her anger making her even more confident. "I don't believe you. They would never knowingly let a Dominion jerk like you mingle with the colonists."

He doubted the female would stay willingly and work on his ship, but he tried to defuse the situation anyway.

"I assure you, my crew and I have permission to be here. You can comm them after I give you a tour of the ship." He extended a hand to her again. No harm in trying twice.

She laughed bitterly. "Forget it. I'm not taking a job with you. Ever. I quit!"

She turned and stomped to the door. When it didn't open automatically, she slapped her hand on the door sensor. Nothing happened. The door was programmed to work only for crew members.

Ulrek sighed. No one could say he hadn't tried his best. "Need I remind you that you signed a contract? I have you for one galactic year."

"The hell you do. I demand to nullify our contract on the basis that certain information was deliberately withheld from me."

Ulrek had expected this. “You can demand all you want. It won’t be approved.”

“According to my contract, I signed up to work on the *New Horizon*.” The female waved her comm in his face belligerently. “I did my research, and your ugly mug didn’t show up anywhere. I did *not* sign up to work on the *Revenge*.”

She was brave; Ulrek had to give her that. He’d expected her to hate him, but also to be terrified of him. There was no fear here though. If she was scared of him, she hid it well.

“As of three days ago, the very day you signed that contract in fact, we are the *New Horizon*.”

Delaney harrumphed. “We’ll let the authorities decide. The law says that in the case of any dispute, a contract’s start date can be delayed until one receives a ruling. Now, let me out!”

Technically, she was right. The verdict would go his way, but she had until they rendered it to begin work. Ulrek sighed and walked toward the door. As he neared, her scent suddenly filled his nose. She smelled delicious, like dessert.

Ulrek had a notoriously sweet tooth.

He leaned in to take a better sniff, and Delaney inhaled sharply and froze, prey-like, her bravado faltering.

She held her breath. Her heart was beating so loudly his acute hearing caught its faint thud-thud, thud-thud. He put his hand on the door’s control panel, and the portal slid open.

“Very well. You are free to leave. For now,” Ulrek purred, his nose mere inches from her ear. “But after the verdict, you’re all mine.”

The female swallowed a small sound and dashed out the door, barrelling down the hallway, only to come to a halt at the first turn, looking confused.

“To the left and then the second right,” Ulrek said helpfully.

Her response was to hold up her middle finger. Then she was gone. Ulrek knew what the gesture meant. He chuckled.

This female was certainly entertaining.

Ulrek hoped she only went to the colony leaders with this information rather than the media. His crew deserved their well-earned time off on the colony, and he'd hate to have to cut their downtime short because they were driven out by an angry mob.

Ulrek sat back down at his desk and waited for Gavin to fly into his office in a fury. The Earth-trained engineer had become an expert on Tallean ships over the last few years and could fix almost anything on the *Revenge* except for the food labs and the greenroom. He was not going to be happy Ulrek had scared her off.

Chapter 3

Ulrek

“Chased the poor girl off, did ya?” Gavin stood by the door, scowling. “You know she’s our best candidate, right?”

“She’s our *only* candidate.” No point in sugarcoating it.

Ulrek always knew his notoriety would be the biggest obstacle to finding a good technician. His reputation would always precede him, making every step a little harder than need be. It was part of the Stars’ punishment for what he’d done.

The human male shrugged. “Not many working here with the knowledge to run and possibly replant the whole greenroom would want to leave Reka 5 and spend a whole year in a warship. This isn’t exactly a luxury cruiser like the *Star Beauty*. And let’s face it, you’re no Jankar.”

That was who had snatched up every other available talent on Reka 5: Jankar, the owner of the Wildview Starliner Company. Ulrek got it: he’d rather spend his time on a luxury cruiser, too. But warships were all he had. A small fleet of them, every last one stolen from the Dominion over the years and crewed by defectors and others who felt wronged by those Goddess-loving pricks.

“Do you think she’s going to tell everyone we’re here?” Gavin asked. “That would cause a stink.”

“She’s probably going to go to Ryek or Holden. They’ll tell her to be quiet.”

The colony directors spared no love for Ulrek, but an agreement was an agreement, and they were nothing if not honorable.

“That’s good. Should we put the job posting back up? Maybe expand it to include New Rhea?”

The male didn’t mention Vosthea because they knew there was nobody there who’d fit the bill. They’d already checked there since that was their home base.

“Not worth it.” Ulrek stood. “Wildview already has every qualified person working for them. I think she’s our only chance. It doesn’t matter, anyway. She signed that contract, end of story.”

His engineer and mechanic raised a brow. “We’re all going to have to sleep with one eye open if you force her to work on the ship.”

No. Not the whole crew. Just him.

That was one thing Ulrek didn’t need: crew that would backstab him. Again. Especially if it endangered the rest of his team. “Leveraging the contract is a last resort. We’ll try to convince her to change her mind. You hated me too when we first met, remember?”

“Ha! I wanted to gut you like a fish, and you didn’t like me any better.”

“I wanted to strangle you.”

Gavin beamed like it was a compliment. Perhaps it was. Ulrek had hated Gavin and the rest of the group of humans who’d stolen the *Stellar Fortune* from him, thus fucking up his plan to steal it from the Dominion himself.

Ulrek looked toward the door and recalled Delaney’s reaction when he’d stepped near her. For some reason, Ulrek wanted to see Delaney again, and soon. Strange, because he’d given up on females.

Back when he was a venerated Dominion captain, females had flocked to him, hoping to form a partnership of

convenience. He'd had offers at every city and outpost. Knowing that these females cared not one bit about the male underneath the medals, he visited their beds strategically, always making sure to stay only briefly.

The Dominion had also gifted him female slaves in appreciation of jobs well done. He'd always accepted them with thanks, as was required by a male of his station, but many of them lacked the fire in their eyes that Ulrek found so delightful in his female companions. The kind of fire that had sparked in Delaney's eyes when she'd told him she quit.

Ulrek had spent the majority of his life avoiding commitment, despite wanting a family of his own. And now it was too late. Since leaving the Dominion and falling from the Goddess' graces, Dominion females avoided him as if he was diseased, while those from the outer planets still thought of him as the enemy. Any female wanting to be in his bed now was most likely only after the bounty on his head.

Ulrek unlocked the drawer that held his disguise.

"You going after her?" Gavin asked.

"I want to learn more about our new technician."

"You're going to stalk her." The human male didn't look impressed.

"No. We are."

"Oh no. Uh-uh." Gavin shook his head and started to retreat. "I'm not a part of this."

"Do you want her help with the greenroom or not?"

Gavin sighed. "Fine. But if we get kicked off Reka 5, you're going to explain why to the rest of the crew, not me."

Ulrek laughed. This was why he liked his mechanic. Ulrek had spent most of his career being bowed down to. No one had dared question his authority, ever.

But this crew of the *Revenge*? They were some of the most disrespectful shitheads he'd ever met. They were not afraid to

call him an idiot if he did something stupid. They were intelligent free thinkers, and their respect had to be earned. Ulrek wouldn't trade them for the universe.

The Dominion had been wrong when they guessed humans would make good slaves. Ulrek had seen the truth early. Humans were too smart, too rebellious. They did, however, make exceptional allies and crew if you could win their loyalty.

"I'll get Tuhror and meet you in front of the ship," Gavin said.

Tuhror had been with Ulrek since his Dominion days. The male had an incredible nose and could track anything. Tahra, Tuhror's sister, would be an even better choice to join them since she'd fit in more with the colonists, but she was out exploring the colony today.

Ulrek took out the tiny device he'd been using to disguise himself every time he stepped off the ship on Reka 5. The device had cost him more than he cared to think, but it had been worth it. Delaney wouldn't be the only one to react the way she did if he didn't bother with it, and others would stab or shoot first, then ask questions later.

He'd had the technological marvel crafted into a thick pendant, the type human soldiers wore, but much bigger. On his large frame, it looked just right, and considering the humans on his ship, the accessory fit right in.

Moments later, Captain "Uzzar" of the *New Horizon* stood in front of the mirror, ready to hunt down his ship's new greenroom technician.

Delaney

Delaney could not believe her ears. “Wait, so you’re saying you guys knew Ulrek the Horrible was recruiting here on Reka 5, and you just let it happen?”

Angie sighed. “I guess I need to explain.”

Angie was one of the first people Delaney had met when she arrived on the colony. They’d been friends once, but it had been so long since they’d talked Delaney was surprised Angie even took her call, and even more shocked when she invited her over. Delaney might have thrown the colony directors’ names in the Dominion asshole captain’s face, but she didn’t actually know them in person. Angie, however, was mated to both of them.

“I’m not sure if you knew,” Angie said. “But the *Revenge* was one of the ships that came to fight for Reka 5 when the Dominion attacked. Ulrek switched sides years ago and has been fighting with us since. He hasn’t been Dominion for years.”

“But he abducted us. Stole us from Earth.” Delaney knew she sounded a bit shrill, but it couldn’t be helped.

“Yeah, I know. Trust me, I was pissed too, and I gave Ryek hell about it. But some of our best allies are turncoats from the Dominion. Why do you think he named the ship he stole from them the *Revenge*?”

Delaney scoffed. “What the fuck does Ulrek want revenge for? He was their fucking poster boy.”

“He has his reasons. I never used to understand why Ryek and Holden let him hide here, but I get it now. Politics are complicated, right? Anyway, we’re supposedly on the same side now.”

“You mean he doesn’t enslave people or treat men and women as merchandise anymore? Oh wow! Give the guy a

medal.” Delaney couldn’t stop the sarcasm that oozed through her words.

Angie turned serious. “It’s not that simple. He helped turn the tide in favor of our little colony. The Dominion has a huge ass bounty out on him. If we help hide him from the Dominion, he’ll have our back if we’re ever in trouble again.”

Shit. Delaney thought again of the lucrative hazard pay that had drawn her in.

“I’m not sure if you remember two women that lived here briefly, Mia and Scarlet?”

“I know a Mia who lived here for a while before finding a mate. She’s living with him on his ship. That who you mean?”

Mia’s mother, Bianca, had run in the same Tallean-hating circles Craig did, and both Mia and Delaney had been dragged to those god-awful sermons that crazy Reverend Jon had spewed. The reverend was long gone though, and Bianca had finally come to terms with the fact that her daughter was happy with her massive mountain of a Tallean male.

“Yes. Her mate is ex-Dominion.”

Delaney gasped. “No way! Are we really talking about the same person?”

“Mia worked at the Daily Dose when she was here. She’s mated to Arus. And you might know Scarlet as Lettie.”

Yup, that was the same Mia. Craig had eventually forbidden Delaney to see her when she came to visit, but that didn’t stop her from stalking Mia’s travel blog as Arus took her across the galaxy. She’d always secretly thought of Arus as the perfect husband. He doted on Mia.

Delaney knew of Lettie too, though not well. Lettie was mated to Vore, a reformed Tallean playboy.

“That’s her,” Delaney said.

“Yes, well, Arus and Vore were both top students at the Academy. They get them young and indoctrinate them into

the Goddess' teachings. They're told again and again that they, and the Dominion, are the Goddess' chosen ones and that heathens should be thanking them for saving them and bringing them into the Goddess' arms, even as slaves."

Delaney made a face. "Man, that's fucked."

"They were lucky they came from families that weren't extremists, or else they would've continued on to become just like Ulrek. But Ulrek? His father and his grandfather were both Dominion captains, and they fed him that Kool-Aid from birth. I know it doesn't excuse his actions, and I'll understand if you don't want to work for him. I wouldn't want to, either. You can try to apply to have the contract canceled, but I'm not sure it will fly."

"I did that already, right before I came over."

"Talking about canceling contracts." Angie squared a look at her. "I did some digging while you were on your way here. I see you applied to have your marriage with Craig annulled. About. Fucking. Time."

Delaney considered telling Angie about the group Craig had recently joined after his hate-on for aliens had gotten worse. He'd started meeting up with this underground group of "human purists." At first, Delaney thought it was just another bunch of assholes who got together to talk shit about Talleans. But after Craig volunteered her to cook for and clean up after them at one of their meetings, she knew they were serious.

They'd talked about committing honest-to-goodness terrorism. It didn't matter to these people that the Talleans here on Reka 5 were completely different compared to the ones working for the Dominion. It was pure hate. Being present for that one meeting had made her almost physically ill. It was one of the reasons she'd decided it was time to leave Craig, even if she didn't have a credit to her name. She didn't want any part of that, even by association.

But Delaney didn't want to strain this old friendship more than she had to because she still had one other favor to ask. Also, it was Delaney's fault they hadn't stayed close, and it still made her feel like shit to think about it.

No. She'd already broken the news about Ulrek. It was best she waited a little bit before telling Angie bad news about Craig. So she just gave her the gist.

"Long story short, I found out he was cheating, but honestly, I was looking for an excuse for a while."

That was the official reason Delaney had given Craig in the Dear John letter she'd left on the kitchen table. Saying that it was as much his Tallean hate-on as his infidelity would probably get her targeted by the crazy group he'd been meeting with. Her instincts had told her not to push those buttons until she was somewhere safe. She'd hoped that would be on board at her new job.

Delaney took a big breath. "And I took my name off our rental a few days ago."

Angie nodded. "Just in time for the new season."

The entire colony ran on a seasonal rental schedule, and summer had just ended. Though, you couldn't tell by how hot it still was.

"Yup. So technically, I'm homeless now. And jobless, if I don't join the *Revenge*."

"I'll get you a temporary room in the New Colonist Housing building until you get a verdict about the contract."

"Thanks, Angie. I owe you, I really do." Delaney felt the tears start to well in her eyes at Angie's kindness. She wasn't usually this emotional, but she'd had a long, hard day.

"No problem. That's what friends are for. You probably don't want to spend the next little while alone, either. Come out to the bathhouse with me."

Delaney hesitated.

“If you’re worried about being a fourth wheel, don’t be. My mates won’t join us until after, for drinks.”

“Gotcha. So, who all’s coming to the baths?”

“Ulia and Jillian.”

“Jillian? She’s back?”

Jillian was another lucky lady who’d managed to snag herself a Tallean mate. Jakkan wasn’t Dominion, but he worked undercover as a merchant in Dominion space. He was filthy rich, and they came back once a year to set up a stall at the market to sell off any trinkets and merchandise they had “liberated” from the Dominion. Delaney looked forward to their booth every year. The Earth chocolate and candies never lasted long.

“They aren’t setting up at the market for a few days, but yeah, she’s back.”

Delaney thought about it. She hadn’t been to the bathhouse in ages, since Craig thought the baths were nasty places. He’d yelled at her and threatened to cut her hair off when he’d found out she’d been going after work with her co-workers.

Which was ridiculous. The public baths were a common enough place to hang out with friends. Nudity wasn’t taboo in Tallean culture, and it was rare to see anyone wearing swimsuits—in fact, Delaney wasn’t sure there was such a thing as Tallean swimwear.

Sex, too, wasn’t hidden behind closed doors in Tallean culture. It was most definitely not allowed in the tubs, but it was allowed everywhere else. On the benches, on the floor, in the co-ed change rooms.

She didn’t really feel comfortable being naked in front of so many eyes, but considering she was currently homeless, jobless, and her still-husband was blowing up her phone with calls and messages asking where the fuck she was, perhaps being naked in public wasn’t the worst of her problems. And

besides, drinks sounded really good right about now. Plus, it was the perfect way to rekindle an old friendship.

If she was set on making a change in her life, she might as well go all out.

“Sure. I’ll tag along.”

“Great. I’ll meet you there. Check your comm now. I just sent you the code for the room. We’re not that busy right now with newbies, so you should be able to live there until something comes up.”

Delaney found the info on her comm, thanked Angie again, and headed over to the NCH building to settle into her home-sweet-temporary-home.

Chapter 4

Delaney

Delaney closed her eyes, leaned back in the giant, Tallean-sized curved seat carved into the tub, and let the warm, lightly-scented water swirl around her. She'd really needed this. She hadn't realized she'd been a giant ball of nerves, but she'd had an anxious few weeks as she planned her escape from Craig, and then of course the whole Ulrek thing.

Delaney, Angie, Jillian, and Ulia had installed themselves in an eight-person tub, simply because there weren't any four-person tubs available. It was a wonder that a group of males hadn't already joined them. Tallean men were not exactly subtle when it came to chasing after women, and the women were just as aggressive. They were probably left alone because two of the females were already mated, and the guys probably assumed their mates would be arriving soon.

That was the good thing about hanging out with Angie: every human knew her because she took the time to talk to and set up new colonists when they arrived at Reka 5, and every Tallean knew her because she was Ryek and Holden's mate, and they'd been fundamental to the establishment and success of this colony. So, yeah—nobody messed with Angie unless they wanted to have a bad time.

Delaney opened her eyes and surveyed the bathhouse. There were naked bodies everywhere, and she had to remind herself that if everyone was naked, then no one was looking at her in particular. Her eyes landed on the door just as two Tallean males and a human man sauntered in.

She recognized the human immediately. It was the same guy who'd greeted her at the hangar. What was his name again? Gary? Gabe? It was strange to see him buck naked, considering if she'd taken the job, he'd be her co-worker. But then again, she'd seen Chara naked too, right here at the bathhouse, and she had been her boss at the greenhouse.

It took her a moment longer to recognize Ulrek. Delaney squinted through the steam.

He was wearing a disguise that made him look older. His hair was sprinkled with silver, and his cheek crease had that thinner texture that developed as Talleans aged. He even had that distinguished air that made him look wiser. The skin on his body looked older too, somehow, even though his body itself was still perfect.

He was a total silver fox.

He was also completely naked, aside from a gold-colored pendant on a chain that contrasted against his tan skin. It reminded her of Earth-style dog tags. The disguise was so believable that it fooled everyone around them.

Everyone except Delaney. She saw right through it the moment she laid eyes on him.

She sank farther into the water.

"Don't look now, but we have fresh meat," Ulia said, eyeing the trio hungrily. "The older one's hot, but I prefer my males closer to my age. I can't tell the age of humans so well, but that one looks delish."

Ulia was always on the hunt for new men to test compatibility with. She was getting to the age when Tallean women started to worry they'd never find *the one* and be lonely forever. That usually inspired them to test compatibility with every male they found remotely attractive, hoping to form a bond.

"You're going to scare them away if you keep staring at them like you want to eat them for dinner," Angie said with a laugh.

Good. Please don't come this way.

Angie caught her eye and said, "That's Captain Uzzar of the *New Horizon*." She stressed his name.

Sure. Right. Because Ulrek wasn't supposed to be here. Delaney rolled her eyes. He deserved to have the entire colony booing him and dragging him down into the dungeon... if they even had one...to serve multiple life sentences. He didn't deserve to be walking around free in a public bath. But she knew better than to mess around with a decision Ryek, Holden, and the colony council had made. That was politics for you.

Despite being mostly submerged, Ulrek's eyes still managed to land on her. He said something to the other two, and the three made their way over.

Fuck. She should really just out him right now, politics or not.

Angie grabbed her hand under the water like she'd heard Delaney's thoughts. "Be nice," she whispered.

"Fine." She could be nice for a few minutes.

"Hello, ladies." Gary/Gabe/whoever tipped an invisible cap.

"Gavin. Good to see you in town." It was Jillian who spoke. As the mate to a merchant, she knew a lot of people.

Oops. Right, Gavin.

"You switched ships?" Angie looked genuinely surprised.

"That I did. Working with Trenton was great, but I wanted to branch out."

Trenton as in Trenton *Walker*? The first human captain in all the outer planets? The man was a legend. Gavin had worked with him?

Trenton had made his name by commandeering the very Dominion slave ship he'd been merchandise on. In fact, it had been Ulrek's ship, the *Stellar Fortune*, now renamed the *Second Chance*.

Did that mean Gavin had been one of the men who'd originally stolen Ulrek's ship out from under him? But now they worked together? Delaney was so confused. She glanced over at the ex-Dominion captain, but he maintained a mask of perfect neutrality.

"Do you ladies mind if we join you?" Ulrek asked. "We didn't want to take up another large tub with just the three of us."

"No," Ulia said. "Please, join us."

"Yes," Delaney said at the same time.

Argh! She'd meant *Yes, we mind very much. Now go away.* But it came out sounding like, *Yes, join us.* Fuckity fuck fuckington.

"Thank you," Ulrek beamed. He knew damn well what she'd meant and was going to take advantage of the misunderstanding anyway. Such a jackass.

The males lowered themselves into the pool, Ulrek taking the spot right next to her. He dunked his head under before sitting up again, smoothing his wet, silvery hair back off his face. None of his disguise faltered, not even a bit.

What wizardry was this? Honest-to-goodness waterproof, smudge-proof 3-D makeup? Makeup that Ulrek was so sure would stay put that he was soaking in a hot tub? She had an urge to rub it off him, but that would require touching him. All over.

The reality hit her. She, Delaney Torres, was sitting in a hot tub next to Ulrek the Horrible! Who also happened to be Ulrek the Sexy.

Ulia asked about the most recent adventure they'd had, and the other Tallean guy, Tuhror, launched into a story about tricking the Dominion out of a shipment of medicine. But Delaney couldn't focus on the story, not with Ulrek mere inches from her.

Every so often, a thick thigh or brawny arm touched hers, sending totally inappropriate zings of awareness through her body. The worst part was that Ulrek seemed completely unaffected when this happened. He just laughed and kept adding to the story, and everyone treated him like this Captain Uzzar of the *New Horizon* instead of Ulrek the Horrible who'd ruined everyone's lives.

She stayed still and tried to ignore the completely unacceptable way her body was reacting to the alien next to her. It wasn't her fault he was so damn hot. She just had to wait this out. Once Angie's mates called, they'd be out of here to meet them for dinner and drinks.

Drinks, yes, she really needed drinks. That would solve her problem.

Angie's comm rang out from behind her, and she reached for it, wet hands and all, to pick up the call. Tallean comms were waterproof, and the touch screen had no problem registering wet fingers. Good thing, too, since Delaney had dropped hers several times in the sink.

"It's my mates," she said. "We're meeting them at the Hideout for some food, and they're wondering if you want to join us." She covered the speaker of her phone and lowered her voice. "Honestly, I think they want to grill you guys for any new info on New Rhea, since you were there last."

Or maybe the directors wanted to keep their eyes on Ulrek. You know, the whole *keep your enemies closer* thing.

Ulrek rumbled a laugh. "Of course. We'll meet with them."

Shit!

For a moment, Delaney wondered if she should fake a stomach ache or something just so she wouldn't need to spend more time with Ulrek. But after Craig, she'd promised herself she wouldn't change her plans for anyone, not even a very dangerous if admittedly annoyingly handsome space captain living a double life.

Angie ended the call with her beaus. "All right, let's get going."

Ulrek stood first, and Delaney found herself staring directly at an impressively well-formed, semi-hard cock. If this was what he looked like when he was half aroused, what the hell did he look like fully erect? He climbed out of the tub, then offered her a hand, a smirk on his face. He'd caught her staring.

When she didn't take his hand of her own accord, he grabbed hers and hauled her out of the tub. Delaney's eyes went wide as she found herself plastered against his very muscular and very naked body. The disguise felt very real too. Her skin sizzled in all the places they touched, which was everywhere.

Just hate-fuck him already and get him out of your system.

Damn it, brain! Where had that thought come from? Wherever it was, it needed to go back there, sit down, and shut the fuck up. Totally unacceptable.

"You're welcome," he said, giving her a scorching look.

He steadied her, then turned to join Gavin and Tuhror. No one else had witnessed their little moment. To everyone else, he'd simply helped her out of the tub, and that was that. The three walked ahead of her, and it was almost impossible to keep her eyes away from his broad shoulders, trim waist, and...oh my...perfect ass.

Next to her, Ulia sighed. "What a view."

What a view indeed!

Chapter 5

Ulrek

Ulrek let Gavin and Tuhror do the coilbeast's share of the talking at dinner, mostly because it was hard following the conversation with Delaney's leg brushing up against his every so often. She'd avoided sitting next to him but had ended up across from him instead.

She picked up her amberberry wine and held the glass to her mouth, only to realize it was empty. They both reached for the carafe, and their hands touched. She snatched hers away like she'd been burned, so Ulrek picked it up and poured her some more.

"Thank you," she said, steadfastly refusing to meet his gaze.

He noticed she'd been avoiding his eyes since that moment at the baths when he'd helped her out of the water. She must have felt it too, that electricity that sparked between them. He sure hadn't missed the brief but intense tell-tale scent of arousal that had spiked from her. It had made him want to take her back to his ship and give them both what they wanted.

Just a few short years ago, that was exactly what he would have done. Old Ulrek would've whisked her away and had his way with her on his ship until he was bored of her. And if he never bored of her, then he'd have the rest of their lives to get her to forgive him for stealing her away. Maybe they'd even form a mate bond.

Ulrek took a gulp of his Rhean spirit, but the intriguing thought did not disappear. Tuhror elbowed him hard, and he realized he'd completely missed a question from Ryek.

Angie and Delaney excused themselves and headed over to use the facilities. Earth females were known to visit such facilities in groups of two or more. Which was strange to Ulrek; bodily functions were not a group activity, surely.

"Did your ship detect any other spacecraft in the vicinity when you were coming in?" Ryek repeated.

Ulrek frowned. "Nothing to give off an alert."

Unauthorized crafts had been spotted over the wilderness surrounding the colony; according to the people his crew had talked to at the docks, the sightings started the day after arriving at Reka 5. They'd made sure they weren't being followed when they left New Rhea, but just to be safe, he'd get Gavin to change the identifying signature of the ship the next time they were hidden in an asteroid belt. He appreciated the subtle warning.

When the females returned, Angie came straight to the table, but Delaney stopped to talk to a raven-haired human female named Natalia who'd taken their orders earlier. She was the owner's mate and had expressed shock at seeing Delaney.

Ulrek didn't miss the sudden change in both females' demeanor when a group of human males entered the pub, sitting down in a large booth. Natalia didn't go to serve them but instead made eye contact with another server, who looked just as unhappy at the group's arrival as she made her way over to their booth.

Meanwhile, Delaney looked ready to bolt. She hid behind the nearest column, her eyes darting between the newcomers and her seat as if wondering if she'd be seen if she made a run for it. Her eyes met Ulrek's, and it was clear to him what was going on. She was scared. That group of males frightened her.

A few of the males were big for humans, and the group had swaggered in like they owned the place. Ulrek was sure he could take them on if any of them bothered Delaney, but he was supposed to keep a low profile while he was disguised as Captain Uzzar. He made eye contact with Delaney again.

The rest of their table had noticed the group of newcomers, and buoyed by the knowledge that her friends were there, Delaney started to pick her way back to the table.

“Yo, Craig! Isn’t that your wife?” The male’s voice was loud and grating, and the entire table of humans turned as one to look at Delaney.

“Lana?”

Delaney stiffened and whipped around to face the male. Angie twisted in her seat to glare at him.

“Where the fuck have you been?” The male stood, his chair toppling as he shoved it aside, and stomped toward Delaney.

For a moment, Delaney cowered, shrinking into herself. Then she glanced over at her table of friends briefly, squared her shoulders, and glowered at the male with even more hate than she’d sent Ulrek when she first met him on his ship. “We are done. I thought the note I left was pretty clear.”

“Done?” The male laughed. “You don’t get to just take off. You’re my wife. You leave when I say you leave.”

Wife? According to his translator, which had the three most common human languages programmed in, that was the English word for a female mate. The declaration had Ulrek clenching his hands into fists. It also had him confused. If Delaney had a mate, why had she applied for a job on his ship? In Tallean culture, it was the male’s job to provide for his female, though some females insisted on working for fun and to have their own source of income.

He’d scented a human male on Delaney earlier, but it was faint, like they shared the same building, not the same bed. He’d assumed it was because she lived in a dormitory setting.

Ulrek made eye contact with Angie, who was watching the altercation with her lips pressed in a firm line. “Married is the same as mated, no?”

She shook her head. “Not quite. Humans don’t develop a bond the same way Talleans do. If anything, it’s closer to what I think you would call a ‘partnership of convenience’. Some marriages are filled with love, like a mate bond, but others are not. Delaney applied to have her marriage to Craig annulled. He’s a jerk.”

“You can go fuck yourself,” Delaney said, the words loud enough for the entire pub to look their way. She most definitely had all the males at the human table glaring at her. “Just like you’re fucking Vicky. Why don’t you marry her instead? I don’t stay with cheaters.”

“There’s no divorce here. You know that.” The male looked smug.

Delaney laughed, the sound almost a cackle. “What are you going to do? Rip up all the clothes I left behind? Break all my shit, like you did before? Threaten to cut all my hair off? I’m done being scared of you, Craig. Leave me the fuck alone.”

“You bitch,” the male hissed. He grabbed Delaney roughly by the arm, making her yelp.

Ryek and Holden stood, looking ready to step in, but Ulrek went one better, shoving his chair aside and marching over to the arguing pair.

“Take your hands off her, or I’ll remove them from your body,” Ulrek growled.

The idiot must have a death wish because he didn’t release Delaney. “What’s it to you, *alien*?” He made it sound like a dirty word. “This is a human affair. Now beat it!”

Ulrek grabbed him by the shirt collar and lifted him clean off the ground, which made him let go of Delaney. “She’s here with me.”

Technically, she was here with the whole group, but close enough. Ulrek shoved him against the wall, and a decoration hanging on it fell and broke.

“Charge that to the *New Horizon*,” Ulrek said to the barkeep. Then he turned back to Delaney. “Give me your hand,” he said, taking the wrist the male had grabbed. He only touched her gently, but she flinched as the skin there was tender. The male was skulking away, until Ulrek grabbed him by the wrist and twisted hard; the male howled. “Now we’re even.”

The human cursed and swore behind him, but Ulrek ignored him. He wrapped an arm around Delaney protectively. She looked a bit shellshocked that he had done so, which he took as a good thing.

“Behind you!” Jillian yelled.

Ulrek had already sensed it coming; he ducked, moving Delaney out of harm’s way. The hurled tumbler smashed against the post behind them. It didn’t break, being made of tough stuff, but it did chip the finish on the post. He turned on the male, ready to remove his hand from his arm.

That glass could have hit Delaney! Ulrek had been hit with much worse, but Delaney was small and a lot more delicate than he was. A heavy tumbler thrown with force was enough to seriously hurt her. He felt the bloodlust rise in him, felt the adrenaline begin to pump through his veins.

Ryek stepped between them. “Captain Uzzar, let’s not make a scene while you’re here,” the director said smoothly, stressing his fake name.

Fuck. Ryek was right. The disguise wouldn’t hold up if he went into bloodlust and allowed his cheek creases to open and his fangs to elongate.

The director turned to the group of human males, some of whom looked as ready for a tussle as Ulrek did. “Delaney is with us. Think twice before you start a fight you cannot hope to win.”

“Oh shit, isn’t that the director?” one of the asshole’s friends whispered.

Craig scowled. “You can’t hide behind your friends all the time, Lana. This isn’t over.”

The group left, deciding to find another place for drinks, as Ulrek took Delaney back to their table.

Chapter 6

Delaney

Delaney tried to slow the pounding in her chest as Ulrek walked her back to their table.

She'd never stood up to Craig before, but knowing that her friends were there to watch her back, not to mention Ulrek the Horrible and his crew, she'd found the courage. It had felt amazing! Just as she'd expected. What she hadn't expected was for Ulrek almost to go into bloodlust while protecting her.

Some Talleans went into a kind of half-shift when they fought. As it was, they already looked like predators, with the giant claws on their feet that stuck out the front of their shoes. But when they went into this altered state, the crease in their cheeks opened, their jaws unhinged completely, and their fangs grew longer and larger.

Many who experienced it called it bloodlust because of the way they felt when this happened to them. They were stronger, their senses more acute, and they had an insatiable craving for violence and sex—in that order.

After her initial fear of the Talleans had worn off, Delaney had started to find it super sexy. She'd witnessed it a few times when Reka 5 guards had faced off against packs of dragus, the wild beasts that sometimes made it through the colony walls. She'd secretly daydreamed that one of them would scoop her up into his arms after the fight for a thorough ravishing. The guard, that is, not one of the dragus.

She'd always been drawn to strong men; it had been one of the reasons she'd picked Craig in the first place. Too bad so many men who were tough were also controlling ass-wipes.

"*This* is your male?" Holden asked, a look of disgust on his face. "He is unworthy of you."

Delaney sighed. "Ex-male. I've applied to have our marriage annulled."

"I will get the matter expedited," Holden said.

"Thank you, that's kind. But don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

Ryek and Holden had a colony to run. Sure, they had help from the council now, but Delaney didn't want them wasting their time on her problems. Craig had squandered enough of *her* time as it was.

She grabbed the first drink she could lay her hands on, which happened to be Ulrek's Rhean spirit. Oh well. Too bad, so sad, it was hers now. She downed what was left of it in one big, long gulp.

"Slow down." Ulrek's voice tickled her ear. His hand rested on her lower back, supporting her.

"Don't you tell me to slow down," she snapped, turning her ire on him. Who was he to tell her what to do?

That had Ulrek grinning. Despite his disguise, the smile looked genuine and went straight to her core, which was just plain wrong, because this was Ulrek the Horrible, for fuck's sake.

And why the hell did he seem to like her snapping at him?

She took a step, heading for her own seat across the table, and wobbled. Rhean spirit was strong stuff. It hit fast too, though she'd already had two glasses of wine before this and had barely touched her food. She reached out a hand to steady herself and got a palm full of muscle instead.

Ooh. That was nice.

She gave the bulging bicep an exploratory squeeze. Ulrek wore a plain black sleeveless top that molded to his body and showed off every muscle.

What was she doing again? Damn, that Rhean spirit was potent. Oh. Right. She was heading back to her seat.

Before she could move, Ulrek sat and pulled her onto his lap. He reached across the table, moved her plate of food in front of them, and handed her a medallion of fried tuber. She stared at it for a moment, not quite recognizing what it was as the alcohol worked its magic on her brain. He held it to her lips, and she took a bite.

Mmm. Alien fries.

Fried jadroot was even better than its potato counterpart. Crispy on the outside, soft and tender on the inside. There was a nuttiness to them that potato fries didn't have. They sold normal fries here too, of course, ever since they'd managed to get potatoes growing in the greenhouse. Delaney had worked on Project Potato herself. But she still preferred Reka 5's jadroot version.

Delaney looked up at the people at their table. Why was everyone staring at her? Gavin had his brow raised, and Angie was frowning. Ulia looked disappointed. Had she done something wrong? She didn't think so.

Angie cleared her throat. "I should get Delaney back to her room. It's probably better she's somewhere safe in case those assholes come looking for her. She's dealt with enough today." She narrowed her eyes, but the look shot over Delaney's head and landed on the sexy older Tallean male behind her.

"But I'm not done with my alien fries." Delaney wiggled on his lap and reached up to trace a finger along his cheek crease. "And this guy's kinda hot."

"Yup, definitely time to go home," Angie announced, wrapping up Delaney's food in a fabric napkin.

"I can take her," the Tallean male offered. "She's technically my crew."

“No!” Angie and Jillian both said at the same time.

“I’ll escort you.” Holden stood, his eyes still on the door.

The room spun around as Delaney got up. *Whee!* Angie stuffed the bundle of tubers into her arms and ushered her toward the door.

“Bye, Mr. Sexy Stranger Alien,” she hollered over her shoulder.

Ulrek

Ulrek watched as Delaney stumbled out of The Hideout, her arm slung around Angie. Those arms should be wrapped around him instead.

Jakkan's mate Jillian was still glaring at him like he'd been the one to upset her rather than the one who rushed to stand up for her. Jillian knew who he really was, having met him multiple times as both Ulrek and as Uzzar.

Ulrek had been shocked when he first learned that Jakkan was actually the same person he knew as Ballus when he'd been on the other side. Ballus was a slightly portly and very gaudily dressed merchant. It had all been a disguise. Jakkan lived a double life.

When Ulrek bumped into him as Ballus, his female was usually dressed like a merchant's showpiece, dripping in gems and jewels and painted with colorful, iridescent pigments. The crazy outfits and makeup were disguise enough. Most people they met couldn't see past them. Today, Jillian wore something comfortable and casual.

The females were trying to protect Delaney from him. Ulrek didn't blame them, considering who he was. But their efforts would be in vain. It wouldn't be long before the powers that be deemed the contract Delaney had signed with the *New Horizon* was valid, and she'd be on her way off the colony on his ship.

Natalia walked over. "Is everything okay?"

"Angie's walking her home in case those guys come back and cause trouble," Jillian said.

"I'm glad she's finally getting free of that asshole." Natalia glanced over at Ulrek's empty drink. "I'll grab you another one."

Now it made sense to Ulrek why Delaney had applied for a job on the *New Horizon*. She was trying to free herself from

an abusive male. The job was perfect: not only would the generous pay make it possible for her to live on her own once her term on his ship was over, but also it physically removed her from the planet and an angry and possibly dangerous male for an entire year.

Smart.

She must be staying in the temporary housing they offered to newcomers who fled Dominion rule with nothing but bad memories in their possession. Ulrek made a note to check the building out tomorrow.

She'd mentioned in her application that she worked for the greenhouses here on the colony, but with someone like her soon-to-be-ex-mate sniffing around, they wouldn't be a safe place for her to continue working.

Ulrek remembered the tiny luggage she'd been dragging behind her today. Was that all she had? She'd mentioned him ripping up and breaking her things. Maybe Ulrek should take her shopping before they left Reka 5.

Because they *would* leave Reka 5. This whole contract nonsense was only delaying the inevitable.

Tuhror guffawed and slapped his hand on the table, and Ulrek forced himself to drag his attention back to the discussion around him. What he really wanted to do now that Delaney was gone was return to his ship, or failing that, follow her home, but he didn't want his interest to be too apparent, so he stayed around to listen to another one of Jakkan's stories.

Uliah was hitting it off with Gavin, which might anger Tahra if she found out. Tuhror's sister technically had no claim on the human male, but everyone on the ship knew she'd been trying very hard to get him into her quarters, just as hard as he'd been trying to avoid her advances.

If he was smart, he'd bring Uliah to one of the nicely furnished rooms for rent at the docks instead of to the ship. While the *Revenge*, or rather, the *New Horizon*, was an

impressive ship with all its armor and weapons, the inside of a warship wasn't really the place to charm a female, even with all the upgrades Ulrek had added.

Gavin wasn't as tall as Ulrek or as wide as Tuhror, but he was still a big male, especially for a human. Tallean females were not built the same as Tallean males; they were tall and slender, and didn't have as many curves as most human females did. The human males on his ship always said Tallean females looked like exotic supermodels.

That was fine by Ulrek. The stars were always brighter on another planet. Let them lust after the Tallean females all they wanted. He would find himself a fiery human one.

Human females were one of his weak spots and had been since his days with the Dominion. They were so similar to his own kind, yet different. Softer. Sweeter. But still full of fire. A tender thing that could turn vicious in the blink of an eye. Delightful!

Back at the Dominion, females had flocked to him, offering themselves to him left and right. Few had ever challenged him or dared to disagree with him, even when he was clearly wrong. It was tiresome. The humans he'd nabbed for the Dominion? They were different. They had brains and daring.

Not the spineless ones the Dominion gifted him as slaves. They'd had their wills broken. He recalled one female in particular. By the time Lori was gifted to him, Ulrek had uncovered the Dominion's plot to murder him and use his death to motivate a new generation of recruits. He was already planning his imminent defection to the other side.

He'd left a weapon out on purpose to see if Lori had any fight left. It was at a port in New Rhea. She could've escaped and made it to Reka 5. Ulrek had given her several perfect opportunities that trip, even left valuables out so she could take them along and trade them for safe passage. She hadn't taken a single one of them.

Delaney, however, *she* would've recognized and taken any opportunity he'd given her. Probably even stabbed him in the back for good measure. She'd made it to Reka 5 after all. She was a female who would walk beside him, not behind him.

And once he had Delaney back on his ship, she'd be all his.

Chapter 7

Delaney

“I’m sorry your new job fell through,” said Chara, the Tallean woman who ran the greenhouse Delaney used to work at. “We’d love to have you back, but as you know we filled your position already. You’ll be top pick when another spot opens up, though. I’ll ask the other greenhouses if they need help in the meantime?”

“Thanks, Chara.” Delaney rubbed her temple as her headache grew.

She’d known this would be the case. She’d trained her own replacement, for goodness’ sake. It had been worth a call, anyway; at least now they knew she was looking.

She hung up, picked up her glass of nuri leaf tea, and downed it in several large gulps, hoping to chase her hangover away. It didn’t work. The tea was supposed to help with the post-indulgence funk, but she was pretty sure it only worked because it got people to drink more liquids. Her head still pounded.

This was exactly why she didn’t normally drink much. Tallean booze tended to mess with her head way more than any hooch on Earth ever had.

Job hunting with a hangover wasn’t much fun, especially when the choices were zero to none. But she still wanted to put out feelers just in case she was in fact released from the contract with Ulrek the Dangerously Sexy, if Horrible.

There was one last option she hadn't tried, which were the local retail plant nurseries and flower shops. It wasn't at all what she'd trained so hard to do, and Craig might find and harass her, but it was still work in a related field...right? It was the end of summer and the least busy time, but still, it was worth a try.

She made her way to the bathroom to rinse her mouth with the teeth cleaning wash before opening her luggage and rummaging through it dismally. She'd packed for a job in the greenroom of a ship, not for job interviews out in the colony. Everything else she owned was back at her—no...she shook her head...it was *Craig's* apartment now. She'd planned on just forfeiting them all and buying a whole new wardrobe when she got back from her year-long stint with all the credit she'd have made.

She regretted the decision now. What was she going to do with a bunch of overalls, gloves, and pruning tools? The only non-work-related clothing she'd taken from her wardrobe was a few pieces of comfortable loungewear since she doubted she'd need to dress up in a spaceship full of men who hadn't showered in weeks.

There was no way in hell she was going back to pick up her clothes, so that meant she needed to go shopping. On a very tight budget, of course. But really, she didn't need more than one other set of normal clothes aside from the one she was wearing.

She sniffed her shirt. Ugh. It still smelled faintly of *The Hideout*, and the bit of amberberry wine she'd spilled on it. She'd fallen asleep last night in her clothes. That Rhean spirit was strong stuff.

Delaney rubbed her temples. She couldn't believe she'd stolen and downed Ulrek's drink. It'd felt like *such* a good idea at the time. Craig had pissed her off royally, and she'd hoped the drink would help her forget the stressful ordeal. Welp, it had. And for bonus points, she'd ended up in Ulrek's lap, in front of everyone.

She stripped and threw on a set of lounge clothes. This would have to do for today.

Giving herself a once over in the mirror, Delaney stuffed her comm into her pocket and headed out into the colony.

The nasty, nagging feeling she was being followed started the moment she left the safety of the building. She looked around but didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Just a few women talking by the bench, and two guys walking toward the NCH office. She continued along the path and down to the main street.

She'd have more luck finding clothes that fit her and her budget at The Shops rather than the market. The market was an old-style bazaar with lots of little stalls. It was a terrific place to find handmade goods, one-of-a-kind trinkets and treasures from across the galaxy, and a wide selection of specialty foods and ingredients. Set inside a huge building, it still had an open-air feel since the two massive doors at the ends were always open.

The Shops, on the other hand, was a one-stop retail establishment for everything the average colonist could need on a daily basis.

He was leaning against a tree where the NCH path joined the road, waiting for her.

Not Craig. Ulrek.

He wore a captain's jacket over a dark shirt despite it being very warm out. This one was plain and didn't have any insignias on it proclaiming him as belonging to any particular ship. His disguise was still in place, and with his salt and pepper hair, he looked quite distinguished. He wore thick-soled boots with his claws extending out the opening at the front—all Tallean footwear was open-toed, to accommodate their claws.

Delaney cursed under her breath as flashes of yesterday evening teased at the edges of her hungover brain. At the time, sitting in his lap and eating from his hand had felt

completely natural. Especially after the way he'd chased off Craig. She'd even rubbed her butt all over his crotch, which apparently had been the only way her drunk ass knew how to flirt. She was mortified.

He was probably here now because he thought he had a chance.

"Listen, Ul—Uzzar," Delaney put a hand up to block the Rekan 5 sun, which was much too bright this morning. "I was drunk. It was a mistake. I didn't mean it."

"I know."

So why the fuck was he here now?

"Okay then, what do you want?" She decided she didn't need to be nice now that Angie and her mates weren't around. This was still Ulrek after all, even if he did come to her rescue.

His mesmerizing green eyes sparkled in the sun as he looked her up and down. His mouth lifted on one side.

"I want you."

She felt the husky sound of his voice all the way down to her toes. He caught her gaze with his and trapped it there. And despite the distance between them, it felt like he was right there, touching her with his eyes. Butterflies fluttered in her belly; for a moment, she didn't trust herself to speak.

"My ship's greenroom is in horrible shape, and my crew deserves better. They signed on even knowing who I am and the danger that comes with working for me, so I promised to give them the best I could."

Delaney blinked several times. Oh, *shit*. This was about his ship. He wanted her as part of his crew, nothing more. Good, because she wasn't interested in anything more either. Not one bit.

You lying liar. Admit it, you're a hussy, Delaney Torres. A hussy who wants to jump his bones.

Delaney hushed the little voice inside herself, squared her shoulders, and faced the much too sexy for his own good captain. “My answer hasn’t changed. No.”

She tried to walk past him, but he pushed himself off the tree and blocked her way.

“Any way I can change that answer to a yes? What if I increase your pay?”

For a nanosecond, she considered it. “No.” There. That was the right answer. Negotiating with Ulrek was the equivalent of making a deal with the devil, as far as she was concerned.

“What about if I pay you to only work on it while we’re docked on Reka 5?”

“No.” She didn’t trust him not to just take off with her on board. Not to mention, she’d already signed that contract saying she’d work for him for a year, and he was liable to throw that in her face when she wanted to leave. She made the turn toward The Shops.

“Just a diagnosis of what’s wrong, then. You don’t need to fix it.”

“I’m not getting on your ship, and that is final.”

“If you’re worried I’ll leave Reka 5 with you on board—”

“Precisely.”

“—the majority of my crew is currently scattered around the colony on leave. I couldn’t take off with you, even if I wanted to.”

“Do you want to?”

Not even a breath of hesitation. “Yes.”

Talk about being completely honest. It gave her pause, but only for a moment. “It’s still a no.”

She continued walking, but that feeling of being followed was back. She whipped around, her heart thumping in her chest.

Ulrek made a low, growly sound in his throat, his eyes scanning the street.

“You feel that too?” she whispered, for the moment allied with him against this invisible foe.

“I do.” He continued to look around. “We are being watched.”

But there were only the regular folks of Reka 5 on the street. Could it be Craig? Maybe he’d sent one of his friends?

“Come to my ship. I will pay you to diagnose the problem. Only that. You will be safe there.”

Even as he negotiated, Ulrek was on high alert, his posture saying he was ready to fight. Delaney bet he was an awesome fighter. She shook her head, trying to shake the image of Ulrek in full bloodlust.

She remembered last night when Ulrek had faced down her asshole ex. Would Ulrek go into bloodlust to protect her from whoever was following them now?

Gah! What was wrong with her that she not-so-secretly hoped that was the case?

She knew full well that fighting in bloodlust was often followed by an intense craving, an insatiable need for sex. And if he fought to defend her, then she’d be his first target. If she was lucky, he’d steal her away to his ship to have his way with her. If she wasn’t, she’d end up getting her brains fucked out right here, tossed over the park bench.

But that wouldn’t happen because they probably weren’t in real danger. Besides, Ulrek was in disguise, and she doubted he could maintain it if his face changed while in bloodlust, no matter how good the prosthetic or whatever was.

“It’s probably just Craig or one of his friends. I can handle them.” She hoped the lie wasn’t obvious. She couldn’t handle them, not really, but she wasn’t going to admit weakness in front of Ulrek.

Ulrek didn't look convinced. "Come to my ship. I give you my word that we will not leave with you on board. Diagnose the problem with my greenroom. I'll pay you a full day's wages no matter how short a time it takes, and you won't need to fix it." He glanced around. "I will protect you and get you back to your room safely after."

He didn't mention that if the verdict for the contract sided with him, she'd end up on his ship anyway. Maybe he didn't think the decision would favor him because of who he was, and he wanted a guaranteed diagnosis either way.

"Three. I want three days' wages." What just happened to not negotiating?

"Two."

Two days' wages to just look at the greenroom and tell him what was wrong? It would take her a galactic hour or two at most. Then Craig and his friends would have given up for the day, and she'd be out of there.

"Deal." She stuck her hand out before realizing Ulrek might not know a handshake was used to seal a deal.

But he did. He took it and shook. "Deal."

He didn't let her hand go after shaking it. Instead, he held onto it and started walking toward the dock.

Chapter 8

Delaney

Delaney snatched her hand away the moment they walked into the ship's common room. Three Tallean males were playing darts, and all of them turned to gawk at her and Ulrek. She recognized Tuhror, whom she'd met yesterday.

"I thought we'd agreed not to kidnap the new greenroom technician," Tuhror said with his brows raised.

"Delaney is my *guest* for the next few hours," Ulrek said. "She's going to figure out what's wrong with the greenroom. That's it." His hand landed on the small of her back. "But before we do that, let's get you over to the medbay to get rid of this headache."

"How did you know?" she asked. Her headache hadn't gotten any better.

"You chugged my Rhean spirit after two glasses of wine last night."

The two Talleans she hadn't met yet did a double take and looked impressed.

He introduced her to Berus and Kirek, who looked at her curiously as they stuck their hands out awkwardly for a human-style handshake.

"Kirek here is in charge of weapons and ammunition. He makes sure the crew has all the right tools for the job, and enough energy cells to do it," Ulrek said. "And this is Berus. He doesn't do much when he's here on the ship, but he's an

exceptional fighter on the ground. One Berus is worth a whole infantry out on a mission.”

Berus almost looked embarrassed at the glowing praise. Delaney had never seen a Tallean male blush through their swarthy complexion, but he was getting very close.

“I’m just really big,” he said with a self-deprecating shrug. He was. He had to be more than seven feet tall, and weighed a ton.

Delaney shook their hands, and Ulrek continued leading her down a hall to the medbay.

“I’ll do it,” she said, holding out her hand for the pain reliever.

She’d used the simple, single-use injector tabs before, when she sprained her ankle last winter while trying to make it up the steep hill to her apartment with way too many bags of groceries. It was strange at first to inject the medicine directly into her body instead of swallowing a pill, but the pain reliever worked really fast and lasted a long time.

“And give up the chance to have you in my lap again? Never.”

Ulrek plopped down on the only seat in the room and pulled her down onto his lap.

“Hey! This wasn’t part of the deal.”

“You’re looking at my ship’s greenroom. I don’t want you doing it with a headache.”

“That’s not what I meant.” She tried to get off him, but it was a half-hearted attempt. A traitorous part of her wanted to be there, even though it was so, so wrong.

“I know.”

The arm around her body slid up, passing over her chest to grip her jaw. He held her firmly but tenderly, and her body exploded with sudden need.

Crap! He was going to smell that and think she wanted him.

And he'd be absolutely right.

"Hold still now," he murmured into her ear. His breath fanned across her, and the hairs on her arms lifted into goosebumps.

She held still, not because she wanted to obey him, but because she was afraid to move. She was a deer caught in the headlights, and Ulrek was an eighteen-wheeler barreling toward her at top speed.

He peeled off the side of the tab to expose the built-in disinfectant pad and cleaned her skin with it before twisting off the tip and pressing it to her neck. The lightest of pinches, and it was done. He tossed the empty tab into the nearby receptacle. The medicine started to work instantly, blocking the pain.

"Feeling better?" he rumbled into her ear.

It took Delaney a few seconds to gather her voice. The ass-tard had somehow made the injection of a pain reliever tab an erotic experience. "Yes. Thank you. Now let me down."

Ulrek just sat there, unmoving, his nose inches from her neck. He held so still Delaney wondered if he was broken and they would be stuck here like this forever. Her body filled with awareness, every nerve ending on high alert. Not able to hold still anymore, she tried to climb off his lap, only to feel the cock that had hardened under her body.

"Do. Not." The words were barely more than a growl, and Ulrek's hand tightened around her jaw.

Holy fuck! Realization hit her. Ulrek, the big, bad captain, was trying not to lose his self-control around her. He needed her to fix his ship, and if he tried anything with her now, she might just run. She had all the power here.

Oh, this was kind of fun. She made as if to get off his lap again and rubbed up all over him in the process. This time, very much on purpose.

All it took was a snarl for Delaney to realize she'd played with fire and lost. Lust shot through her body as Ulrek's hips bucked. He buried his face into the side of her neck.

He was nuzzling her! This was the Tallean equivalent of a kiss. And it wasn't like anything Delaney had imagined from a monster like him. It was soft, tender, and—

“Delaney.” The sound of her name coming from him sent a frisson of need zipping down her spine. It was like he was praying to her, begging for something only she could give.

She turned her head and, ignoring the tiny voice in her head telling her to run, nuzzled him back. Oh, wow. He smelled good.

Then he kissed her for real, a human-style kiss, his lips firm and demanding. She was lost in his arms as waves of desire crashed over her.

Ulrek

Ulrek couldn't believe it. Delaney was kissing him back while he held her in his arms. It was a small victory and most likely short-lived, but he savored it anyway. The little female was just as sweet as he'd imagined, proving once again that the ones with the most fire were the sweetest on the inside.

Ulrek wanted to tame that fire—only temporarily, because even he knew that fire was untameable. Then it would burn brighter than ever before. Those who believed in the Stars considered fire the balance between life and death. Just as the fire of the stars brings forth life on the planets, it could also turn everything to ash on a whim.

Those raised in Dominion space and fed the Goddess' teachings, like him, were supposed to find such beliefs primitive and laughable. But Ulrek knew better. He'd seen the best-engineered ships consumed by flames. Only those who were brainless...or *brainwashed*...would ever disrespect fire.

He groaned as his hand explored her body, stopping for a moment at her ass. It was a perfect handful, and Ulrek couldn't help himself. He gave it a gentle squeeze, and Delaney melted against him.

Sliding a hand into her hair, Ulrek grabbed a handful of the silky strands as he tilted her head and devoured her, his tongue parting her lips and delving inside. She whimpered into his mouth, the sound soft and needy.

Stars, he wanted to explore every single inch of her.

Kissing mouth-to-mouth wasn't a Tallean thing, although they did kiss everywhere else on the body. But Ulrek rather enjoyed this odd human custom; he viewed it as a glimpse of things to come when he lavished attention on more intimate parts of her body.

Emil's voice came over the intercom. "Ulrek," he said in English, "there are two idiots poking around the hangar."

Delaney bolted up ramrod straight, almost bashing her lips against his sharp teeth, and Ulrek pulled away immediately. He chided himself for getting distracted by the delectable female. With her in his arms, he'd completely forgotten about his concern that they might be followed back to the ship.

"Let me get Delaney set up in the greenroom," Ulrek replied, trying to sound business as usual. "Then we'll go investigate."

They went to the greenroom, and he opened the portal. The muggy humidity rolled out in a sheet, and Delaney made a gagging sound.

"Jesus! What the—" She waved her hand in front of her face to dissipate the steam. "You were not kidding about this place being messed up." She frowned. "Crap, I don't have my tools with me."

"The old technician left his set in the storage room inside."

"Has this been linked to your ship's air filtration system the entire time? Because if it is, you need to disconnect it yesterday." She gathered her hair in her hands, smoothed it up into a ponytail, and tied it with a thin elastic she had on her wrist.

"No. We cut it off from the system when it started to get bad. And I turned off the water to it, though it still gets light." Ulrek didn't think this place needed any more water.

"Good. I don't smell any dangerous bacteria, but that's swampy as ass."

Ulrek grimaced at the description.

"Can your system vent it out of the ship? Not all systems can, and I doubt your old tech has a mask to fit my face."

"Our system can, yes. I'll do it from the bridge and leave the door open for you."

"Thanks. I'll need to wait for the air to clear before I go inside, but I'll get started as soon as possible." She almost looked excited to face the challenge.

“If this is too much of a mess for you to diagno—” Ulrek started, taking advantage of this new side of Delaney.

She held up a palm. “Pfft, I can do this.”

Ulrek held his hands up in surrender. “Good. If you need anything, the common room is down that hall and around the corner. Tuhror will be there.”

Then, before he could get sucked into kissing or nuzzling her again, Ulrek turned and left. He headed to the bridge first to vent the greenroom, then went in search of his comm specialist and part-time navigator.

Emil met him at the ship’s entrance. Cage was there too; the human was as big as a Tallean male. He wasn’t too bright, but reliable in a fight and fiercely loyal. Together, the three stepped out into the hangar to find the intruders.

Chapter 9

Delaney

Delaney wiped the sweat off her brow as she gaped at the plant. It was unfamiliar to her and, frankly, ugly. Whatever it was, it didn't belong in a greenroom—but considering where it was growing, it couldn't be a weed either. Someone had transplanted it there on purpose.

The poor thing might have been more attractive if it wasn't struggling. Clearly, it hadn't been bred to survive in a greenroom, spending most of its life in space. The plants used in these systems were all either specially engineered to handle the stress of interplanetary travel or had evolved naturally to do so.

Some had thick, strong, leathery leaves that made the most of the artificial grow lights but still tolerated the stronger light from passing stars when the sensors of the ship deemed it advisable to open the shade screens and let the natural beams in. None of them required a winter freeze or other seasonal events like monsoons. None went into dormancy for months at a time, not doing their job in the greenroom. Most importantly, no greenroom flora was allelopathic, preventing other plants from growing in its vicinity.

Every bush, vine, and shrub had a reason to be there. Some excelled at filtering out certain chemicals and toxins from the air, while others converted carbon dioxide to oxygen extremely efficiently.

There were many different kinds of greenrooms, depending on the region where they were set up. The most common

type used plants from the Dominion's inner planets, both because there were more ships there than anywhere else in the galaxy and also because it was the original design. The one on the *New Horizon* used plants from Vosthea. It was a newer style, but the one Delaney was most comfortable working with. She did train in the outer planets, after all.

But this plant? Well, Delaney had no fricking clue what it was. She wasn't even sure it was from Vosthea, like everything else around it.

All the plants in its vicinity seemed to be struggling too, even worse than the rest of the greenroom, which was already in bad enough shape.

Delaney had diagnosed the problem quickly. All the settings were wrong. Terribly, terribly wrong. This wasn't set up as a carefully controlled air filter for a space-faring vessel; it was *this* close to being a perpetual rain chamber. No wonder everything was dying.

At first, Delaney had thought that maybe Ulrek's last technician had left on bad terms, but now she wasn't so sure. She'd need to see the greenroom records to figure out what really happened, but she didn't have the authority to access them.

It really was a mess. Most of the plants here were beyond saving, and even those that could be rescued weren't worth the effort. It would be best to gut the place and start from scratch, especially with the mold that was starting to take over part of the substrate. It would be a huge job.

She dug her comm out of her pocket and took a picture of the unfamiliar plant. It was in such a bedraggled state that she doubted the program on her comm would be able to recognize it. She tried anyway. Yep, she was given an error.

If she were back on Earth, she would most definitely classify this as some sort of succulent. Despite half of it being rotted away, there was still the recognizable shape of a rosette at the center of the plant. Unlike any other succulent she'd ever

seen, however, a stem came out from the center of the rosette to form more rosettes with more stems of their own. Surely it must have once stood on its own, but now it lay limp on the ground.

She made a note to look up the plant when she got home. She'd ask Chara, too. It was a long shot, because there were dozens and dozens of planets and moons in the galaxy, and it was impossible to know every plant out there, but perhaps her old boss would recognize it.

The sound of someone clearing their throat had her looking toward the door. Ulrek was back. She stepped out into the hallway, wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand. Even with most of the humid air vented, it was still hot and stuffy as fuck in there, and she probably looked a mess.

Ulrek, on the other hand, was as cool as a cucumber, looking just as annoyingly composed as ever. He'd gotten rid of the disguise, and Delaney found him even more attractive. God, she hated him.

"I think I know what's wrong with the greenroom." The faster she gave the diagnosis, the faster she could get out of there. "But I have a few questions, and I'd like to check the ship's record for it, starting a cycle or so before your last technician left. I don't have access to it, though."

"I'm not sure how much I can answer, but I'll try." Ulrek eyed the still much-too-humid room. "We can do it in my office. Follow me."

Ulrek

Ulrek pulled up a second seat and gestured for Delaney to sit. She eyed it warily.

“You can always sit on my lap if you prefer.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Just so you know, I still hate you. And whatever happened yesterday won’t happen again. I was pissed off and drunk, remember?”

Ah, of course. How could he forget?

She moved the chair a little further away from his and sat down as if that tiny bit of extra space would protect her from him. He thought it was super cute.

Resisting the urge to antagonize her even more just to see her delicious reaction, he pulled up the ship’s records of the greenroom. The charts of numbers didn’t mean much to him, but they clearly did to Delaney. She leaned in, nodding and humming.

“When did your tech leave?”

Ulrek pointed to the date.

“The numbers look great back then. The watering schedule and misting schedule were exactly how they should be. And so are the nutritional values and the light cycles. But look.” She pointed to a date one galactic cycle later. “About a month later, the watering frequency doubled. Then, a few days later, the misting as well.”

Ulrek frowned. Who would be messing with his greenroom?

Delaney scrolled down a little more. “And here. It was increased again.”

That one Ulrek recognized. It was him. Oops.

Delaney wasn’t finished. “The lighting was dimmed here...” She continued scrolling, looking for more changes. “And, oh

my god, here the nutrients were nearly doubled.” She met his gaze. “Your plants are drowning, light-starved, and chemically burned. I’m not sure it’s worth it to save them at this point, to be honest. The wrong type of soil bacteria and fungi are taking hold. I think the entire greenroom should be cleared out and sanitized.”

Ulrek had expected that. They already had the funds set aside. But now that he had an expert’s diagnosis, he had even more questions than before. Like, who was fucking up the very air they breathed, and why? He’d made one of those changes, an honest mistake on his part, but the rest were a mystery.

His crew was loyal, though. That was the thing.

“There’s also one plant that doesn’t belong, but I think you know about it already.”

She was referring to the kima plant from his home planet. It had been one of the first plants to suffer, but it was a new transplant, and he thought it just needed time to recover from its move.

“Yes, I’m aware.”

“I don’t know anything about it, but I’m not sure it plays well with other plants.”

“I’ll find another location for it when we replant the greenroom.” Ulrek wasn’t sure it would survive.

His childhood home had kima all along the front. The blood-red flowers were stunning when in bloom, and the aroma never failed to remind him of happier days when his father was still alive. Ulrek had looked up to Ulren like he’d created the suns himself. Ulrek had also been his mother’s pride and joy back then. She couldn’t stop talking about his achievements, first at the academy, then later as a captain.

“Even if you replant the greenroom, you’ll need to make sure the settings are correct and adjust them as needed, depending on the stage of growth of the plants.”

Ulrek cocked his head. "I'm aware. That was why I contracted a technician."

Delaney ignored his reference to their contract. "Do you think someone's screwing with the settings on purpose?"

"No." Ulrek had briefly considered internal sabotage, but that had only lasted a second. He trusted his crew.

"You sound so sure."

"I am. I have been backstabbed before, but I didn't get to choose my crew back then."

Delaney pursed her lips. "When you were with the Dominion?"

"Correct. They were not all loyal to me. The ones who were, are with me now on this ship."

"They switched sides with you?"

"They helped commandeer our first ship. We filled out the rest of the crew by hiring directly from the Earth prison we were sent to raid." That hadn't been his original plan, but it had worked.

Many of those humans now worked on the other ships in his fleet. In addition to a half dozen smaller private shuttles, Ulrek owned two other battlecruisers, and they were currently on duty guarding Vosthea. He'd contracted them out to Kean on the condition that he could pull them when and if needed for emergencies.

Those other ships might be his in name, but they weren't his baby like the *Revenge*. Ulrek ran the *Revenge* on a skeleton crew, with only those he trusted the most.

"Enslaving isn't hiring." She gave him a frosty look.

Ulrek growled. "I am not so stupid as to give angry males control of my ship. Every human that left Earth that day did so as a free entity and was offered exceptional pay. Besides, humans make horrible slaves."

The same could not be said for the Fiete, the race the Dominion had conquered previously. Like humans, the Fiete were slightly smaller than Talleans. They had pointed ears and delicate features. The males were much less rugged than humans, and often perished in the mines. They were mainly used for domestic labor throughout Dominion space.

They never fought back. Never tried to escape. They just did as they were told. As a result, very few had made it here to the outer planets. Ulrek had once met a very intelligent Fiete female who helped a merchant run his ship, but she was the exception, not the rule.

“Ha! That’s pretty rich, coming from you.”

“It’s true. I’ve always believed this.” He had, and often mentioned it, even back in his Dominion days. “Humans are too intelligent. Too independent. But they make good crew. The crew I have now is loyal.”

“Oh, come on! You’re *Ulrek*.” She said his name like he ate babies for lunch. “Don’t you worry someone’s going to stab you in your sleep? Or slip you some poison or something?”

He was amused. “Should I be?”

“Well, you almost hired *me*. I’d destroy you if I could. I do hate you, remember?”

“Oh, really?” Ulrek wasn’t completely convinced she hated him as much as she believed.

He toggled off the maglock with a claw on his feet and pulled the chair she sat in toward him so they were face to face, her knees trapped between his. She gasped, and he gripped her delicate jaw in his hand. “I think you’re lying, Delaney, because I clearly remember you moaning into my mouth earlier today. I think you like me.”

Delaney stood and tried to shove him away, but he held onto her chair, and she ended up losing her balance instead. Ulrek trapped her in his arms and kicked her chair away.

“Listen, you prick.” She stabbed a finger at his chest. “I don’t like you. I find you repulsive. I can’t wait to get off your ship. End. Of. Story.”

“Liar.”

He lifted her up to sit on his oversized desk and stood, positioning his body between her knees. He placed a hand on each side of her, imprisoning her between them. The unmistakable scent of her arousal filled the air.

But despite her need being so obvious, she snapped her teeth at him when he went in to nuzzle her.

“Try to kiss me again, asshole, and I’ll bite you.”

Ulrek grinned. “That’s a lie too.” He could smell lies, and this one was strong. Delaney was fighting her attraction to him. It would be extra fun to earn her submission.

He grabbed a handful of her ponytail. She’d put it up neatly before working in the greenroom, but it was a mess now, and pieces of her hair had come free from the elastic. “Do you think I can’t smell your desire for me? Do you think I can’t see right through your lies? I bet if I fingered you now, you’d be soaking wet for me.”

The scent of her lust nearly knocked him over. Ulrek breathed it in, getting drunk on it.

Stars! She was beautiful.

“Just because I want to fuck your brains out doesn’t mean I like you. It just means I have shit-tastic taste in men.” The words came out breathy. Needy.

Well now, at least she was admitting she wanted him. “Your brains are too valuable to my ship, but I want you screaming my name like it’s the only prayer you’ve ever known.” He licked his lips and nudged the soft skin of her throat with his nose.

“I bet you’re so used to having any woman you want as a Dominion captain that you’re a lazy lover.” Delaney’s nails dug

into his shoulder. "I don't think you have the skills," she breathed.

Oho, was that a challenge? Ulrek *loved* a challenge.

Chapter 10

Delaney

Delaney didn't know what had come over her, baiting Ulrek like this. She knew she was sex-starved since neither she nor Craig had been interested for a while, but this was ridiculous.

It was a dangerous game, and for a moment, she wondered if Ulrek could have drugged her with an aphrodisiac. If he had, he must have accidentally dosed himself too. He looked feral with desire.

Ulrek pulled away from her throat, a predatory gleam in his eyes. He cupped her cheek with his hand, forcing her to meet his gaze. "I adore a challenge. But let's make it even more fun: if I can make you come all over my face, you return tomorrow and work on my ship."

To say that didn't spark her interest would be a huge ass lie. "And if you can't?"

"I'll leave you alone for the rest of my stay on Reka 5."

"Nope. Not good enough. If you fail, you release me from the contract, no matter the legal verdict."

Ulrek didn't even flinch. "Deal." He moved his hand down to her throat, gripping it.

Delaney pushed back the tide of desire racing in from the possessive gesture. "Let's set some rules," she said, hoping he couldn't hear his effect on her. "You keep your cock in your pants." The very cock that, even now, was straining against the fabric.

“Done. I won’t fuck you today unless you ask...no, unless you *beg* me to.” The asshole said it like he believed Delaney would actually do that.

Delaney rolled her eyes. She had more control than that. Didn’t she?

The hand that had been supporting her back moved lower to grip her ass, pulling her to the edge of the desk. Ulrek rolled his hips, and the impressive bulge rubbed deliciously against her crotch.

“Or are you scared?” The asshole smirked, waiting for her response.

Delaney scoffed, sounding much more confident than she was. “Of you? Never.” Such a lie; she was terrified.

“I thought not. Any more rules? I’ll be nice and let you set them.”

Him? Nice? Ha!

“No one finds out about this.” The last thing she needed was to face Gavin or Tuhror after. Or, worse, what if it got out to the colony?

“Accepted. The room is soundproof. This will be our little secret.”

Good god, why did he have to say it like that? He’d made her request sound dirty.

“Any more rules?”

Delaney shook her head before she could dig herself an even bigger hole.

“Good. Now, what is that Earth phrase?” Ulrek’s eyes landed on her lips. “Ah yes. Let’s seal it with a kiss.”

The second his lips touched hers, Delaney knew that she’d fucked up. She should’ve specified no kissing, or nuzzling, because this was too much. Too intimate. Too tender. So she did what any red-blooded woman would do.

She bit him.

Ulrek snarled and pulled away, his hand tightening around her throat. A single drop of blood welled on his lip, and he licked it away. Then, slowly, his lips curled up into a grin, the points of his fangs dimpling his lower lip.

“It’s going to be difficult to keep this a secret if you leave your marks all over me.”

He tilted her head and dragged the tips of his fangs down her throat, pressing just enough for the points to dig in but not leave a lasting mark. The pain was slight and laced with hunger. He grabbed both her wrists with one giant hand and trapped her there.

Delaney struggled to get off the desk, suddenly realizing she was in way over her head, but with her arms trapped, she lost her balance. As she rolled off the desk, she realized she was going to hit the ship’s floor headfirst. She squeezed her eyes shut, bracing for impact.

There was none. Ulrek caught her and lifted her back up onto the surface. “Calm, my love. I won’t harm you.” He shackled her wrists in his hand again. “But I can’t have you fighting me if we’re to keep this a secret. Your nails are as dull as your teeth, but they still leave marks.” He licked at the red mark on his lip, which had already stopped bleeding.

“I’m not your love.” She pulled at her wrists, but they were stuck.

“Until you walk out of this office, you are anything I want you to be.”

Delaney watched as he shrugged off his jacket, switching her wrists between his hands to get the second sleeve off, and tossed it over his chair. He wore a loose-fitting, silky shirt underneath that gave him a definite swashbuckling vibe. The top of the shirt was left open, showing a whole lot of smooth, dark skin stretched tight over his muscular chest. She knew what was hidden under the captain’s uniform already, thanks to their meeting at the baths.

Delaney expected him to just head for the finish line, but Ulrek crawled over her and crushed his lips over hers again, completely unafraid she'd bite him again. She had to keep reminding herself who he was, and that this was just a challenge, nothing more. He didn't really care about her, no matter how it felt right now.

But as his tongue dueled with hers, she lost herself in the kiss. He released her wrists and slid his hands under her shirt to cup her breasts over her sports bra. A thumb circled her nipple over the fabric before he pinched it. Delaney gasped into his mouth.

He wedged his hips between her legs, and his hard cock pressed against her clit. Even through all the layers of fabric, the touch had her shuddering. She couldn't stop herself from rolling her hips to grind her sex against it shamelessly.

"Delaney..." He said her name in a warning tone.

Then he was peeling her pants and underwear off and shoving her top up over her breasts, the elastic of the sports bra easily stretching to give him access. He bent and covered a nipple with his mouth, suckling and nibbling until it was almost painfully hard, before moving to the other one.

His mouth moved down her body slowly as his hand reached between her legs. He slid a thick finger through her juices and made a muffled, satisfied chuckle when he found her already wet. She wasn't ready for it when he rolled her clit gently between his fingers.

"Oh god," she whimpered, unable to stop the desire coursing through her body.

The exclamation earned her a louder, wicked chuckle as Ulrek continued kissing his way down to meet his hand. He inched down her body, torturously slowly. When he finally got there, Delaney was practically holding her breath in anticipation.

When two of his fingers found her slit and pressed in, she inhaled sharply. Then his mouth was there, working her clit

like an expert, drawing circles over it with his agile tongue, rolling it between his lips. Pleasure streaked across her vision as he pumped into her, his fingers curling slightly to hit all the right spots.

Needing something to hold onto, her hands fisted his dark hair.

This couldn't be happening. No. Not so fast, not with Ulrek.

But it was.

Surely this must mean he was a promiscuous manwhore. That was the only way he could have gotten so good. She tried to focus on that, because that was a turn off, right? A total, utter turn off.

But while her brain agreed, her body didn't. He continued his assault on her clit with his supremely talented tongue, and the pleasure grew more intense, no matter how hard she tried to deny it. She wound tighter and tighter, like a rubber band being stretched.

Then it snapped, and a thin scream left her mouth as she pulsed and spasmed around his fingers. He didn't stop to celebrate his victory, only hummed in appreciation, and kept going, changing up the tempo just a bit so she could start the climb again.

The second orgasm came hard and fast. And this time she couldn't even scream; all she could do was gasp for air, her body a quivering, shaky mess.

"Beautiful." The softly growled word barely made sense.

She didn't know where he was carrying her, but when he set her down, it was onto the giant floor cushion on the opposite side of the office, the one next to the bookcases filled with Tallean literature. She wondered how the books stayed in place when the ship was moving, then laughed at the fact that she was worried about something like that at a time like this.

Chapter 11

Ulrek

Ulrek tucked Delaney close against his body and wondered how long it would be before she realized she was cuddled in his arms and make a big fuss about it. The guilt and self-loathing would soon hit her hard, but until it did, he'd enjoy this moment of her submission.

Cuddling was something he always wanted but never got to do. When he was a high-ranking captain with the Dominion, females had always tried to stay with him in bed not because they wanted to, but because they wanted to force a mate bond. Since striking off on his own, all his encounters were as Captain Uzzar, at pleasure houses where he could pay them to leave right after. It was the safest option.

This was a hell of a lot more satisfying than those empty encounters, but much riskier.

This had not been part of the plan when he put up the job posting. While workplace dalliances were not frowned upon in his culture, he'd wanted to avoid them if at all possible simply because it made things difficult. Feelings got involved, and that was dangerous for someone like him. It put the rest of his crew in danger, too.

But when it came to Delaney, Ulrek couldn't help himself. He didn't understand it. He wasn't usually this easily controlled by his needs and desires. He didn't cuddle females in his library after making them come all over his face, and he *definitely* didn't sniff their hair like he was trying to memorize their scent and the way it mingled with his.

What the fuck was happening? What had started as nothing more than a mission to get her to stay and work on his greenroom had quickly gotten out of hand. He couldn't afford to get attached to a female who wanted to stab him in the back, yet he also, for some unfathomable reason, couldn't release her from his arms.

His comm alerted him of a message, and Delaney made an exclamation of surprise, bolted upright, and tried to scramble out of his arms. And there it was: reality filtering back after her high. Ulrek let her go and collected their clothes.

"I am visiting the market," Ulrek said as he tidied himself up to look presentable. "I can—"

"I'm not going to the market with you."

He had indeed been about to ask her to come along and be his tour guide, but he wasn't going to admit that now. "I was merely going to offer to drop you off at home." He tried to keep from smiling at her switch back to being all combative with him.

"I'm not going home. I'll call another transport."

"Where are you going?"

The two humans they'd found sniffing around the hangar were gone, but he didn't want Delaney bumping into her ex-mate.

"That's none of your business." She started to put her hair up again.

"Best to wash up first," Ulrek said as he sent a message to Emil. "Emil is human, so he will not be able to smell what we did. I'll get him to take you to my quarters to clean yourself." Any of his Tallean crew would know the moment they opened the door what had happened between them with one single whiff.

"Your quarters?" She rolled her eyes. "No. No fucking way."

"It's private, and you won't have anyone walking in on you. My crew all have their own rooms with private facilities for

natural bodily functions, but the cleansing units are shared.”

“I’ll use the shared units. I’m not going into your room.”

“It was your rule: no one finds out. I’m just helping you follow it. Some of my crew is on board right now. They are curious about you, and if they walk in on you cleaning, they’ll know.”

“I’ll tell them the greenroom is hot and muggy, and I needed a shower afterward. Easy peasy lemon squeezy.”

Ulrek leaned in and sniffed loudly. Then he groaned. “You smell delicious. I had no idea plants got you off so easily.”

“Fuck you.”

“All you have to do is ask. But seriously, they can smell your release. You will use my personal cleansing unit, end of discussion.” When she looked like she would protest again, he added, “What? Are you afraid the door will never open again, and you’ll be stuck there forever as my sex slave?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You know it.”

“Are you afraid of it happening? Or afraid you’ll like it too much?”

She held her middle finger up, making Ulrek chuckle.

There was a knock at the door.

“That will be Emil now. I swear, I’ll let you out of my quarters once you are done. Unless you want to explain to my comms specialist why you think I’m going to keep you there.”

Emil knocked again, and a muscle in Delaney’s jaw twitched. “Fine.”

“Wonderful.” Ulrek ordered the shipboard computer to open the door. He introduced the two and explained that Delaney had been working in the greenroom and needed to use his cleansing unit. “Can you bring her over to the captain’s quarters? I’ll program the door to let you in.”

“Of course.” Emil jerked his head toward the hall. “Follow me.”

Alone again, Ulrek ran a hand through his hair. He ordered the ship to filter the air in his office. He needed to get a hold of himself, and the first step toward doing that was to remove her scent. Something about it made him make horrible decisions—like cuddling.

He didn’t survive the Dominion’s scheme to use him as a martyr, and the despair when he found out his second-in-command was in on the plot, to get himself killed now years later because he was distracted by a female.

Ulrek dragged his fingers through his hair.

His exodus from the Dominion started when he found out the real reason for his father’s death. Ulren had been a galaxy-famous Dominion Captain and was Ulrek’s personal hero. He was the textbook example of what a male could make of themselves if they worked hard for the Favored, the Dominion’s ruling class.

The history books claimed that pirates had killed him. His devoted admirers rose up and demanded justice. Donations came pouring in, and young males joined the military, hoping to continue his fight. His heart aching from the loss, Ulrek had been one of them. His mother had been so proud of him.

As the son of the legendary Ulren, Ulrek had been a bit of a celebrity right from the start. The Dominion broadcasted his achievements to every corner of the galaxy. By the time he became the captain of the *Stellar Fortune*, he had replaced his father as the people’s hero.

But unlike his straight-laced father, Ulrek had friends in many different places. It had been a shock the day he learned that pirates hadn’t killed his father; the Dominion had. In the Dominion’s eyes, Ulren had done his service for them, and they no longer needed him alive. He served them better dead as a martyr.

And that was to have been Ulrek's fate too. Imagine the uproar if Ulrek, still young and in his prime, was murdered by the same pirates who had killed his father! The donations would overflow the coffers, and young males would sign up in droves.

Memories of the betrayal had him checking the scanners over and over for ship Gritarr captained for the Dominion. They were each hunting the other. Gritarr wanted to capture Ulrek and collect his bounty, to make up for letting Ulrek escape the first time. Ulrek just wanted Gritarr dead. He wanted revenge, pure and simple.

Gritarr usually didn't travel so far out of Dominion airspace, especially now that New Rhea and Vosthea had been liberated. But Ulrek knew he would risk it just to have a chance to drag Ulrek in for his punishment.

The last Ulrek had heard, the traitor was using Aton Station as a launching pad into the outer planets. Aton Station had been without an official ruler since Jotah, another "friend" who'd tried to backstab Ulrek, had been taken out.

Not by Ulrek, though. That honor had gone to Zharor, one of Kean's friends.

Zharor and Ulrek didn't always see eye to eye, but they got along tolerably well for Kean's sake. Kean was like a brother to Ulrek. They'd gone through the academy together and had taken turns saving each other's hides ever since. Kean had also been wronged by the Dominion and had responded by joining a band of pirates. He taught them how to make Euphora and started a drug empire on Vosthea.

Their friendship had survived the test of time. There weren't enough credits in the galaxy to drive a wedge between them—unlike Gritarr, who'd taken the first chance he got to stab Ulrek in the back so he could rise to the rank of captain.

Since Jotah's death, Neyala, the female who'd been his partner of convenience, had taken over the station. Gritarr

and Neyala had a history, and Ulrek wouldn't be surprised if his former second-in-command had promised Neyala a cut of the bounty if she helped bring Ulrek in.

They weren't the only ones looking to snag his bounty, but they were the most dangerous. He had to keep his wits sharp. He couldn't do that when he was constantly thinking of Delaney.

Maybe Delaney was right. Maybe they should just dissolve their contract before things went too far. The problem was, he really did want to get his greenroom working again, since he'd invested so much to have it put in, even though it wasn't essential. Most warships functioned perfectly well without them. They just had to deal with subpar air quality and run the CO2 scrubbers more vigorously. That's what they were doing right now.

Maybe he could pay one of his existing crew members to learn the basics of greenroom maintenance. Or put a call out for people to work on it whenever they could, and do the rest of the day to day themselves. Ulrek wasn't sure that would work though. He didn't trust temporary workers on his ship. Not to mention, Groden had left the greenroom in pristine condition, and somehow it had been fucked up beyond repair.

Ulrek really doubted it was deliberate sabotage. Not this crew, on this ship. Some of them had chosen to leave the Dominion and everything they had behind—family, friends, riches and rank—to join him.

At first, not everyone who had sided with him had done so out of loyalty. Some had simply found out the Dominion had planned to sacrifice them along with the captain, and had joined for revenge. Hence the name of their ship.

Over time, Ulrek had either earned their fealty or had left them behind. The two who had planned to give him up to the Dominion were dead. He'd transferred those he was suspicious of over to one of his other ships, where his captains would watch them with a close eye.

Some of the humans he'd picked up from Earth had needed reshuffling too. A few left over time for other opportunities. Still others had only taken the offer so they could get out of a life sentence; he did recruit from an Earth penitentiary after all. They too, were long gone.

He didn't trust Delaney yet, and this was her first test, though if he was going to nullify their contract, it wouldn't be needed. Emil was outside his door, ready to apprehend her if she planted bugs in his room. He pulled up the live feed from his quarters to see what she would do.

Delaney was already inside. Ulrek's room was simple. He'd picked up the habit of keeping everything neat and tidy while he'd been at the academy, and it had stuck. She glanced around the room.

She didn't linger long and quickly went to the facilities to clean up. She didn't plant any recorders or drop poison into the glass of water by his bed. Ulrek hadn't expected her to, though if she had, it would make it easier to terminate the contract.

He hated monitoring her like this. It felt wrong. But it was needed, not just for his safety but for that of his crew. They depended on him.

As things stood right now, Ulrek didn't know what to do, and that was a new feeling for him. He wanted to explore whatever was starting between him and Delaney, but he also knew that he couldn't afford any mistakes. This tiny little human female, who barely went up to his chest, was going to be the death of him.

Chapter 12

Delaney

Instead of inquiring at local flower shops and nurseries about job opportunities after picking up a set of suitable clothes, Delaney found herself heading straight to the New Colonist Housing building. She didn't even know if she could get out of the contract on the *New Horizon* yet, and it wasn't right to agree to a job only to back out of it later. She'd also spotted one of Craig's friends at The Shops.

She could face down Craig while there was someone on her side of the court, but if he caught her alone on the streets, and she couldn't get to a guard in time, she'd be in big trouble.

Also, she only had enough fucks to give to deal with one jackass a day, and she'd already used that fuck with Ulrek.

She scanned her comm at the door, and it let her in. She had a flashback of when she'd been brand new to Reka 5. This room wasn't much different from the one she'd had then, except back then, she'd been in a double with Craig.

The room had a single bed, sized somewhere between a twin and a double, but longer, since Talleans were taller. It had one table, one chair, and a single-door wardrobe for her clothes. The window had simple blinds.

That was it.

Basic. Barren. The point was to encourage those living in it to get a job and be a part of the colony. Since this colony consisted mostly of escaped slaves and others getting out of

bad situations, Reka 5 provided new colonists with essentials like food and housing for two planetary years. During that time, they were expected to work on integrating and becoming functional, productive members of society.

Once the two years were up, they were kicked out of the housing units, and if no one took them in, then they were out of the colony for good. Delaney remembered a woman who'd taken advantage of the free housing and meals, not believing the handouts would ever end, no matter how many times she was told. She'd gotten a one-way ticket to New Rhea.

People had protested, but rules were rules. The woman had spent two whole years doing nothing and living off the colony! Delaney thought Reka 5 was already extremely generous.

She felt really lucky that Angie got her a room here, but then again, she never used her full two years. She'd gotten a job at the greenhouse, and Craig found one in construction. They'd left the NCH and moved out together just one year later.

And now she was back.

There was a cafeteria on site, but she didn't remember the food being very good, so she stepped out again to grab some pre-made stuff from the nearby grocer. It was just across the street, and a guard patrolled around the building.

The selection of pre-made instant meals had grown since the last time she'd been here. It now boasted some very familiar-looking Earth-inspired goodies—samosas, slices of pizza, beef patties. Whoa, was that an egg salad sandwich? It was even cut into triangles.

She was sure it all only vaguely tasted like the real thing since most of the ingredients were substituted, but they sure could fool her with the presentation. The Earth finger foods sat next to Tallean meat skewers, sauce-covered dumplings, and fire-charred sweet doughs. It was a perfect representation of their uniquely mixed colony.

Delaney grabbed some fruit and a tray of still-warm meat skewers, paid for them, and headed back across the street. She was cutting across the green when she heard footsteps and realized someone was following her. She whipped around.

“Hello, wife.”

A cold chill ran down her spine, making her want to crawl into a hole and hide. But Craig was probably expecting her to freak out and start cowering. So she forced herself to stay calm and face him.

“Go away, Craig.” She surreptitiously looked around for the guard that usually patrolled the New Colonist area. Not there. Damn.

“If you think I believed that little charade with the Tallean captain, then you must think I’m stupid. Did you think I’d leave you alone because you’ve been sullied by aliens? I’m not that dumb.” He closed the gap between them. “You weren’t there *with* him. Angie walked you back here. The captain ended up bringing that Tallean bitch back to the docks.”

Wait. Ulia? Ulrek slept with Ulia before totally rocking Delaney’s world earlier today? Why was that, of all things, the part that she latched onto? And why did it piss her off?

Craig reached for her, but she danced out of his way. She noticed he had bandages wrapped around one of his wrists. The one Ulrek had twisted.

“You’re terrified of those Tallean monsters, always have been. I don’t believe you’ve miraculously gotten over your fear all of a sudden.”

He might be right about her spending last night alone — unlike a certain captain who would remain nameless—but he was wrong about her being terrified. She used to be, sure, but not anymore. Despite knowing who Captain Uzzar really was, Delaney wasn’t that afraid of him at all, though she really should be. She must be broken.

“Now come with me before I get angry.”

Delaney spotted the guard at last and started toward him, not bothering to reply to crazy.

“Don’t you dare walk away from me, bitch.” He grabbed her arm and yanked her down the path.

Delaney screamed as loud as she could. The guard was close enough; he’d hear.

“Fuck. Shut up!” Craig covered her mouth, but he was in such shock that she was fighting back and not cowering like she usually did that he didn’t hold her tightly.

Delaney did the only thing that came to mind. She kneed him as hard as she could in the balls. She screamed again the moment his palm left her mouth. Looking around wildly, she spotted the guard who was now hurrying their way, and Delaney stumbled toward him.

Now that help was here, Craig took off. He got into fights, but only when he was with his friends. And drunk. The guard looked back and forth between Delaney and Craig, trying to decide whether to get her to safety or give chase. He opted to stay with Delaney.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

Delaney rubbed her arm where Craig had grabbed her. It was a little sore, but not too much. “I’ll be fine.”

The guard looked her up and down. “You are not a new colonist.”

“No. But Angie put me in here because I’m trying to get away from—well, him.” She held up her groceries. “I thought it would be safe to go across the street to get some food.”

“I will accompany you next time,” the guard offered.

“Thank you. Appreciate it.”

Delaney returned to her room, her appetite completely gone. Her comm rang as she stepped inside, and she picked it up, glad to see Angie’s name on her screen.

“Hey, Angie. What’s up?” She stood in front of the mirror attached to the door of the wardrobe, rubbing her tender arm.

“I’ve got some good news. They bumped your application to dissolve your marriage to Craig to the front of the line after what happened at The Hideout. You’ve got Holden to thank for that; he’s dealt with Craig and his crew before. You’ll need to go down to the tribunal hall to sign the paperwork in person.”

“Oh, thank god! That ass-wipe just accosted me outside the building.”

“What?! Are you okay?”

“Yeah, the guard scared him away. I’ll go in first thing tomorrow morning.” Their office opened early, and she should be done in time to report to the *New Horizon*. Then, before she could chicken out again, she decided to tell Angie about Craig’s new friends. “Look, originally I was going to wait until I was safely away on the ship to report this, but I might as well tell you now. Craig and his friends have been meeting up with this group of people who call themselves the New Earth Militia.”

Angie grumbled. “Jeez. Not them again.”

Delaney blinked. “You know about them?”

“Yeah. Bunch of troublemakers. They want humans to kick out all the Talleans, take over Reka 5, and rename it New Earth.”

Yup. That was them all over.

“He dragged me to one of their meetings. It sounded serious. They were talking about attacking the colony council, and both your mates. They even mentioned stockpiling weapons. Craig has been part of so many of these hateful groups I don’t know which ones are crackpots and which to worry about anymore. I didn’t want to bother you and your mates with false alarms, but this group sounded bad. That

meeting was my wake-up call that I couldn't stay around Craig anymore."

"Thanks for letting me know. The NEM causes problems for us all the time. They mess with the colony's perimeter and defenses. The problem is, we don't actually know who's leading it. I'm surprised they let you into a meeting."

"Pfft. Technically, I was just the broad serving snacks. I don't think they considered me a person. They had strange views about women. They called them Mothers of New Earth." Delaney scrunched her nose at the memory. "It was weird. Like women were revered, but only because they gave birth to pure humans."

"And only 'clean' women, right?" Angie said in an exasperated tone. "The ones who are untouched by aliens."

"Yeah. I guess you've heard that one."

"Have I ever."

"Honestly, Angie, that's why I'd never marry a leader of any kind. It'd stress me out too much."

Angie was unperturbed. "The council makes most of the decisions now. I think my mates might want to give up the title soon and just take up jobs as guards, like Holden was before. They want more free time."

"They deserve that. They worked hard to make Reka 5 what it is now. Thanks for letting me know the good and the bad news. I'll head down first thing tomorrow to sign the papers. What about the contract? Any news on that?"

Angie blew out a breath. "Technically, the law is on his side. All the information on the contract is correct. You're hired by the ship, which is a separate business entity, not by the captain, so the captain's identity doesn't come into play. But it's Ulrek. The council has to be diplomatic, but they also hate his guts. Some think they should make this an exception, But others are worried they're setting a precedent of different laws for different people."

“Oof. I didn’t mean for things to get complicated. I can see how that’s a slippery slope.”

“They’re still debating. I’ll let you know when they reach an agreement.”

“Thanks, Angie. And I’ll be at the tribunal hall bright and early.”

Chapter 13

Delaney

After her run-in with Craig the previous evening, Delaney planned out her day to avoid the bastard as much as possible. Heading out to the tribunal hall early in the morning should be pretty safe since Craig would be on his way to his work on the other side of the colony.

Even then, she'd take the busiest routes so there would always be people around. After signing everything, her plan was to grab a transport and head straight to the docks. The docks were well-monitored, with cameras everywhere. Craig wouldn't be desperate enough to try something there.

Unfortunately, she never made it to the tribunal hall.

Most Reka 5 colonists called a colony transport if they needed to get from one place to another. It was like a cab, except you never needed to worry if the driver was ripping you off by driving around in circles while you were drunk because the transports were self-driving.

Privately-owned transports were very expensive since, unlike cars, they also had short flight capabilities. Craig and his buddies jointly owned one that looked like it was falling apart. Delaney didn't know where they went with it, but she did know that they'd gotten it for not-so-legal purposes. It was a beater, so when the luxury transport pulled up next to her, she wasn't worried.

It didn't look like the transports colonists used here, so Delaney assumed it was a visitor asking for directions, maybe a merchant, perhaps an investor here to check out the slew of new start-ups on the colony. Reka 5 had grown so much over the last few years.

Instead of being known just for amberberry wine, Reka 5 was now the home of Hullean Visions, a tech company that had their immersive simulator games in homes and on ships across the galaxy. Wildview Starliner company also had its headquarters here. Several big-name merchants had also settled down in the colony with their human mates. All this growth meant they had a lot more visitors. So the transport could have been anybody.

By the time the door opened and she saw Craig step out, it was too late. Delaney opened her mouth to scream, deciding that her best bet was to draw as much attention to the two of them as possible. But before she could make a sound, the back door opened, and Craig pushed her in, right into the waiting arms of his friend Eric. She struggled, but he covered her mouth with a cloth. Then everything went black.

Ulrek

Ulrek surveyed the front of the NCH building, trying to guess which room was Delaney's. She never showed up at his ship this morning, and it was almost midday. He'd asked for her at the front desk, but the moment he'd mentioned her name, security had turned from friendly and helpful to mistrustful and accusatory.

So now he was standing in front of her building. They wouldn't let him in? Fine. They couldn't stop him from waiting outside. Delaney had to leave her room eventually.

"What are you doing here?"

Ulrek turned to the familiar female voice. Angie stood with her hands on her hips.

"I am looking for Delaney. She was supposed to come to my ship this morning, but she never showed."

"Really?" Angie narrowed her eyes at him. "I wouldn't show either."

"She agreed to come." Ulrek leaned back on the tree.

"I don't believe it. I don't think she'd ever willingly step foot in your ship again."

"She was there yesterday. She diagnosed the issue with my greenroom, and she promised she'd come back today." He left out the part about their little challenge. Angie didn't need to know about that.

Angie picked up her comm. "I've got Captain Uzzar here. He's standing outside the NCH building and claims to be waiting for Delaney Torres. Apparently, she was on his ship yesterday and was supposed to return this morning but didn't." After a moment, she turned to Ulrek and asked, "When did she leave your ship?"

"Just after midday or so. She was going to The Shops. What's going on? Where is she?" A feeling of dread started

brewing in the pit of his stomach.

His thoughts went instantly to the male who'd confronted her the other day at the pub, then to the pair of humans they'd caught snooping around his hangar yesterday. They'd given them quite a scare, and Ulrek doubted they'd be back. Could he have been wrong?

Angie stuffed her comm back into her bag and pressed her lips in a thin line. "Delaney was supposed to go down to the hall to sign some papers. She never showed."

Ulrek let out a growl. "The male from the pub."

"Exactly. A guard chased him off here yesterday. We checked his work and home." Angie crossed her arms. "He's nowhere to be found."

"Then why are we just standing around? We are wasting our time."

"We?"

"She is my technician."

"Ha! That's what you think. They gave the verdict this morning. They're making a special exception for this case. The contract currently still stands, but she can end it anytime she wants. You can leave now."

Did she think Ulrek would abandon Delaney because of a silly verdict?

"Have you traced her comm?"

Angie frowned. "Did you hear me?"

"Yes. Why the fuck would I care about the verdict when Delaney is missing?"

She studied him for a second. "Her comm isn't traceable. Colonists like their privacy, you know."

Everyone on Ulrek's crew had tracers in their devices, and some even had locators embedded in their bodies. He did, Tuhror did. It was part of keeping everyone safe.

Ulrek pushed himself off the tree and started toward his transport. He'd taken it out today instead of walking since he'd been in such a hurry to see Delaney.

"Where are you going?"

"To find my—."

"She's not—"

"And I said I don't care."

Angie stopped at his personal transport. "You sat her in your lap the other night while she was tipsy."

"I did. I fed her too."

Surely the female understood what that meant; she was mated to not one but two strong warriors. It was part of Tallean courting, and something Ulrek hadn't understood until he'd suddenly gotten the urge to do it with Delaney. Between the inner planet females fighting for his attention and the ones given to him as gifts by the Dominion, he'd never had to court anyone before. Something about having her eat directly from his fingers gave him an enormous sense of satisfaction.

"That's worse."

"You do not have to like it. In any case, I'm going to look for her."

"Whatever," she huffed. "Do you even know where to start?"

"We were followed on our way to my ship yesterday. I found two human males poking around my ship afterward."

"Interesting. I'll see if anyone can identify them from the dock security feed."

"Get in my transport. I'll take you."

She eyed his transport warily, clearly still not trusting him.

"What are you afraid of? That I will abduct you again?" Ulrek wasn't sure Angie had left Earth as merchandise on the *Stellar Fortune*, or on one of the other ships. But it didn't

matter; no one ever remembered the names of the other captains.

He didn't blame her for hating him any more than he could blame Delaney and everyone else on this planet who wanted him dead. What nobody knew was that his flippant responses were how he coped with knowing everyone hated him.

"You're an ass, you know that?" She eyed the transport again. "Fine, but I'm comming my mates first."

As she did so, Ulrek got into the transport and contacted Tuhror. There were too many conflicting scents in the air for Ulrek to pick out Delaney's, but Tuhror might be able to. He didn't earn his reputation of being the Dominion's best tracker for no reason.

Then, he sent out her image to his entire crew, introducing her as their new greenroom technician and explaining that she'd gone missing overnight. He asked that the whole crew keep an eye out. If she was still on the planet—and she was, since none of the ships at the dock had moved—they'd find her.

The transport door opened, and Angie got in.

"They are meeting us there now."

Delaney

Delaney blinked at the unfamiliar ceiling. She was still in the transport, and a bright light was shining into her eyes. She put a hand up to shade them, and someone moved the light off her. She blinked a few times, and two Tallean males came into view.

What the fuck? She could have sworn it had been Craig and Eric who'd attacked her, but the two towering over her now were clearly Tallean.

They were both huge. One was a little shorter than the other, but he looked like he'd compensated for that by spending every waking moment at a gym. The guy was built like a tank. The taller one had a giant scar that ran across his face.

Everything about them screamed Dominion, though they clearly weren't military. Delaney tried to pinpoint it: perhaps the mix of the clothing style and the way they had their hair cropped. Regardless, they didn't belong on Reka 5.

They pulled her out of the transport and into the Reka 5 wilderness. It had been overcast when she left for the tribunal hall this morning, but now large trees shaded out the sun.

She had no idea how long she'd been unconscious, but she was parched.

Two things that caught her attention immediately were the run-down dome-like structure directly in front of them and the shuttle parked next to it. Was that a bunker? Hadn't the New Earth crazies talked about finding old bunkers in the wilderness and using them as their hideouts?

"Sit." Tank pointed to a knee-high rock.

Delaney did as she was told. She had no idea where they were, and running might be more dangerous than staying if she encountered a pack of dragus, or a coilbeast. The wilds of Reka 5, the planet and not the colony that is, were not a place

to go on vacation unless your idea of fun was fighting off giant man-eating monsters. For some Tallean males, it was. But Delaney was not a Tallean male.

Tank handed her a pouch of packaged water. "Drink."

She squeezed the pouch experimentally. Nothing came out. Sealed. It should be safe. Also, she was extremely thirsty. She twisted off the top and squeezed the contents into her mouth. It was warm from being in the heat, but it quenched her thirst.

"Now talk," Tank said.

"What do you want me to say?" Delaney asked.

"Stop pretending. We know who he is," said Scarface.

The device in her ears translated the strange accent. It sounded almost familiar, and Delaney frowned as she tried to place it.

"Who are you talking about?" She blinked a few times, trying to look innocent.

Delaney had already guessed these thugs were here for Ulrek, but she played dumb. If they knew, then why did they need her to confirm it? As much as she hated Ulrek, she hated the Dominion even more. If Ulrek were to get his just desserts, she wanted to see it happen at the hands of all the humans he'd stolen from Earth, not the people he'd stolen them for.

Tank sidled closer. "We will make it worth your while. We'll share his bounty with you, and you won't need to sleep with him to earn credits."

They thought she was sleeping with Ulrek for money?

"Bounty? I don't understand." Yeah, keep playing dumb. They thought she was a dumb bitch, so that was what they'd get.

"You've been inside the *New Horizon* twice. He met you and your friends at the baths. At the bar, he said you were

there with him. We know you're fucking him."

"Captain Uzzar's got a bounty on him? That's impossible. He's friends with the directors; they were right there at the pub with us."

The two exchanged a look; then the short, tanky one pulled the scarred one aside. "The bitch doesn't know anything," he hissed. "Maybe we followed the wrong ship."

That accent. Delaney was starting to place it. These guys were from the inner planets. Definitely loyal to the Dominion.

"No." Scarface looked utterly sure of himself. "That ship has to be the *Revenge*. They can rename and repaint it all they want, but I know it's the one."

"You said you were sure they were sharing sex. She doesn't even smell like him."

"But why else would a female visit the ship?"

Was this guy for real? *Why else?* He must be one of those idiots who thought women couldn't work on spaceships. Most Tallean females preferred not to spend a lot of time in space, but it wasn't unheard of, although now that she thought of it, the Dominion only had men in their army.

"Maybe it was the other female. The sexy Tallean one," Tank said.

He must be referring to Ulia.

"No. That one went with the human. They rented a room. She never boarded the ship."

Oh! Ulia went with Gavin! She hadn't been with Ulrek at all. Despite everything that was going on, Delaney's heart did a little happy dance. Ugh! She was so screwed.

Tank stomped over to Delaney and lifted her up into the air. "Why were you on the ship?"

She blinked, not sure whether she should continue letting them think she was there to sleep with the captain.

“We know you were there. Our scouts watched you leave with him,” Scarface said insistently.

She decided to be partially honest. “I was hired to fix the greenroom while the *New Horizon* is docked.”

Tank pressed his lips together for a long moment before bursting into laughter. “It *is* the right ship! It has to be the *Revenge*. I knew it. A temporary hire wouldn’t know anything.”

Shit. Somehow, saying she was hired for the greenroom had helped confirm it. How had they known Ulrek needed a technician?

“Know anything about what?” Delaney wanted to figure out exactly what these assholes knew.

“While you were on the ship,” Tank asked her, “was there anything there that led you to believe the captain isn’t who he says he is?”

Delaney frowned, hoping it looked convincing. Some Talleans could smell lies, but since she was nervous in general, perhaps it would be blended with her fear. Still, she decided to be as truthful as possible. “The credits came in from the *New Horizon*. That’s all that matters to me. I can show you the transfer.”

“Fuck this. We are wasting time.” Scarface turned to her. “Give me your comm.”

Delaney dug it out of her pocket, and he snatched it from her.

“We’ll call Ulrek ourselves and see what he says.”

Chapter 14

Ulrek

Ulrek sat behind the glass and watched as Holden questioned the pair of humans. He didn't understand why the colony director was using so much restraint. If it were him, arms and fingers would be broken already, and the idiots would be spilling everything, including their guts.

He got up, impatient. "Let me in there. I'll have them talking now. Delaney is out there, and we need to get to her."

Ryek barked a laugh. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you cared for the female."

"I care about my greenroom. I need her to fix it."

"Ah, your greenroom. Of course." The male smirked.

"Let me at them for just two minutes."

"You know you can't permanently maim them, right? They are still Reka 5 colonists."

"Fine." Ulrek had other ways to make them talk. Lips got loose when people thought they were going to die. "But I'm going to tell them you released them to me for messing with my ship yesterday. And I'm going to make them think I can do whatever I want."

"You have two galactic minutes." He pressed a button to talk to Holden, calling him out of the room.

Holden, the more bloodthirsty of the two, was thrilled with the idea. "Why couldn't we do that? I hate all this playing nice."

“Because we don’t know if they are guilty yet, and until we do, we still have a reputation to uphold.”

Holden made a face like he could care less about his reputation. Ryek had always been the more diplomatic one. It hid a fierce protector, and Ulrek knew that when it came down to it, Ryek was the more dangerous.

He hadn’t needed two minutes. The two idiots spilled everything in one.

They’d been paid to follow her by two Talleans who were visiting the colony. They didn’t explain much, except that it was something about the captain of a ship and a bounty. After they were caught yesterday, the Talleans hired two others to replace them. The humans had no idea Delaney had gone missing.

Ulrek didn’t sense they were lying. He stomped out of the room, frustrated at not being any closer to Delaney. They let the two males go, since it wasn’t a crime to simply follow someone around.

“Fuck!” Ulrek pounded his fist on the table.

Those two were here for him, and Delaney had gotten caught in the crossfire.

“Don’t break the furniture, Captain Uzzar,” Ryek said dryly. He didn’t look particularly angry. “I have one of my males looking through all the security feed from cameras on the route from the NCH building to the tribunal hall right now. They’ll find something eventually.”

Ulrek’s comm buzzed on his belt. He picked up without looking at the screen, expecting it to be Tuhror or one of his crew with information.

“Ulrek, so we meet again.”

He stiffened at the male voice speaking in the Tallean dialect used most often on the inner Dominion planets. “This is Uzzar of the *New Horizon*. You must have the wrong contact.”

“That’s not what the female we have here says.”

He checked the comm. Delaney’s contact stared back at him on the screen. Had Delaney really given up his identity? Delaney might claim to hate him, but she hated the Dominion more. He doubted she’d give him up to them. These guys were relying on him giving himself away.

He would too, but not now. They’d know who he was, all right...right before they stopped breathing. And if they’d hurt Delaney in any way, he’d make sure they died very slowly.

“You must be mistaken. Release my greenroom technician. She’s late reporting to work.” He hoped that came across as nonchalant. It was best if they thought he didn’t care about her as anything more than a ship asset.

“We could, but she’d probably get eaten by a coilbeast trying to find her way back. We have a better idea: come get her yourself. Alone. And don’t think you can secretly bring your crew; we have the area monitored. If we see more than a single ground transport, your female is dead.”

“My female? Is that what she told you?” Ulrek highly doubted that. “She’s my greenroom technician.”

“We don’t care. Come for her if you want to see her again.”

The male disconnected the call, and a message with map coordinates popped up on the screen.

Holden stood with his arms crossed. He’d heard the call right through the speakers, as had Ryek. Angie was the only one who looked confused.

“One transport, huh? They underestimate how many can fit inside one vehicle.” Holden was clearly itching for a fight.

“No. This is my problem. They are here for me. It is best if the colony does not get involved in any official capacity.”

“He is correct. There will be other fights where you can stretch your fangs.” Ryek put a hand affectionately on Holden’s shoulder. “The wilds of Reka 5 are a dangerous place. It is truly a shame when those who choose to land

there in secret and unprepared meet their doom at the claws of the beasts that roam there.”

Ulrek grinned. “Indeed. Lots of dangerous beasts that leave no trace of their prey, save for their shuttles, which the authorities will find too late.”

The director smiled right back. “A real shame.”

It was a good trade. They stayed out of Ulrek’s business while he cleaned up his mess, and in return, the bounty hunter’s shuttles and transport would become part of the colony’s fleet. It was a win-win for everyone.

He started out the door, sending Tuhror the new information.

“What’s going on?” Angie demanded.

“We’ll explain later, Trouble,” Ryek said. “Delaney will be fine.”

Ulrek sure hoped so. As for the ones who took her? He hoped they’d gotten a good look at the sunrise this morning because they would never see another one again.

Delaney

Delaney stared daggers at Craig as he walked out from the bunker with his friend.

“I knew it! I knew you weren’t sleeping with that alien.” Craig looked practically giddy. “A technician for some plant shit. I should’ve guessed. I should never have let you take those extra courses.”

Delaney put on her best I’m-not-scared-of-you-anymore face. It was easier than she thought, probably because those Tallean thugs who’d just stepped back into their shuttle were much scarier than him.

“I can’t believe you’ve stooped so low as to work for the Dominion, Craig. They don’t even have the right guy.”

“Nah, not the Dominion. Just some random bounty hunters. Besides, who cares if it’s not the right guy as long as I get paid.” Hearing a notification, he took his comm out of his pocket. “And there’s the first part of the payment right now.” He sneered. “I was waiting to see what you said before deciding what to do with you. If you’d slept with that monster, I would’ve left you here for the coilbeasts. But since you didn’t, we’re going home.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” Delaney said. “I’d rather stay with the coilbeasts.” At least that part was true.

Behind him, Eric laughed. “See, man. I told you Vicky wasn’t worth it. She’s only interested if you’re taken. You’ve lost a good, pure-blooded woman in this one, Craig. Jake and Nate followed her yesterday, and they said two humans came out with the captain. Half the *New Horizon*’s crew is human. Isn’t that right, Dee?”

Delaney wasn’t sure what he was getting at. The *New Horizon* didn’t hide the fact that it was a mixed ship. “Yeah. So?”

“See? I told ya.”

“Whatever.” Craig waved the comment off. “I’m just happy they fucked up and got caught, and these alien freaks hired us for the job instead.” He started toward Delaney. “Now get back in that transport.”

Delaney backed away. “No.” If Ulrek was on his way, she was going to do anything to delay leaving. He was going to have to drag her back, kicking and screaming.

“It wasn’t a yes or no question.” He tried to grab her, but she darted out of his way.

Eric sniggered, then came to stand between her and Craig. “You fucked up, bro. She doesn’t want you anymore.” He kept his eyes on Craig but spoke to Delaney. “You can come home with me, Dee. I won’t cheat on you, or break your shit, or knock you around. I’ve been waiting so long for you to finally come to your senses. I’ll be so good to you, I promise. Way better than him.”

Delaney gawked. Eric was supposedly Craig’s best friend, though Craig often talked shit about him behind his back. Delaney never had any idea he felt that way about her.

“You son of a—” Craig lunged for Eric.

To Delaney’s surprise, Eric pulled a blaster from his messenger bag and pointed it at Craig. “Get back.”

Craig blinked in shock but slowly obeyed.

“More. Right up against that tree,” Eric ordered. “Delaney, it was his idea to drug you. I just planned on bringing you here to talk to the aliens. It took you so long to wake up. I was worried. You could’ve died.”

“That’s fucking bullshit, you back-stabbing piece of shit. You’re supposed to be my *friend*.”

“You fucked Trish! At least I waited until Delaney left you.”

Trish had briefly been Eric’s girlfriend. Craig had cheated on Delaney with her too?

“Whatever, man,” Craig said. “Trish was a slut who fucked everyone.”

Delaney felt sick to her stomach. She’d never go back to Craig, and Eric wasn’t much better. He was the one who got Craig into the New Earth bullshit in the first place.

Suddenly, Craig lunged, grabbing Eric’s weapon, which went flying to the ground. Eric threw a punch, and the two were soon brawling on the leaf litter like two Tasmanian Devils.

With the two otherwise occupied, Delaney quietly crept toward the trees. There were dragus and coilbeasts out there, but maybe she didn’t need to go too far. None had attacked yet, so there must be a sonar repellent somewhere. The trees were thick in this area; all she needed to do was get lost behind a few.

She ducked behind a tree and made her way around the shuttle. The two were still fighting when the taller of the two aliens stomped out from the vessel. Scarface pulled the two apart and hit one of them hard.

“Stupid humans. You want the rest of your credits? Don’t fight until after we have Ulrek in our shuttle.” He stepped aside, and Delaney saw that Craig had a nosebleed.

Tank poked his head out from the shuttle. “Where is the female?”

Scarface sniffed the air. He turned and tromped toward Delaney’s hiding spot.

Chapter 15

Ulrek

Ulrek watched the mercenary drag Delaney by the hair into the middle of the clearing. There were two Talleans and two humans. One of the humans was Delaney's useless ex-mate. He didn't recognize the other one.

He'd taken his personal transport but stopped just out of range of their sensors and had proceeded on foot to assess the situation. It was the perfect opportunity to use the personal cloaking suit he'd invested in several years ago, right before he left the Dominion. At the time, the technology was so new that he was sure he had snagged the only one. Now, these suits were available for anyone with enough credits.

Unlike the disguise, which could only modify what was there, the personal cloak made him completely undetectable, both visually and olfactorily. This allowed him to get close enough to survey the situation. It also got past any sensors that relied on visual movement, such as the ones these bounty hunters were using now.

He recognized them. These two mercs-cum-bounty hunters weren't working alone; Gritarr was funding their missions for a cut of the bounty. What these idiots didn't realize was that they wouldn't see a single credit. Once they did all the dirty work, Gritarr would have them quietly removed from the equation. Ulrek had run into them in New Rhea; it had been the reason he'd left early.

Gritarr must really want or need the bounty on Ulrek's head to have his lackeys come all the way to Reka 5. This colony was as far away from Dominion space as you could get.

He'd been watching long enough to know that it was just the two of them plus the two human males. How nice of Delaney's former lover to ally himself with these idiots. Now Ulrek could get rid of them all at once.

Ulrek grinned, his jaws itching to extend. It had been a while since he'd had a good fight, and he did love a proper brawl.

He waited for the soon-to-be-dead male to release Delaney first, throwing her to the ground. Stars, he was going to pay for that, and every other mark on her body. With Delaney safely out of the male's grasp, Ulrek pressed the tiny button at his neckline, toggling off the cloak, and stepped into the clearing. He still had the disguise in place and looked like Captain Uzzar. That would change soon.

His appearance took the two Talleans off guard. A moment of shock registered on their faces, but they recovered quickly.

"Look, the captain has finally decided to join us," said the taller one with the scar.

"You wanted to see me. Here I am."

"Let's do away with the disguises, shall we? Your female told us everything." This time it was the shorter but much more muscular one.

Ulrek highly doubted it, considering the angry look on Delaney's face.

"She told you nothing. But you have me anyway." Ulrek reached for the device around his neck, toggling off the disguise.

He could almost see the credits dancing in the bounty hunters' eyes. Just as he'd thought, they hadn't been completely positive who he was and had been looking for

confirmation. Well, they wouldn't have long to celebrate the fact that they'd gotten it.

"Ha! I knew it," said the scarred one to the shorter one. "You owe me a case of Rhean spirits." Then he drew his weapon.

Ulrek charged, tackling him and knocking the blaster out of his hand before kicking it and sending it into the trees.

"Fight me properly," Ulrek growled. "Fight me like a real Tallean warrior." He backed away and let the male recover.

It wasn't fun to kill them too quickly.

The male struggled back to his feet, his jaws unhinging as the first moments of bloodlust took over.

Ulrek laughed, eager to let his beast out to play. His fangs descended from their usual half-retracted position, and the crease at his cheeks unfolded. He roared at his opponent, opening his jaws impossibly wide.

Adrenaline coursed through his system, sharpening his senses. He loved this feeling. Everything was better, stronger, when he was like this. He could see clearer, smell better, and his reflexes were beyond compare. He craved action. Violence.

He scanned his playground. Both his opponents had embraced their bloodlust too. One of the humans searched in the leaf litter for something, perhaps a weapon. Delaney had gotten out of harm's way, hiding behind the shuttle, her eyes wide as she watched him.

Wonderful. He loved it even more when he had an audience. And when the violence was over, Delaney would get down on her knees and thank him for the rescue. Ulrek couldn't wait.

The taller Tallean attacked first, but he was slow, and Ulrek moved easily out of his way. He sent out a fist, catching the male on the side of his head. But Tallean skulls were made to handle a few blows. The male whipped around, punching. Too

slow. But the other mercenary had joined the fight, lashing out with his feet, his claws extended.

Ulrek rolled, but the claws grazed his skin. Two thin red lines appeared on his shoulder.

“First blood,” the male taunted him, looking smug.

Ulrek wasn't worried. First blood didn't mean anything; it was the last that determined the winner.

They came at him at once, punching and kicking. As he kicked the stocky one away, the one with the scar grabbed hold of Ulrek's head and bashed it against the side of the bunker. Ulrek punched him in the face, and his attacker staggered back.

He seized his opportunity and tackled him to the ground. His opponent fought back, snarling, his sharp teeth snapping shut an inch from Ulrek's face. Ulrek kicked him, claws out, and caught him on the side; four parallel slashes opened up, and blood gushed out. He looked up just in time to see a boulder hurtling his way.

Fuck! He wouldn't be able to get out of the way in time. He thought fast, even as the scarred one clawed at his face. He angled his body, used the other male as a shield, and braced for the impact.

The boulder smashed into him, knocking the air from his lungs. Those who claimed one couldn't feel pain when in bloodlust were lying. You could. But pain didn't feel the same; it only strengthened a fighter's anger, adding fuel to the fire that burned within.

“Ulrek!” Delaney's scream pierced through the air.

His female was watching, and she was worried for him. Did Delaney not know who he was? A simple boulder could not stop him. But her fear was real, and the scent of it reached his nose.

It was sweet. Enticing. The perfect prize for when he won this fight.

With a roar, he shoved the cracked rock aside, but his adversary was already upon him. The bigger male grabbed him by the throat, throttling him. But with both hands on Ulrek's throat, he couldn't defend himself. Ulrek grabbed a stone and bashed his opponent in the face with it again and again, and the hands around his throat loosened.

The other male backed away, blood from his wounds streaking down his face and neck.

The sound of blaster fire rang out before a beam of energy passed so close to Ulrek that it singed the tips of his hair. One of the humans had found a blaster and was shooting at him. Ulrek grabbed hold of a large branch that had fallen and flung it at his attackers.

They cursed and tried to dive out of the way. No such luck. The branch hit them, pinning them to the ground. The blaster flew out of the male's hand.

But now the other Tallean was on him again. Ulrek bit down on the other's shoulder, tearing out a chunk of flesh. The male howled but refused to back down. Punches rained down on Ulrek's face as they struggled, but his opponent was wild now, and not using his brain to fight. Some of the punches found their mark, but most of them missed.

His enemy was tiring, and Ulrek took full advantage of it, heaving the other's head against a rock. The giant male went limp for a fraction of a second. That was all Ulrek needed. Moments later, Ulrek stood with his boot on the mercenary's chest, his claws digging into his throat.

The gurgling only lasted a second as the claws tore into the windpipe and crunched through the spinal cord beneath. It was over. The urge to behead him and hold his head up like a trophy was strong, but the two human males had freed themselves from the branch and were trying to sneak around him to the transport.

They froze when he turned his gaze on them.

Ulrek struggled to refold his cheek crease and retract his fangs. His keen nose had detected the scent of an approaching coilbeast, and that meant he needed to get Delaney to safety. Now.

He needed live bait to keep the creature distracted, and the two humans would do nicely.

With the blood already spilled, the lust part of the bloodlust was ruling him now. He needed Delaney. Needed her underneath him. Needed to bury himself in her. It was a natural reaction to the violence, and he wasn't going to fight it.

He was going to *revel* in it.

Delaney was his prize for this fight. He knew she was still watching from behind the shuttle.

"Come out, Delaney," Ulrek said, trying his best to enunciate through the enlarged fangs and extended jaw.

She poked her head out from behind the shuttle, looking small and sweet. She smelled it too, her fear mingling with her delicate natural scent. Was it fear from watching the fight, or the abduction before? Or was it of him? He must look terrifying with his enemy's blood all over his face.

He scanned the area, spotting a flask atop the transport. Keeping an eye on the two humans, he picked it up and uncapped it. It wasn't water, but alcohol would do just fine. He poured the spirit into his mouth and over his face and throat, letting it rinse away the red.

When he turned back to Delaney, she was glancing over at the two human males. Anger spiked, and blood roared in his ears. He wanted to go crush them just because she'd looked their way, but the coilbeast was almost here.

"Do not look at them, Delaney," he growled. "Come to me. Now."

Chapter 16

Delaney

Go to a terrifying Tallean male still half in the throes of bloodlust, who was probably going to fuck her silly the moment he had her, or to Craig and Eric? It wasn't a difficult choice.

Delaney hurried over to Ulrek. He wrapped an arm possessively around her, pulling her body against his. He licked the cut she'd gotten on her face when Scarface had thrown her on the ground, and Delaney squeaked, not expecting it. Did he just taste her blood? She should be creeped out, but she wasn't.

Because Ulrek in full bloodlust had been magnificent. Delaney didn't know what the fuck was wrong with her, but now she wanted the dangerous captain more than ever. She must have a few screws loose.

He was a ruthless killer; she'd just witnessed it with her own two eyes, and yet her body insisted he was the one for her.

"Dee, you don't have to do this," Eric said.

Delaney ignored him and grabbed Ulrek's arm. "Let's get out of here, please."

"Fucking traitor!" Craig snarled. He ran toward them, a knife in his hand.

Ulrek moved fast, putting Delaney behind him and grabbing Craig's charging body, redirecting it so that he smashed into the side of the bunker.

“Close your eyes, Delaney,” Ulrek ordered.

Delaney blinked a few times, but she was in too much shock to keep them closed.

Ulrek picked Craig up, much like the way he did that day at the bar. “You were right. I have not yet fucked Delaney. But I will now. I will take her again, and again, and she will love every moment of it. I will fuck her until she forgets you ever existed.”

A shudder ran through Delaney’s body. The words were a little unclear because his jaw was still partly unhinged, but every ounce of meaning came through loud and clear.

Ulrek threw Craig to the ground. He stepped on his leg, digging talons into his flesh. Craig screamed as they tore through the muscles and tendons. Ulrek dragged him over to a tree and picked up the knife Craig had dropped on the ground. He stabbed it through Craig’s hand and into the tree trunk. Craig screamed again.

“I’m not going to kill you,” Ulrek said, his voice low and dangerous.

Right now, Ulrek looked and sounded exactly like the monster Delaney had thought he was when they first met. Except he was *her* monster. He’d come to her rescue. And that made all the difference.

“No,” Ulrek continued. “I need you alive. The coilbeast is hungry, and it’s almost here. You’re the appetizer.”

Craig began crying, pleading for his life. Delaney doubted Ulrek cared. She didn’t either. Let him die. If that made her a villain too, then so be it.

Eric was trying to make a run for it, but Ulrek grabbed his blaster from his belt and shot him in the shoulder. He fell, screaming.

Ulrek turned back to Delaney. The predatory gleam was still in his eyes as he prowled toward her. Her every instinct told her to run, but Delaney held still, fighting the urge. He

holstered his blaster before swooping her up into his arms. "Let's go, my Star, before the coilbeast arrives."

Delaney smelled the monster first, almost gagging at the stench of decay as the coilbeast crashed through the trees toward them. She gaped at the nightmare.

Coilbeasts were like giant, thick serpents with legs. They had low-slung bodies and claws that made the talons on Tallean feet look like toys. Their metallic scales acted as armor. It made them very hard to kill.

This one whomped across the ground toward them on its short, stumpy legs. The creature focused first on Eric, then on Craig. It swung its reptilian head side to side, sizing up its dinner, debating which one to eat first.

Eric and Craig both pressed their mouths shut, but it was too late. They already had the hostile beast's attention.

Delaney's eyes went wide. She was about to watch them be eaten, and for some awful reason, her eyes refused to close. But just as the creature attacked, Ulrek moved to block the sight with his body. Delaney only heard the screaming.

"I told you to close your eyes," Ulrek tutted as he carried her through the forest.

"I couldn't." She barely recognized the tiny voice that came out as hers.

They came to a sleek silver transport and Ulrek stepped inside, closing the door behind them. The transport was spacious and had two rows of seats facing each other, with a narrow table in the middle.

He settled Delaney in her seat, then pressed a button on the table, which lowered until it was recessed in the floor. Then he knelt in front of her, his hands running up and down her body to look for injuries. His fingers touched her cheek, where a sharp rock had cut her. A low growl sounded from his chest.

She touched his hand gently. "It's okay. I'm fine."

His cheek crease slowly folded back into place while she watched and, curious, she reached up and ran a finger along it. That earned her another growl, and his eyes turned feral again.

“Delaney.” Ulrek pinned her to the seat as it reclined. With the other hand, he grabbed her shirt and pulled down, ripping it. Then his mouth was all over her, devouring and kissing everywhere he could.

Delaney’s heart pounded in her chest as she considered what usually happened after a fight, especially when a Tallean had gone into bloodlust. Yet she wanted this. She wanted Ulrek. No matter how scary he was. How could she not, after he’d come to her rescue?

She forced herself to stay still as he fisted the waistband of her pants with both hands and shredded it. The sound of ripping fabric was loud in the shuttle. Then he was shoving his own pants down. A massive cock sprang out.

Delaney swallowed hard. Even if he didn’t want to hurt her, fucking her too roughly with that could definitely hurt. His fangs and jaw were back to normal, but his eyes still had that feral look. She hoped he had regained enough control to go slow.

Kneeling on the shuttle floor, he grabbed her knees and hauled her to the edge of the seat.

“Ulrek,” she whimpered, suddenly scared he was going to shove it in right away. “Kiss me,” she urged. “Please.”

He did, but not on her mouth; he kissed her body instead. His tongue explored every inch of her skin and teased erotically over her nipples. She felt every vibration when a needy growl escaped from him. Her body responded instantly.

His hands reached up to cup her breasts as his mouth moved to drag his sharp fangs across her collarbone. There was no gentleness as he palmed her sensitive breasts. He pinched her nipples hard, and she yelped with the delicious, erotic pain. The sound only made Ulrek more excited. He

reached up high to grab her throat. Delaney heard a loud, lusty moan, only to realize it had come from her.

His cock was pressed against her slit, sliding against the wetness there. It sent a shockwave of pleasure through her and she bucked her hips eagerly, wanting more. She wrapped her legs around him and rolled her hips. The length of his cock slid up and down her slit again, bumping up against her clit. She shuddered in anticipation. Ulrek bucked his hips, rubbing against her again and again until the head of his cock lodged in her opening. He paused and snarled, then thrust. His broad head sank in, and Delaney gasped.

“Fuck.” Ulrek blinked, and that wild look was back, making his green eyes glow.

He thrust again, sinking in another inch, and Delaney’s eyes went wide. Holy fuck. He was incredibly thick and ridiculously hard.

Her hands pushed at his chest, trapped beneath him. “Oh god,” she panted. “I don’t think I—”

She choked on her words when his thumb found her clit and mercilessly rubbed it in tight circles. He rocked his hips, sinking a little deeper with each movement. It was intense, the sensation walking the line between pleasure and pain. Needing something to hold onto, she grabbed at his arms.

It happened on the next thrust as he sank in another few inches. The climax tore through her, surprising her with how fast it had come. There had been no warning. Her whole body shook as he released her clit and braced his elbow next to her hand for leverage.

Then he was thrusting into her, the new wetness easing his way. Delaney screamed as he sank into her to the hilt, the pleasure-pain blinding her.

She’d never been filled like this before, stretched to her limit, riding a wave of bliss that refused to end. She felt every rigid, magnificent inch of him inside, claiming her, impaling her.

“Mine,” he growled. “All mine.”

“Yes!” Damn, that was so hot.

His movements were almost frantic. She welcomed every growl and snarl that surged from his throat. She should be terrified of them, but she wasn't. They were so freaking sexy. Ulrek was a monster, yes. But he was *her* monster.

She was climbing again, the pleasure coiling inside her like a spring, ready to explode. It was too much. Delaney cried out, her body shaking and jerking violently as another climax stole her ability to do anything but surrender to her pleasure as the rush came.

Chapter 17

Ulrek

Ulrek reached for his comm, turning off the alert. Whatever it was could wait until he'd had his fill of Delaney. They were back on his ship, and the blasted alert had just interrupted their cuddling.

Delaney gasped from behind him. "What happened?"

Ulrek knew what she was looking at. He'd been lowkey hiding that scar from her until now. He knew how bad it looked. It covered a good portion of the right side of his back.

"Fire," he replied. He knew he couldn't hide it forever. "Two years ago, here on Reka 5."

He sat back down on his bed, and a still nude Delaney knelt next to him, gingerly tracing the pattern with her fingertips.

"I can't believe I never noticed this till now."

"My disguise hides it when I'm Captain Uzzar. The injury is known to the Dominion and would be a sure tell."

"Does it still hurt?"

"No." But it had for a long fucking time.

"You said two years ago. Was it during the Dominion attack?"

"Yes." He wondered if she knew he'd been fighting on their side and not the Dominion's.

“Angie said you fought for us. I knew she wouldn’t lie to me, but I still didn’t really believe it. You did, didn’t you? You got this fighting for Reka 5.”

He shrugged, pretending he really didn’t care as that familiar sense of despair and frustration filled him again. “Not that it matters.”

“Oh. Why not?” She removed her hand from his back. “Do you regret coming to our aid?”

“No.”

“Then why doesn’t it matter?”

“I’m not going to lie to you and say that I came to Reka 5 to make up for what I’d done to the people here. It crossed my mind a few times. But the truth was, I had a ship full of humans and Talleans who wanted nothing more than to see the Dominion burn. They wanted revenge, and so did I.”

“I appreciate the honesty,” Delaney said. “Truthfully, I’d never have believed it if you said you did it for a good cause.”

“And you’ll tell me to my face.”

“Yup.”

“We drove off the Dominion, but I lost a ship that day and, along with it, many good males.” Ulrek took a shaky breath, remembering that moment when he’d realized that he’d been leading with his feelings, and that was deadly. They’d gotten their revenge, but at what cost?

It wasn’t until after he’d spent more time in the outer planets that he’d started wondering if he could make up for the things he’d done to the people here. Though Ulrek wouldn’t admit it out loud, he and his crew did everything under the guise of revenge. Things were easier that way.

“I offered Ryek and Holden my continued support. My fleet is at their disposal should another attack come.” He clenched his hands in tight fists, knowing that it wasn’t enough. Even if he sacrificed his life at the next Dominion attack, people would still hate him. “I know you probably don’t believe it,

but I spent my whole life trying to follow the right path. I tried to live up to my sire's legacy and make my mother happy spreading the Goddess' love."

Ulrek couldn't miss the scowl on Delaney's face.

"See. Your reaction says it all. Now that I've been out here and see another way of living, I understand. But back then, the Goddess was all I had. I know it doesn't excuse my actions in your eyes, but I hadn't known any other life. As far as I can remember, the bells would ring, and I'd get on my knees and pray to Her. Anyone who didn't know Her was pitied and needed to be saved."

Ulrek didn't know Delaney's scowl could get worse, but it did.

"I see now how fanatical that sounds, but I believed that shit for years. I'd known since the moment I learned my name that I'd be expected to follow in my father's footsteps and be Her sword. There'd been no other choice. I lived my whole life trying to make them happy, trying to be the best son. In the academy, we were taught to be ruthless. Cruel. It was a virtue. I rose through the ranks, becoming a decorated captain like it was expected of me."

"Then what happened? Because something did. You didn't switch sides for nothing."

Ulrek told her about finding out the Dominion had orchestrated his father's demise and used it to garner support and donations and to inspire a new generation of recruits and how they had planned the same for him. Ulrek had been funneling credits and resources away so he could strike out on his own.

"But it wasn't just that. I was starting to question everything I knew. After I left, I contacted my mother and told her the truth. I wanted to bring her with me. She didn't believe me. She was more upset at the fact that I was no longer in the Goddess' arms."

“I’m sorry. Do you still believe in the Goddess? I’m guessing no since I haven’t seen you pray to her. At the hotel where they had me working before, everyone made a show of it, dropping to their knees dramatically every time the bell rang.”

“I don’t know when I stopped believing. I did all of the Dominion’s dirty work while the Favored sat in the palaces. I started to question what I’d been taught. Somewhere along the way, it became clear to me that the Dominion only wanted to spread the Goddess’ teaching to planets with resources they wanted.”

“Like Earth,” Delaney said. She narrowed her eyes at him. “Which *you* raided.”

“I did. By that time, I was already planning my escape. I couldn’t let my plan slip, and I needed the extra credit. So I followed my orders like the perfect mindless captain I was supposed to be. So, in that regard, I am every bit the villain you cast me. If I’d left early, I wouldn’t have been on the *Stellar Fortune*. But all the Tallean in the outer planet would still hate me.”

“And if you’d left the Dominion early, what would’ve happened?”

“I probably would’ve died or gotten caught.”

And Tuhror, Kirek, Berus, and everyone else wouldn’t have gotten out, but Ulrek didn’t mention that. Those were their stories to tell, not his. The Dominion’s plan had included sacrificing part of Ulrek’s crew, the ones loyal to him. He’d promised to do anything in his power to get them out. The extra credits had been to ensure everyone got out alive. He hadn’t escaped and built an army on his own.

“What about Earth?”

There was no good in lying. “Another captain would have gone in my stead. As it stands, I wasn’t the only captain making those runs. Just the most infamous.”

She pinned him with a look.

“I’m not excusing what I did. I did a lot of questionable things, but it’s the only reason I’m still alive today, so I can’t exactly regret it. But I’m not proud of it either.”

Back then, he hadn’t cared who he’d had to step on to make those credits. Life had been so much easier when Ulrek hadn’t cared for anyone except for those he considered his inner circle. But a pesky thing called morals had set hold since he’d started this new life.

Ulrek took a deep breath. “I’m sorry for taking you from Earth.”

He wasn’t so naïve to believe she’d accept his apology and forgive him, but he still had to say it.

After a long silence, she spoke, but she didn’t reply to his apology. Instead, she said, “I was one of the first ones taken. I heard things got really bad on Earth after.”

“They did. The Dominion did what they usually do when a planet tries to fight back: leveling entire cities, poisoning the water, mass public executions, anything to scare the people into obeying. It didn’t work. You humans just got angrier and fought harder. And last I heard, there are many ex-Dominions like me working with Earth now. But also humans who joined the Dominion for credits.”

“Some people on Reka 5 say that the Dominion lost the outer planets because Earth was giving them so much trouble.”

“That’s very plausible. I did warn them humans made horrible slaves. They didn’t listen.”

“Damn right.”

“Too willful. Too stubborn. Too intelligent.” And all the other characteristics Ulrek admired in a person. “They make exceptional crew and friends.” He grinned at Delaney. “And are a delight in my bed,” he said, trying to get off this very personal and difficult topic. His past was still a sore spot.

“You make a habit of sleeping with your crew? Or is that just the females?” She crossed her arms over her chest. Was that a hint of jealousy in her voice?

“I never sleep with crew.” Back with the Dominion, they’d been all male, and here in the outer planets, it was too complicated.

“Right, because I’m not really crew. I’m leaving the moment the council renders the verdict. And they *would* side with me.”

She didn’t know they’d already made the decision. Ulrek toyed briefly with the idea of not telling her but decided against it. She didn’t need more reasons to hate him.

“They already made the decision. The case got special consideration because I am me. The contract currently still stands, but you can terminate it anytime you wish.”

Delaney raised a brow. “And why are you telling me this when you could just take off with me on your ship none the wiser?”

“Because I’m giving you a choice. And I like you, Delaney. And not just in my bed. You’re resilient. You were displaced from your life, yet you worked your way back up. And even when you’re afraid, you don’t cower.”

Her face softened.

“You don’t have to make the decision yet. Stay on my ship until we have to leave. Get to know my crew. They are good people, you’ll like them. You can make the decision when it’s time.”

Delaney nodded. “That is a good compromise. I’ll take it. But only because you gave me a choice and because I want to know who’s crazy enough to work with you.”

Ulrek grinned at her little jab. “Good. But until you leave, you are mine to care for and pleasure. And pleasure you, I will.”

He crawled over her to straddle her hips and held her down by the throat. Her eyes went wide at their sudden change in position, and her hand came up to shove at his arm. She struggled to free herself even as the scent of her arousal rose to tease at his nostrils. The addictive scent and her writhing had him hard as granite in seconds.

“You like this, don’t you?”

She opened her mouth.

Before she could reply, he added, “Remember, I can smell your lust, and I can smell lies.”

She slammed her mouth shut, pressing her lips in a thin line.

“I thought so.”

Keeping her held down with one hand, he opened her legs and repositioned himself between them. He leaned over, bracing on one elbow and letting his heavy erection press against her mound as he nuzzled the side of her face. She was wet, and his cock slid deliciously against her slit, making her inhale sharply.

“Delaney,” he whispered into her ear. “I’ve never wanted to possess something so much.”

She made a small whimper at his words but quickly recovered. “I thought you said humans made horrible slaves.”

“They do. I don’t want you as a slave, my Star. I just want you.”

He didn’t know how to explain this need to be with her; he couldn’t even understand it himself. It confused him. What wasn’t confusing was her reaction to him and her wet cunt slick against his cock.

“You’re so fucking wet.”

He reached between them and pressed two fingers into her tight passage. It was hot and welcoming. He curved his fingers

upward, and she gasped. She squeezed her eyes shut, her mouth open and panting.

“Keep your eyes open, my Star. I want you to know who’s making you feel so good.” He released her throat to cup her face, guiding her to look at him.

Her eyes were glassy with lust and pleasure that only grew with every thrust. She cried out, her channel milking his fingers. Then Ulrek had his cock at her sopping wet entrance, plunging into her. Her pussy clenched and fluttered around his cock.

“Fuck! You feel so fucking good.”

She thrashed under him and her screams filled the room. He looked down at her face, but her eyes were squeezed shut again, tears squeezing out the corners. Stars. She was so perfect.

“Mine. You’re mine, Delaney.”

He hammered into her with abandon.

“Oh god, yes!”

There, amidst the grunting and groaning, lost inside the perfect female, Ulrek finally found a taste of happiness.

Chapter 18

Delaney

Delaney didn't recognize any of the smells or sounds when she woke.

She sat up and looked around. Oh. Right. She was in the captain's quarters on the *New Horizon*. All the deliciously sinful ways Ulrek had used her body came rushing back. They'd been going at it for who knew how long, taking short breaks to talk, have a bit from his food replicator, or a nap. No wonder she felt so sore. Ulrek had more stamina than the Energizer Bunny.

She was alone in bed, and a quick glance around the room showed that he wasn't there. She spotted a holo messenger on the table with her name typed in English on the screen. According to the time on the displayed, it was already early evening. She must have taken a long nap. She picked it up and played the message.

The device projected an image of Ulrek from the shoulders up. He grinned, showing his fangs.

"I trust you had a good rest. I have programmed your bio signature into the ship. Most of it will be available to you now. You've been added to the captain's quarters. You will stay with me while on the ship. I am collecting your things from the New Colonist Housing and will be back soon. My crew is eager to meet you."

Delaney blinked. What the fuck did Ulrek mean he added her to the captain's quarters? Oh no. No way. She'd agreed to stay on the ship, not to sharing a room with him.

Fucking him once, twice—okay, a half dozen times, but who's counting—was one thing. She wasn't going to start playing house with her possible boss, especially when that boss was *him*.

Then the memory of her screaming yes when he declared she was his came rushing back.

Fuck!

It was sexy at the time. Sooo fucking sexy. And she'd meant it as a sexual thing, in the heat of the moment. She wasn't agreeing to be his mate or anything.

Oh god. What if...

No. Abso-fucking-lutely not. There was no way she was going to jump from one horrible choice in men to another, no matter how good he was in bed. Delaney was ready to be single for a very long time, thank you very much. Sure, there might be the occasional romp in the sack with a certain very sexually talented captain, but not a full-on relationship. She wasn't ready for that. She'd just gotten out of one, for fuck's sake.

Delaney knew her rights. The contract had clearly stated that she'd get her own room, no matter how small. She didn't care if it was the broom closet; she needed a place to hide from Ulrek and these pesky, confusing feelings she was developing.

She'd already come to the conclusion that she just wasn't strong enough to avoid him when it came to sex. There was too much attraction, too much tenderness, too much... everything. But actually *falling* for him was completely out of the question. And if he kept insisting that they cuddle and sleep together, all while being the total opposite of the tyrant she'd thought he was, then she was going to be in serious trouble.

She'd fall hard, and it would be a disaster.

She looked around for her comm, then remembered that Scarface had taken it. Angie would be worried about her. Delaney would have to call her when she got her hands on a comm.

Her clothes were completely destroyed, so Delaney dug into Ulrek's closet and found a top and belt that would work, sort of, as a dress. She stared at herself in the mirror. The bruise on her cheek was already starting to fade after Ulrek had applied a special salve on it. She found a comb and used it to detangle her hair.

There. She looked semi-presentable in case she bumped into some of the crew. She only made it a few steps out of the room before a Tallean female rounded the corner to greet her.

"You're up!" The female looked familiar.

"Hi, I'm Delaney—" She hadn't realized she wouldn't be the only woman on board. That was a pleasant surprise.

"The greenroom technician, I know."

Should she tell the female she wasn't sure she was staying? No, she didn't want to alienate her potential future co-workers.

"I've been waiting to meet you. I'm Tahra."

That name was familiar. "Tahra. Are you related to Tuhror?"

"I'm his sister. I'm the medic on the ship."

The medic? Tahra looked barely old enough to have finished high school, but then again, Delaney wasn't the best at guessing Tallean ages.

Tahra eyed the door Delaney had come out of. "So Ulrek put you in there with him, did he? I thought he was acting possessive with you."

"It's, um, not what I signed up for." Delaney rubbed the back of her neck. Great, now she was going to be known as the one who slept with the boss her first day on the job. That

wasn't a taboo thing in their culture, but it still made her uncomfortable.

"Of course it's not. Most females want privacy. I'd hate to be hidden away in a male's quarters unless he was my mate, and even then, I'd want some freedom." She sniffed the air briefly and wrinkled her nose.

"I bet this is exactly how Ulrek wanted you to walk out of there to introduce yourself to the crew: smelling of sex, and him, and wearing his clothes. That would warn all the other males on the ship off you, the Tallean ones anyway."

Delaney's jaw dropped. She'd completely forgotten about their amazing sense of smell. How embarrassing. "Thanks for the warning. I'll go back in and wash up first."

Tahra peered around the corner she'd come from. "I'd let you use the one in the medbay, but you'd still be trailing that scent through the ship. I'm not sure if you—"

"No, you're right. Thanks. I'll use the one in Ulrek's room."

"You can borrow some of my clothes. I'll go grab some." Tahra went into a room down the hall.

Delaney went back into the captain's quarters and washed up quickly. She was glad this ship had water cleansing. Some didn't, and she didn't relish being blasted with sand or disinfected with bright lights. Clean, fresh, and naked, she poked her head out the door into the hallway.

Tahra handed her a simple tunic and a pair of slim pants. The tunic was a bit tight across the chest, and Delaney had to roll up the pant legs, but they would do.

"Much better." Tahra looked her up and down. "I think we can find you a room of your own. Ulrek won't like it, but too bad. He'll learn he can't just control a female like that."

It occurred to Delaney that maybe Tahra was being so helpful because she had her eyes on Ulrek herself. Why did that bother her? She shouldn't care whether he had other female admirers or not.

Tahra gestured for Delaney to follow her down the hall. “You didn’t tell the bounty hunters Ulrek’s true identity, did you?”

“Of course not!” The sick feeling she’d had when they’d taken her comm and called Ulrek, claiming she’d spilled his secret, returned. “I mean, I don’t like the guy. But I wouldn’t do that.”

“I understand. I hated Ulrek too, but for different reasons. When he left the Dominion and took my brother with him, I was really angry. Especially when Tuhror came to pick me up. I told him I’d rather fly into the nearest star—” She stopped as they reached a door. “Give me your hand. I’m going to program the spare room to let you, and *only* you, in. I can’t do it by myself; all quarter doors except for the captain’s require authorization from at least two crew members to be reprogrammed. But you’re crew now, so this should work.”

She took Delaney’s palm, held it against the panel next to the door, and entered a code. Then she held her own palm to the panel and typed in the code again. There was a soft beep, and the door opened.

“It used to belong to Groden, the old technician.”

“Thanks, Tahra.” Then, curious about what Tahra had said, she asked. “What you said about flying into the nearest star. Why you didn’t want to come along at first?”

“Because Tuhror and I had worked so hard to get where we were after our parents died. I was one of the only females accepted into the medic program at the academy. It was a big achievement, even though I knew they wouldn’t actually let a female work any of their top ships.” She tilted her head. “I know you hate the Dominion, but it was all I ever knew. I’d never lived in a world without the Goddess filling our lives every day. Never lived without the bells and the prayers, never seen a society without serfs and slaves.”

That was the same culture Ulrek had grown up in, the one that made him the monster he was. Delaney had learned

about Dominion culture while in Reka 5. To someone like her, born into a modern society on Earth, it was barbaric. They had slaves, watched fights to the death for entertainment, and hunted wild beasts just for fun.

It was as if they took all the pleasurable vices and ran with it. Humans had cultures like that too, not very long ago, and Delaney wondered if Earth could have turned out like that in another reality.

They say the neural pathways between violence and pleasure crossed in the Talleans, but were they so different? If those ships had landed on Earth during Roman or Aztec times—two cultures that had both slaves and public fights to the death—would the people find Dominion culture that repulsive?

“Then Tuhror and Ulrek brought me to the outer planets and showed me how things could be. They had me train remotely with Kean’s personal medic on Vosthea. Then they offered me a job on the ship.” Tahra was beaming, and it made Delaney smile too.

She knew who Kean was. Anyone who hadn’t been hiding under a rock knew about the Euphora dealer who’d taken over Vosthea. Rumor was that he’d been a Dominion-trained chemist who’d also left the fold. It made perfect sense that Ulrek knew him.

“Now that you have a room, let’s go meet the rest of the crew.”

Ulrek

Ulrek sat at his usual seat, the big reclining one sandwiched between two large couches, letting his eyes drift over the common room as he watched his crew talk and mingle.

Delaney sat on one of the couches, with Tahra next to her. Ulrek was glad to see she'd already started spending time with the crew while he'd been busy tying up some loose ends. He'd gone to give Ryek the location of the bounty hunters' shuttle, as well as pick up a new comm for Delaney.

He'd also dropped by the NCH building to pick up her things, but the guard there had once again refused him entry. They'd have to go back for her things tomorrow together.

He wasn't happy to see her in Tahra's clothes and not his, smelling all clean and fresh with not one hint of his scent on her.

Vhast and Dex regarded her with interest, and Ulrek resisted the urge to warn them away by bashing their heads together. Vhast had been a new recruit, fresh-faced and keen, when Ulrek had made his escape from the Dominion. Dex was the human who balanced their books. Dex was short for his nickname Poindexter, which was supposed to mean something amusing, but Ulrek had forgotten what it was.

No matter. They'd get the hint when Delaney returned to his quarters with him later.

Not everyone had returned to the ship yet. Ckzarr, Roxy, and Kirek were still out, enjoying Reka 5's local culture. Technically, the crew still had a few more days' leave before they returned to Vosthea to pick up their next mission.

Delaney's tiny body was swallowed up by the large couch, and she looked very comfortable as she listened to Tuhror speak of all the exotic planets they'd visited.

The furniture on board had been an easy modification to the ship that benefitted both him and his crew. The common

room had originally been fitted with hard metal seats and equally bland-looking tables that were the mainstays of Dominion warships.

In the Dominion, a ship of this size often carried the crew as well as an entire squadron of soldiers and whatever commodities they were there to seize. Things like a greenroom, food production labs, and general comfort all had to be sacrificed to fit everyone in.

The space Ulrek had converted to a greenroom, for example, had once been barracks for the troops on board. And while the food production lab had already been there, the Dominion crew had used it as ammo storage rather than for its intended purpose.

“You should see the parties we get invited to on Vosthea,” Tahra was saying enthusiastically. “Kean really knows how to celebrate. We actually have one coming up. I can’t wait.”

“I’ll bet. If there’s one thing you Talleans know how to do, it’s party.” Strangely, Delaney looked almost nervous.

Reka 5 culture was a little more demure, mainly because of the human influence, and Ulrek wondered just how different parties were on Earth. Tallean parties often included lots of drugs and alcohol, live performances, sexual or otherwise, and fights and competitions.

Kean’s parties were no different, except he didn’t care for fights to the death, and the Euphora provided was always safe, clean, and made in-house. It was a way for Kean to flaunt his power and wealth, something expected and necessary. He invited everyone who was anyone, especially those he suspected were conspiring against him, and he always joked that it wouldn’t be a party if there wasn’t at least one attempt on his life. Ulrek usually spent the evening guarding his friend and making sure Kean and his mate Sarah survived to party another day.

It was also crucial for Ulrek to show up to these events. He wouldn’t want the Dominion to think he was hiding in fear

from them.

“Ulrek has strict rules about Euphora though,” Tahra said. “If we bring it onto the ship, we’d better have enough to share.” She laughed, then tilted her head at Delaney. “Have you tried Kean’s Euphora? It’s way better than the stuff the Dominion sells.”

Now that was an interesting mental image—Delaney, demanding and lusty, with Euphora running through her veins. Would her hatred of him and what he had been melt away? The drug was known galaxy-wide to heighten feelings of connection and bonding. It was also a bit of a truth serum, which is why Kean offered it so freely, especially to those he didn’t trust.

Delaney looked uncomfortable. Humans were so strange that way. Their culture had illegal substances that were taboo. Imagine! No drugs were taboo in Tallean culture. The only reason Kean’s Euphora was illegal in Dominion space was that the Dominion had a monopoly on the substance.

The ship’s system rang out with the bell sound from the hangar.

“That must be food.” Berus got up excitedly.

The question about Delaney’s Euphora consumption went unanswered, leaving Ulrek imagining Delaney high as a shuttle and begging for him to give her release.

“We asked Delaney for some suggestions for the Tallean-human fusion food Reka 5 is so famous for,” Berus explained. “That must be one of the orders now.”

One of the orders? Ulrek grinned. Berus had a habit of ordering much more food than the crew could possibly eat so he could sample everything. He loved food and it showed. If he didn’t train every day, he would be fat, but as it was he was a rock-solid mountain of a male.

Ulrek didn’t mind. He loved to eat too. His crew’s palate ran far and wide, and he set aside a generous budget for acquiring local and specialty food. It was especially important

on a ship like this, where the crew came from all different corners of the galaxy.

Homesickness was an inevitable condition out in the vast expanse of space, no matter how accustomed you were to traveling the galaxy. Having access to nostalgic scents and flavors helped, especially since many of his crew would never see their home worlds again. Himself included.

Even if he did make it all the way back to his planet, sneaking through the strictest of Dominion Space, he didn't have anyone to return to, so why bother? His only family, his mother, had disowned him. She'd probably be happy to report his presence to the Dominion herself.

So all he had now were memories. The crew was the closest thing he had to family, together with Kean, the ruthless ruler of Vosthea.

Kean had offered him a piece of Vosthea, since Ulrek had been partially responsible for getting Kean's well-produced drug to the inner planets after the Dominion outlawed it. The very secret and very illegal earnings had been crucial in his escape from the system.

But Ulrek wasn't interested in ruling anything. He didn't need everyone bowing to him to his face, only to conspire against him behind his back. Perhaps one day, when he was mated and ready to settle down, he'd take up the offer. Or not.

Mated. He looked at Delaney. Would she be strong enough to run a section of an outlaw planet with him? Probably. Would she want to, though? He doubted it.

Stars! How did that thought even make its way into his head? Delaney was not his mate.

As they ate, the crew asked Delaney about the food and the Earth ingredients she'd helped grow at the greenhouses.

"We have a food production lab. It's not really being used except to raise tepins. They're so easy to care for. So that hardly counts," Berus said.

“I can get that set up too,” Delaney said. “It’s not hard to manage once it gets going.”

The whole crew looked excited at that, but Ulrek noticed she’d only said she’d set it up and that it was easy to manage, not that she’d be here to manage it.

While both Talleans and humans could subsist just fine on replicated food and travel rations, the real thing was always welcomed. It improved morale, and a happy crew was a loyal crew in Ulrek’s books.

“Berus, you’re getting ahead of yourself,” Gavin said. “You seem to have forgotten that none of us cook, unless you count charring pieces of tepin into a barely edible mess cooking.”

“Yeah, sorry, can’t help you there,” Delaney said with a laugh. “I only grow things. You don’t want me in the kitchen.”

“There’s the NovaChef,” Tahra suggested tentatively. “We rarely use it, but doesn’t it do everything? We can look up some simple recipes and see what we need to grow to make them.”

“You have a NovaChef?” Delaney asked. “I keep seeing ads for those everywhere. Aren’t they crazy expensive?”

“It’s the shipboard edition. It was Ulrek’s idea,” Tahra shrugged.

Delaney’s eyes landed on him. “I’d have never guessed.”

Ulrek grunted. “I like food.”

There was, as he’d expected, a lot of leftovers, which was just as well. Leftovers did not last long on the *Revenge*, not with so many hungry mouths aboard. As the members of his crew made their way back to their quarters, Delaney stood as well. When she got to the hallway, she turned the wrong way.

“Where are you going?”

Delaney turned around and smiled at him. “To my room.” She pressed her palm to the panel of Groden’s old room, and

the door slid open. "Goodnight, Captain. Sleep tight." She winked at him, then stepped inside.

Ulrek clenched his jaw as the door slid closed. Behind him, Tahra laughed.

"Sleep tight, Captain," Tahra mimicked Delaney's words in a singsong voice. Then she, too, disappeared into her room.

Chapter 19

Ulrek

Ulrek waited for Delaney outside the greenroom the next morning. By the look on her face when she arrived and spotted him, he was the last person she wanted to see. He wondered if she'd spent the entire night thinking about him like he did about her, or if she'd fallen asleep easily.

Ulrek held out a comm. "I went back to look for your device, but it's gone. Here's a new one."

"Thank you. How much do I owe you?" She turned the comm in her hand. "This one's a newer model."

"Nothing," he said. "It's a gift."

She frowned. "I'm sorry. I can't accept it." She shoved the comm back at him.

"Consider it a work perk. Not from me personally, but from the ship. You need a comm to do your work effectively. I've already programmed a few contacts into it. Me, the crew. Angie too. I got her contact from her mates. You should comm her. She was worried about you."

"Why are you doing this, Ulrek? Why are you feeding me, buying me gifts, and being so fucking nice? Stop it already. You got what you wanted. I'm weak, and I gave in to lust, okay? You win. Stop rubbing it in."

Was that what she thought he was doing? He'd only wanted to give her something of value. Something she'd use daily.

“I have not won. If I had, I would’ve woken up with you in my arms.”

“Why the hell are you saying all this? Are you not happy until I give up completely, lose all respect for myself, and fall for the enemy?” Then, realizing she was yelling, she pressed her lips together and looked around the hall. Luckily, most of the crew was off the ship, enjoying their last bit of free time on the colony before departure.

Delaney still thought of him as the enemy. Ulrek didn’t understand why it mattered to him. He usually didn’t give a flying fuck what other people thought. But this time, he did, because it was her.

“Take the comm. Call Angie.” He made it an order, hoping the hurt didn’t show in his voice. “Take the day off and go pick up your things from the NCH building. I tried to do it for you yesterday, but they wouldn’t let me in. The crew is still on leave, anyway. You can start work when everyone is back.”

Delaney gave up and took the comm.

Ulrek returned to his office. There was a shipment of Euphora he still hadn’t delivered here on Reka 5 since he’d been so busy with finding a technician and dealing with the bounty hunters. He sent out a message to the buyer and made plans to meet later.

He was just stepping out to get ready when Emil came charging down the corridor, concern written all over his face.

“To the common room. Now. I’m calling an emergency meeting.”

When they got there, his communications specialist made an announcement on the PA system from his comm to anyone on the ship. Then he told Ulrek to recall anyone who was out in the colony. It sounded serious.

Within minutes, everyone who was on board had arrived, Delaney included.

“This better be important.” Gavin looked like he’d been bathing. His hair was still soaking wet, and he wore only a towel.

“It is. Where’s everyone else?”

“They are on the way back. Someone else can update them. What’s going on?” Ulrek asked.

Emil held up his comm. From it came a message declaring Ulrek’s presence had been confirmed on Reka 5.

“The message is being broadcast on all the important channels on repeat.”

“How can they prove it?” Tahra asked. “I can just as easily go on the air and say I saw him on Tal.”

“There’s a link to several photos of Ulrek in the forest, together with the coordinates where it was taken.” Emil pulled up the first image.

It was from right before the fight. He hadn’t gone into bloodlust yet, but he’d already dropped his disguise. Another one was of him mid-fight. The last one showed him carrying Delaney in his arms. Her face was blurry, though,

“Sure, they could be fake, but I’m catching some of the responses, and people are believing it. Someone identified you, Delaney, even with the shitty photo. This place is going to be crawling with bounty hunters soon.”

“Fuck. We need to get everyone back on board.” Ulrek dug in his pocket for his comm. “Can you pinpoint where it’s coming from?”

“I’m not sure how accurate it is, but it looks to be coming from the Reka 5 impound lot.”

The comm in Ulrek’s hand buzzed. It was Ryek. He accepted the call. “Ryek, are you getting what we’re getting?”

He listened to the director as he looked around at his crew. Delaney’s brow was furrowed, but everyone just looked

disappointed to have their time off interrupted. They'd clearly gone through this before.

"I understand, Ryek. Thank you for your generosity. I will gather my crew immediately." Ulrek ended the call and turned to his crew. "We have officially overstayed our welcome on Reka 5. The message is coming from the confiscated shuttle. The bounty hunters must have programmed it to go out if they failed to return to the ship by a certain time. They have someone working on shutting it down now, but it's too late. It's everywhere. Ryek is asking us to leave immediately to prevent any danger to his colonists."

"So much for trying more local food," Berus said sadly.

"The others should be back soon. We need to leave within three galactic hours. There was no mention of the *New Horizon*, but to be safe, no one is to leave the ship alone. Partner rule is in effect. Your partner is your responsibility. Lose your partner, and I'll tan your hide myself."

And with that, everyone got up to finish whatever they needed to do on the colony before they once more found themselves having to move on. This wasn't the first time this had happened, and everyone partnered up as usual, leaving Delaney alone.

"I think my decision was made for me," Delaney said, looking wan.

"We'll go pick up your stuff," Ulrek said, approaching Delaney. "I am meeting with the directors. Angie will be there too."

She looked unsure at first, but really, what choice did she have? It wasn't safe for her out there until this died down.

She sighed and agreed.

Delaney

Delaney gave Angie a hug, grateful for everything she had done for her. While Ulrek spoke with Ryek and Holden, she assured her friend that Ulrek was treating her well and that she didn't, in fact, need to stage a dramatic rescue and hide her in their spare room. After the photo got out, the council had strongly urged Delaney to take the job on the *New Horizon*, but Delaney had already made the decision. Craig was gone, but his crazy friends were still around.

She did *not* mention to her friend that she'd slept with the infamous captain. That was still her secret for now.

Tahra and Gavin were probably suspicious because they'd been there when Ulrek had snuck a mostly-naked Delaney back to the ship and right into his room. Some of the crew were giving them curious looks as well, but they didn't have any proof unless someone spilled the beans. Delaney was going to try to keep this under wraps the best she could.

Ryek and Holden had already welcomed them back once the heat had died down, but she still felt as if she was never going to see Reka 5 again. When she left Earth, it hadn't been by choice, and it had happened in a blink of an eye. Leaving Reka 5, her new home, felt almost as bad. Like she was abandoning it.

Ulrek held his fist to his chest pinky side out to Ryek and Holden, and they returned the gesture. Delaney knew it was a sign of respect. They didn't need to like Ulrek to respect him. She understood that now.

Delaney reached for her luggage as they walked out, but Ulrek picked it up instead. He hefted it like it barely weighed more than a feather, even though it had all her tools in it. It was for the best anyway. If he was carrying her bag, it was easier to avoid him putting his hand on the small of her back when they walked.

He'd had it there on the walk from the transport to Ryek's office, and she'd been hyper-aware of it the entire time. She'd thought her body would calm the fuck down now that it had gotten what it needed, but it hadn't. Instead, it demanded more every time he was close, no matter if he wore his disguise or not.

"Most of this is tools and equipment. You barely have any clothes," he said as he loaded her bag into the back.

They'd taken his private transport since he had a few other places to visit before returning to the *Rev*— the *New Horizon*. She was starting to think of it as the *Revenge* like everyone else on the ship.

"We will visit Kean's tailor when we get to Vosthea. He is accustomed to making clothes for human bodies. You will like Sarah and her sister, Chrissy."

Delaney had heard of Sarah, the human female who had the Vosthean ruler wrapped around her little finger, and she was excited to meet her. She was less thrilled that Ulrek had implied that she'd be meeting them as his...well, she didn't know quite what he thought they were. But whatever it was, they weren't.

But the only response she could come up with that wouldn't make her seem like she was the one getting ahead of herself was, "I don't need custom-made clothes to work in the greenroom."

What else could she say? *We're not a couple?*

It wasn't like he'd explicitly said they *were*. He was just... acting like it. Which was confusing as fuck.

Ulrek pressed his lips into a thin line but did not reply.

Their next stop was at one of the most expensive private residences on Reka 5.

"Put this on," he said, handing Delaney a jacket.

"Wait. I'm coming with you? What if they recognize me?"

“Varan will not recognize you from the fuzzy image as long as we don’t use your name. Delaney was with Ulrek. I am Uzzar.”

“Okay. We can use Lana or Dee. I reply to both.”

There was no ship logo on it, but it looked like the ones she’d seen some of the other crew members wearing. At first, she thought it was Tahra’s, but it was cut even bigger in the chest than Delaney and would be far too big for the Tallean woman. Where had he gotten this?

Ulrek was suddenly all business. “The second we step out of this vehicle, I’m Captain Uzzar. And you are Lana. That is the name the male used for you. If you have issues with anything I do or say, take it up with me when we’re back on the ship. Not here. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Delaney wasn’t stupid enough to test him now, not with that serious tone in his voice.

Ulrek reached back to pick up an important-looking case. “It’s important to stay calm during these transactions. Know that I will never let anyone hurt you.”

“Wait, is that a possibility?” What the hell was he getting her into?

He clasped her chin. “Are you scared? Do you not trust me to protect you, even after seeing me fight? That wounds me, my Star.”

That had Delaney remembering how fucking hot he had been in bloodlust.

“I hate you.” She wasn’t sure if she was saying it to him or to remind herself.

“I like you too,” he replied.

Delaney hated the fluttering in her chest at his words. She shouldn’t care whether Ulrek liked her or not. Even though she was working for him, and had slept with him, he was still the enemy. Right?

Ulrek removed his blaster from his belt and tucked it away in a compartment in the transport before stepping outside. She stepped out as well and followed him toward the ornate but tastefully decorated front door.

Whoever lived here must be filthy rich. Angie lived in a penthouse with Ryek and Holden, but despite being the directors, the two Talleans chose to keep modest lives. Whoever lived here was swimming in luxury and liked to flaunt it.

They were met by two armed guards at the door and patted down, Ulrek growling when the guard lingered on Delaney's chest and ass a little too long. Then they were led down a hallway and into the fanciest meeting room she'd ever seen.

She tried to act casual and not gawk too openly at the ridiculously opulent room. An extravagantly-dressed Tallean male sat on an oversized divan. Two gorgeous women perched on either side of him. They wore sumptuous gowns, had gems in their long dark hair, and had their faces heavily painted. Bracelets, earrings, necklaces—they were dripping with jewels.

They looked ready for a party, and Delaney wondered if they got dolled up like this every day or just when people came to call. She knew Jillian dressed similarly when she was in Dominion space, masquerading as Ballus' slave-turned-obsession. She'd said it was actually a pain, because all the jewels weighed a frigging ton.

The door closed behind them, and two guards came to stand on either side of it. Delaney hoped her nervousness wasn't showing. Ulrek strode right up to the trio, looking as cool as a cucumber.

"Varan, it's nice to see you again." Ulrek held his fist to his chest, pinky side out.

"Captain Uzzar." Varan stood, returned the gesture, then angled his head to Delaney. "Who is this? A new female?"

“New crew member,” Ulrek clarified. He didn’t give her name.

No wonder he’d had her put on the jacket. If it weren’t for it, Delaney would have felt woefully underdressed. As it was, she was in uniform, same as the captain.

Varan offered the same respectful gesture to Delaney, who returned it, hoping it was appropriate for her to do so. Just as Ulrek had surmised, Varan didn’t suspect a thing.

There were couches arranged facing a low table, and Ulrek picked the one adjacent to their host’s. He motioned for her to sit and then sat down right next to her, their thighs touching. For once, Delaney was glad for the closeness. He placed the case down on the table, and the other man pulled it over and opened it.

Holy crap. She was in the middle of a drug deal.

Delaney blinked at the case brimming with Euphora tabs, trying not to react. She reminded herself that Talleans didn’t have any contraband substances or anti-drug laws. Kean’s Euphora was perfectly legal here.

The two females, however, couldn’t hide their reactions. Their eyes grew wide and covetous. One of them leaned over the merchandise.

Varan chuckled. “So eager, my sweet. Uzzar is going to think I don’t care for you properly.” He grabbed a handful of the tabs and gave them to her, then did the same for the other woman. “Go ahead, give it a try.”

She was already twisting the tab off and pressing the tip to her neck. Ulrek and Varan watched her face closely as the Euphora flooded her system. Her eyes took on a relaxed look, and her face flushed ever so slightly despite her tan complexion. She sighed, and a beautiful smile brightened her face, making her look even more gorgeous than she already was.

“Don’t you love the look on their faces?” Varan reached over to stroke her cheek.

“That’s the best part.” Ulrek grinned.

The female was now trying to crawl into Varan’s lap, but he pushed her away. “Later. Business first. Go play.” He shoved her at the other female.

Delaney tried to ignore the fact that the two women were full-on making out as Ulrek and Varan talked business. She tried to focus instead on her surroundings and on the conversation but failed when one of them crawled over the couches to her.

“You’re very pretty.” She made a moue at Delaney’s uniform. “Except for that. I’ll help you take it off.” She held out a tab to her. “Here. Come join us.”

She was getting very handsy, and while Delaney found her attractive, she froze, unsure what to do.

Ulrek came to her rescue. “She is working.”

The female blinked languidly up at him. “You too, captain. You should join us as well.” Then her hands were all over Ulrek.

Delaney bit back the ridiculous stab of jealousy. Why did she care if this gorgeous woman was mauling him?

Ulrek ignored her advances. “I’m working too. Maybe later.”

The woman pouted but backed off.

The rest of the meeting went by quickly, and soon, Delaney and Ulrek were walking back to the transport.

“Is this what the *New Horizon* does?” she quietly asked when they were alone in the transport.

“We do everything. Sensitive deliveries, escort missions, defense, whatever is needed.”

“Why did you bring me there?”

“Two reasons. First, because I need you to be an extra pair of eyes and ears, and this safe transaction was good training. And second, because if I hadn’t, Varan would have insisted

one of his females sit with me while we talked business. It is both a courteous gesture of hospitality and a tactic to distract the other party during negotiations.”

“Oh.” Delaney thought back to the woman in Ulrek’s lap, high on Euphora, her hands touching him everywhere.

He smirked. “I didn’t think you’d like it.”

“I don’t care either way,” she lied.

“If you say so,” he replied mildly.

Where the fuck did this insane jealousy come from? Ulrek wasn’t hers. Hell, no!

Ulrek set the transport to head back to the ship on its own, then pushed his seat back and pulled Delaney into his lap.

“Don’t worry, my Star. I have no interest in her. The only one I wanted in there was you.”

Delaney’s tummy fluttered a little.

“But she’s right,” Ulrek whispered into her ear. “You’re very pretty. I can’t wait to see you give in to the Euphora.”

“You just want me horny and crawling all over you.”

“Yes.” He didn’t even try to lie. “But I don’t need Euphora for that, do I?”

“I—”

“Yes, I know, you hate me.” Ulrek buried his face into the side of her neck, nuzzling her. “And as I said before, I like you too.”

Chapter 20

Delaney

Delaney sat down on the bench to take a well-deserved rest and admire her handiwork. The greenroom was barely recognizable. It smelled and felt so much better now, with most of the rotting foliage gone and the humidity under control.

After a thorough questioning of the crew, Delaney had figured out how the settings had gotten so horribly out of whack. It had all started in the bed with the mystery plant: some of the leaves had gotten yellow and crispy. Thinking it was because of a lack of water, Tahra had gone in to fiddle with the settings, twice.

But the symptoms for too much water and too little water were very similar, and the issue had gotten worse; that was when Ulrek had gone in as well, increasing the humidity. Then, thinking there was perhaps too much light and the leaves were drying up from being burnt, Gavin had turned down the lighting. When that still didn't work, Berus thought maybe there weren't enough nutrients.

Mystery solved. There was no deep, dark conspiracy: the plants had simply been loved to death.

They'd spent the last few days hiding in an asteroid field as Gavin changed the ship's identifying signature, and Delaney had finally met everyone on the crew. The jacket she'd worn to the meeting with Varan had belonged to Roxy, a busy brunette who worked on the operations and maintenance of

all the ship's onboard weapons with Ckzarr, the ship's gunner. Apparently, the *Revenge* had so many weapons that one person couldn't possibly fire them all.

It was a lot of new faces to keep straight, and Delaney was still struggling to remember everyone's names and what they did on the ship. A few of them didn't actually have jobs on the ship and were only there as muscle for planetside missions.

With her on board, there were now six humans and seven Talleans in the crew. The humans were easy for her to remember. There was her and Roxy, the only two human women. Emil and Gavin she already knew, same as Dex—as in Poindexter—the nerdy accountant and treasurer for the ship, complete with glasses and button-up shirts. Delaney was sure he played up the look on purpose. The last human was Cage. He didn't talk much, and she had no idea yet what he did.

As for the Talleans, there was the captain, of course. Tuhror was the pilot and shared navigation duty with Emil. And Tahra was the medic. Berus was the one who loved to eat and fight. There were Ckzarr, the gunner, and Kirek, the weapons guy... although Delaney had no idea what the difference was. Lastly, there was Vhast, who looked young, and like Cage and Berus, seemed to do nothing on the ship.

Delaney was shocked at how few people were actually needed for a ship this size. No wonder Ulrek had been so sure no one on board was messing with the settings on purpose. He knew everyone well, and they were a family of sorts.

A family she didn't fit into.

She'd been hiding out in the greenroom for the last few days. It had been pretty easy to stay away from Ulrek because he was still preoccupied with monitoring the situation with the broadcast.

It appeared the bounty hunters had been funded by someone named Gritarr. He'd been after Ulrek's bounty for a while now, but he was selfish, so Ulrek doubted he was behind the broadcast. By the number of simultaneous eye

rolls at the mere mention of Gritarr's name, the crew was familiar with this guy.

Hiding out meant Delaney had tons of time to work on the greenroom undisturbed...mostly. Each crew member had come by one by one to talk to her.

She'd finally met Roxy, the owner of the jacket she'd borrowed that last day on Reka. Instead of Reka 5, Roxy had spent her time freed from the Dominion on Vosthea. Missing her video games, she'd found her way into a training simulator after hours and started playing a "game" that had her playing as a gunner on a ship. Their training sims were what VR in Earth had aspired to be, but better. Her high score had been the thing that outed her unauthorized use of the simulator. And that was how the busty babe with the multicolored hair had ended up on the Revenge.

Berus had come by several times and was the only reason Delaney managed to clean out most of the dying plant matter and contaminated substrate. The gentle giant didn't have much to do and was bored out of his mind, so he didn't mind taking on the grunt work of lugging the heavy containers full of garbage down to the airlock, especially if it meant the greenhouse got fixed faster and Delaney could work on food production.

That was the good thing about doing this part out in space: she didn't have to worry about proper disposal so as not to contaminate the native flora of a planet. The official and acceptable method was just to space everything.

Like the other Tallean males on the crew, Berus had worked on the *Stellar Fortune*. He'd been a simple soldier, paid for his brawn and not his brain. He apologized for his part in raiding Earth, which had Delaney feeling a bit awkward. When she accepted his apology, he went into his story on how Ulrek had helped him leave the Dominion.

By now, Delaney had heard the story several times from different perspectives. No wonder those on board were so loyal to him.

The only section left now was the one with the kima plant.

Delaney had discovered the name of the plant by chance while doing her fair share of cyberstalking the ex-Dominion captain. She'd found *the video*. The one where his mother disowned him for abandoning the Dominion and the Goddess. It had been played billions of times across the known universe. Delaney had seen short clips of it before but had never really paid attention. Now that she knew how much it had affected Ulrek, she watched it with new eyes.

In the video, behind the impeccably-dressed Tallean woman, there was a wall of beautiful blood-red blooms, their color rich against the green of thick, fleshy stems and leaves. They reminded Delaney of alien roses. She had looked them up, and lo and behold, it had been the very same plant Ulrek had tried to grow in his greenroom.

Except the specimen on the ship looked nothing like the impressive display in the video.

She was also beginning to suspect that it had been the cause of all the problems to begin with. She'd tested the substrate around the plant and had found it to be much more alkaline than it should be. The high PH prevented any other plants in the vicinity from taking up certain nutrients.

She'd managed to save a handful of the other plants, taking cuttings of them and rooting them in new substrate. She'd taken over part of the food production area expressly for this purpose and had a whole propagation station set up. She had taken a cutting of the kima too, but she was pretty sure it would fail to thrive.

She'd be ready to replant the other cuttings soon. That meant she needed to talk to Ulrek about when and where to order the supplies as well as figure out the budget she was working with.

She'd caught flashes of the captain here and there and had even seen him briefly during the evening meal—the *Revenge* ran on the Galactic day and night cycle—but that was it.

When they'd first lifted off, he'd sent her a brief message reminding her that she was welcome to visit him any time in his room.

She'd been tempted once or twice, especially after seeing him in those buttery soft lounge pants he liked to wear around the ship with nothing else. How he managed to make drawstring waistband pants sexy was beyond her. A lot of the other guys went around topless too, but they didn't draw her attention the way Ulrek did. Even his burn scars couldn't put a dent in his hotness.

She'd expected him to be a hard-ass captain to his crew same as Dominion captains were known to be, but things were very casual on board. A good thing too, because the ship ran hot sometimes, and it meant she could work in the lightweight shift dresses she'd brought along.

It was less a workplace environment and more like a bunch of friends hanging out and getting stuff done at the same time. It was obvious that they all cared about each other. None of the humans onboard treated Ulrek any differently. If anything, they respected him and looked up to him. Which was just weird to Delaney.

Footsteps sounded at the door. Delaney twisted to look back behind her, expecting Berus again, asking if she needed any more help, but Ulrek stood at the entrance instead.

He was wearing those same lounge pants but in a different color. These ones were gold and reminded her of the gaudy clothes of Tallean merchants, minus all the gems and jewels. They hugged his ass and thighs and showed off his muscles with every movement. The contrast of the fabric against his dark skin at the waistband made her swallow hard.

No wonder Talleans loved gold so much. It looked so good with their coloring.

He wore nothing on top, and his hair was down. There were a few thin braids scattered throughout the wiry strands.

He stepped into the greenroom, closing the door behind him with a press of his palm. Delaney stood and turned to face him.

“Did you miss me?”

God! The soft growl in his words gave her goosebumps.

“No. Not a bit.”

He prowled toward her. “Lies.”

Delaney backed away, suddenly feeling very much like she was staring down the Big Bad Wolf. She wanted to run. If she did, would he chase? Did she want him to?

The mental image of Ulrek chasing her down and tearing the clothes from her body had her squeezing her legs together. Ulrek instantly inhaled deeply and licked his lips.

“Stars, Delaney. Why do you smell so fucking good?”

Then he moved closer, backing her against the wall of the greenroom, trapping her there with his massive body. His strong hands lifted her up, and Delaney instinctively wrapped her arms and legs around him so she wouldn't fall.

His mouth crashed onto hers, consuming her with a feral hunger. Delaney couldn't stop herself from kissing him back. She was drowning in lust. She moaned into his mouth, and ground against the hard bar tenting his pants.

She was gasping for breath when he finally broke away to trail kisses down her jaw.

“Why?” she panted. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“Because I want you. I need you. I'm sick of waiting for you to come to me.”

He'd been waiting for her? It didn't matter. They couldn't do this again.

“We can't. I can't.” She shoved at his chest.

“Why not?”

Was he serious?

“Because I know what will happen,” she said, her voice cracking. “I’ll fall a little more for you because my stupid brain can’t separate sex and love. That’s why, okay?”

His response was to bury his face into her neck again, nuzzling her. “Good. I want that.”

He wanted her to fall for him? “Why? So I can hate myself later?”

He snarled, his hand tightening on her for a moment. But then he was dragging his fangs down her throat, and she was completely powerless against the erotic feeling.

“Don’t hate yourself. Hate me instead. Let me make this easier for you, my Star. Let me be the villain.” His hand, still supporting her weight, reached around her ass and slipped under the dress she was wearing, pulling her underwear aside from behind. “We’ll pretend you don’t have a choice. You can put all the blame on me.”

“I’ll still know, though.” She squeezed her eyes shut and inhaled sharply as he dipped a finger into her cream.

“Know what?” He moved his hips, and his cock nudged up against her clit.

A small sound escaped her lips.

“Know what?” he demanded again.

“That I wanted it.” Her voice shook with the admission. “Wanted you.”

Ulrek

Ulrek savored the bittersweet victory. Delaney wanted him. He didn't want her to hate herself after, but she wanted him. Well, he'd take whatever wins he could get. Every day she ignored him felt like torture. This was why those who are rejected by their mates went crazy. He understood now, and Delaney wasn't even rejecting him physically. Not really.

He hooked his fingers under the thin scrap of fabric that covered her crotch and tore it off her body. She rewarded him with another whimper and surge of arousal, the intoxicating scent filling his lungs.

"Let's play a game," he said, letting her slide down the wall. "If I catch you, I'm going to do anything I want with you, and it won't be your fault. You can blame it all on me." He held her underwear to his nose, scenting it like he was a beast about to hunt her down. "Run, little Delaney, run."

She blinked back at him a few times, the meaning slowing penetrating. She took a step, unsure of herself, then ran to the door.

Realizing the door was locked and she didn't have the time to unlock it, she turned to face him. He could hear her heart pounding. She darted to the side, following the wall to loop around one of the empty grow beds. He followed, taking large but deliberate steps.

He reached for her, moving slowly to give her a little time. It wouldn't be any fun otherwise. She ducked under his arms, a tiny, strangled sound escaping her lips. It sounded like she was trying to hide a giggle.

He chased her one more time around the greenroom. This time she took a path around bins of substrate and piles of discarded plant matter. When she got to the door, Ulrek gave her enough time to toggle the lock and press her palm to the door panel. He made his move when the door slid open, and she darted outside. His hand barely touched her arm.

This time, she did giggle. The nervous laughter pealed out like bells in the ship's hall, and she raced down the corridor. He knew exactly where she was going. There was only one place on this ship where he couldn't follow her, and that was her quarters. He stalked through the ship after his female, following her tantalizing fragrance.

He turned the corner just in time to see her duck between Tuhror and Kirek. They looked amused. Then, seeing him following behind, they immediately flattened their bodies against the corridor wall to let him through.

Delaney shot a glance behind her, her eyes shining with the thrill and excitement of the chase. Their eyes met. Then she was off again, turning into the crew quarters.

Stars! Ulrek loved the chase, even if it was just a slow one through his ship. And by the smell of her desire filling the air, so did his little female.

She squeezed by Roxy, who was coming out of her room, and was almost at her door when Ulrek closed the space between them in a few large steps. He grabbed her by the thighs and tossed her easily over his shoulder. He continued a few yards down to his room, opened the door, and stepped inside.

She was panting heavily when he deposited her onto his bed.

"How nice of you to take us to my quarters, my Star."

He started stripping. Her eyes were wide as she watched him. And when the last piece of his clothing was tossed to the floor, he caught her staring at his cock, her mouth open. A pink tongue darted out to lick her lips.

Now that they were in his quarters, and the chase was over, she let her lust take over. She crawled to the edge of the bed and reached for him. Her delicate fingers caressed his length. Ulrek loved the contrast. It made him look even larger in comparison.

"Ooh. It's so velvety," she murmured.

Ulrek gritted his teeth and allowed her to explore him. She ran her hands up and down his length, paying extra attention where the thick mushroom-shaped head joined the shaft. A drop of precum glistened on the tip, and she licked her lips before leaning in and engulfing it in her mouth. She hummed.

He groaned, and his cock twitched. She slid her lips up and down his cock. Delaney's mouth was tiny, but she used her hands to help as she sucked on him.

Fuck. Unable to hold still and be passive any longer, Ulrek reached for a handful of her hair. "Open wide," he demanded.

He began moving her head up and down, and her lust thickened the air. She squeezed her eyes shut as he invaded her mouth, pushing her head down until she gagged before letting her up to breathe again. She let out a soft sob, then down she went again, choking on his cock. She had no cheek crease; this was as wide as her jaw went, and she strained to take him.

"Look at me," he ordered.

Delaney opened her eyes, her lips still around his cock.

Stars, she was so beautiful like this. With one hand still tangled in her hair, he caressed her cheek with the other. "This is my mouth. *Mine*. Do you understand?"

She didn't reply.

"I asked if you understood."

She nodded with his cock in her mouth and made a soft "mm-hmm" sound.

"Good. I'm going to use it exactly how I want. Now... Touch yourself as I fuck it."

She obeyed, her hand reaching under her dress. He maintained eye contact as he used her mouth, fucking it slowly as tears welled in her eyes.

Ulrek savored her submission, knowing that right now, her sole focus was on the two of them and their pleasure. For her,

there was no guilt, no overthinking. And for him, his past didn't matter. There was only him and Delaney, and their connection.

He thrust in her mouth a few more times before pulling out with a pop. She gasped for air and panted.

"Arms up, my Star," he said as he reached for the hem of her dress. She obeyed and he peeled it off her.

She sat naked on his bed, her hair messy, her face flushed, her lips red from sucking his cock. It was a perfect image he wanted to cherish forever.

He shifted her higher on the bed and shoved her knees apart. Then he buried his face between her legs, eager to return the favor.

He didn't go slow this time. There was no need to, not when she was already so wet for him. He found the little bundle of nerves above her slit and attacked it mercilessly with his tongue. She made a small mewling sound and tossed her head back, and her fingers tangled in his hair, much like his had in hers.

He could feel her start to climb, her body tensing and her breathing becoming unsteady. Her knees gripped his ears tightly and he growled. He lifted his head and pulled her legs apart again.

"Keep them open."

This time, he played with her clit as he drove a tongue into her depths, savoring her taste. Her body started to shake, but Ulrek didn't let up. His fingers increased pressure and suddenly her channel was tightening and gripping his tongue and she was bucking against his mouth as she came.

He sat back on his heels to admire her. She lay there, limp and blissful, a dreamy smile on her face, her eyes half-lidded. He wanted to capture the image and frame it.

"On your hands and knees, my love."

When she moved too slowly for his liking, he did it for her, arranging her ass-up on the bed. He snarled and palmed her round ass cheeks. He couldn't wait, not anymore. He lined himself up at her entrance, then with an arm around her belly, trapping her in place, he thrust, driving himself into her.

Delaney cried out and started to crawl away, but Ulrek held her still, his cock still half seated in her.

"Ahh. It's too much."

"No, my Star, you can take me." He curled his body around her and licked the shell of her ear.

"I mean this position is too much. I can't."

"But you want me to fuck you?"

"Yes." The word came out a desperate whimper.

"Good. Then you are going to take me," Ulrek growled. "I give you permission to struggle."

Chapter 21

Delaney

Delaney blinked at Ulrek's words. Was he actually asking her to fight back?

Delaney didn't have more time to think about it before his palm landed hard on her ass with a loud crack. She yelped and tried to wriggle out of his grip, but he held her firm. He reached around her body and pinched her nipples. She yelped again, twisted to glare at him, and was greeted with a wide grin.

The asshole found this fun!

She narrowed her eyes at him, not wanting to think about the excitement brewing in her core. He was trying to get her to react, to struggle, to fight him. And it was working, damn it.

"I could always try tickling," he said. "It doesn't work with Talleans, but I know for a fact it is very effective on humans." His fingers teased at her sides.

"Don't you fucking dare—"

He didn't wait for her to finish. His hands tightened on her hips, and he thrust again. Her last word rose to a scream. Fuck. He was so big at this angle it felt like she was being split in two. He thrust again, and this time, hit the very end of her channel, filling her completely. Ulrek didn't let her adjust, thrusting into her again and again. It was so intense she couldn't tell if it was pleasure or pain.

It was too much. She crawled forward on her hands and knees trying to create a moment of reprieve, even though she

wasn't sure she wanted one.

"Fuck!" Ulrek snarled at her movement, seeming to grow harder, even though that was surely impossible. He was already hard as rock.

She tried to crawl away again, this time reaching behind her to shove at his body with one hand. He laughed, catching it and holding it behind her back. Then he grabbed her other wrist, which had been supporting her, and she fell face-first into the soft mattress. He trapped both wrists in one massive palm and then used the other to push her chest down on the bed.

Again, this seemed to make him grow larger and harder. Ooh, this was kind of fun.

Then he was pounding into her, and she lost track of every thought as the pleasure and pain melded together into an exquisite blur.

"Ah. Oh my gawww—" her words dissolved into mindless screaming.

"Fuck, yeah."

Ulrek rammed into her hard, occasionally stopping to smack her ass, the sound echoing in the room. Pressure started to build deep inside.

"This cunt is mine, Delaney. Just like your mouth," Ulrek growled as he continued to pound away. "You are mine forever. You can run and you can fight all you like, but you'll still be mine. I'm going to fuck you until I die."

Delaney shuddered at the possessive words. She shouldn't enjoy them, but she did. She absolutely loved them.

He released her wrists to grab her by the hair and lift her head. "Look in the mirror," he ordered. "Watch me fuck you."

Delaney braced her hands on the bed and glanced over at the mirrors mounted on the double doors of the wardrobe that were placed perfectly beside the bed. The scene that greeted her stole her breath.

She was on her hands and knees, flushed and sweaty, her ass round and red. Behind her was Ulrek, his eyes glowing and his fangs elongated, his cheek creases threatening to expand. He was all raw power and unbridled lust as he slammed into her. A total beast.

This was them. And fuck, it was hot.

“Look how perfect you are.” Ulrek leaned in to drag his fangs down her shoulder. He pressed just hard enough to leave two lines of reddened skin.

He reached down between her legs to press on her clit. That was all that she needed to send her over the edge. The world around her exploded. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. White hot pleasure blinded her.

She collapsed onto the bed, her arms unable to hold herself up anymore. Behind her, the beast roared as he emptied into her, his hips jerking wildly.

Delaney woke up to find herself wrapped in Ulrek’s arms, his nose nuzzled against her neck.

The high had faded, and the intrusive thoughts were sneaking in uninvited again. She knew what was coming. The intense guilt of enjoying what they had done. It’d happened the last time too, and it sucked. The more he tried to cuddle her, the worse it got. Because she knew the truth. She was falling, legit falling, for Ulrek the Horrible.

And that was not acceptable. No matter how compatible they were sexually.

She extricated herself from his arms and looked around for her dress.

“Come back to bed,” he said lazily. “I wish to hold you.”

Gah! Why? Why couldn't he just send her on her way when he was done? That would make it so much easier. She couldn't look at him because she was afraid of what she'd see on his face.

She found her dress on the floor and was about to toss it back on when strong arms hauled her back onto the mattress.

"We are not done," Ulrek whispered into her ear. He grabbed her dress and chucked it across the room. "Next time, I'll throw it into the hall."

"You ass!" She whipped around.

He only grinned at her, his eyes glimmering with amusement.

Then she recalled his words from earlier. *Let me be the villain.*

Delaney realized he'd done that on purpose to get her to redirect her negative thoughts toward him. She deflated. It wasn't fair. She wanted to hate him, but she couldn't.

An alert from his comm rescued her from another round of cuddling.

"This is important. I need to take it in my office," he said, his face turning serious. "I expect you to be here when I return."

He pulled on his pants, then pulled her in for a scorching kiss that left her breathless.

"Don't make me chase you down again when I'm done."

Then he was stepping out of his quarters, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

Chapter 22

Ulrek

Ulrek froze the moment he opened the door to his room. Delaney's scent was fresh. Had she decided to visit him? He looked around his room, hoping to see her on his bed. But it was empty. She wasn't here. He deflated.

He sighed at the sight of the sad-looking kima plant sitting on his table. She must have dropped it off while he was busy training with Berus.

It wasn't like he needed the training. But fighting the massive male was one of the only ways to stop himself from hunting Delaney down again.

Delaney had left the second she had the chance a few days ago, though Ulrek hadn't been surprised. She was still fighting the feelings between them. He didn't blame her. What female would want a disgraced Dominion captain who had the largest bounty ever offered on his head? What female would want the one who'd captained the ship that had stolen people and goods from her home?

He rubbed his chest and the constant tightness there. It was hard to focus on anything else but Delaney. He could never remember what he had to do, but somehow always knew where on his ship she was.

Even Emil had teased him about it, but that had stopped when Ulrek admitted, in the privacy of the ship's bridge, that it might be a mate bond. Unfulfilled mate bonds were

dangerous, and now he wondered if his navigator thought him unfit to captain.

He put his PPC down on the table and picked up the plant. It was only a small section that Delaney had potted up in fresh substrate. The chop and repot hadn't done anything to make it look better. In fact, it looked like it wouldn't last the day. He doubted it was worth Delaney's time to try to recover it at this stage.

He could always see if Ship's Alive, the depot on Vosthea from which Ulrek ordered all his ship's live components, had gotten another one in. The owner came from the same planet as Ulrek and had a collection of rare flora from their home. Plants and animals from his home rarely made it when being transported this far out. It had been pure luck that one of them even survived.

He looked over at the plant sadly. Survived for a while, anyway.

Ulrek turned on his PPC, found the greenhouse's contact, and commed it through the ship system. They had already placed Delaney's order for the greenroom, and it should be ready for pickup when they get to Vosthea.

"Ulrek. How can I help you? Is this about the order request you put in?"

"Actually, has that shipment with the kima arrived yet? The one I have didn't like my ship."

The older male laughed. "They are finicky, for sure. I managed to get the one I kept to grow, but no signs of flowering yet."

Ulrek recalled the amazing fragrance of the kima flower and suddenly felt achingly homesick, despite having been exploring the galaxy for most of his adult life. Even when he'd been a Dominion Captain, he rarely had the chance to visit his home world. Now, he would never set foot on it again.

"I'm sure you'll get some soon."

“You are in luck, Ulrek. The shipment arrived just a few days ago. Not all the plants made it, but I have a kima here if you want a replacement.”

“Yes indeed. Please hold it for me.”

“Of course. But only if you come in to see me and tell me all the adventures you’ve gone on recently.”

“I’ll bore you to death.”

“I highly doubt it.”

Ulrek set a time to pick up everything he needed for the ship, assured the owner of Ship’s Alive he would be there, and disconnected the comm.

They would be in Kean’s compound on Vosthea in a few days, and Ulrek would be able to walk off his ship as himself for once. That tiny but heavily fortified corner of Vosthea was their home base, and they’d be among friends again. They wouldn’t be there long, just enough to refuel, get updated with all the gossip, pick up all the things they needed from the local supply depots, and let his crew have a few days of rest before starting their next mission.

He pulled up the video feed from the ship’s greenroom. Delaney had yet another load of contaminated substrate and plant matter ready to be spaced. She walked over to the panel by the door, probably to call Berus to help her take it to the airlock.

Ulrek connected to the greenroom instead, and the signal chimed just as she reached for the panel. She frowned and took the call.

“Hello?”

Her voice made him smile.

“It’s your captain.”

Her face brightened for a fraction of a second, like she was happy to hear from him, before she rearranged her features. She sighed heavily. “What do you want?”

“So much disrespect and willful insubordination. I should bend you over that bench and spank your ass for defying my last orders.”

Her jaw twitched, then she looked up and directly into the camera. “If I recall correctly, Captain, you ordered me to stay in your bed. However, the last time I checked, warming your bed wasn’t one of my duties.”

No, it wasn’t. But warming her bed was one of his. Whatever was between them was too big for him to resist. This *had* to be the mate bond. The Stars *would* punish him by bonding him to a female who hated him and would never forgive him.

She tolerated him and seemed to secretly enjoy their bantering, but he could feel her guilt after every tender moment they shared. It was why he hadn’t hunted her down and dragged her back when he returned to an empty room the other day. He was giving her time to come to terms with the encounter before initiating another one.

But Ulrek was a selfish male; he wouldn’t have survived this long if he wasn’t. He wasn’t sure how long he could last before he stomped into the greenroom again, undoing all the trust he was trying to build by waiting for her to come to him.

Delaney was his. He’d told her as much in the throes of passion many times, and she accepted the statement just fine when she was out of her mind with lust. It was afterward, when she thought too hard about it, and who he was, that she fought their connection.

Ulrek had tried to make it easier on her by playing the villain and putting the blame on himself, but that hadn’t helped. Not the way he’d hoped anyway. If giving her space and time and redirecting her guilt wasn’t working, then he’d need to try another option.

He’d have to tell her she was his mate and force her to spend time alone with him, hoping the mate bond did the

rest. It was risky, though. It would give her all the power. She could ruin him simply by rejecting him, and she'd know it.

"Are you going to say something, or are you just going to sit there and stare at me?" She crossed her arms over her chest.

Ulrek almost stomped over to the greenroom that very instant to teach his mouthy female a lesson but stopped himself.

"You can space the rest of the kima. I have a fresh one coming."

Delaney looked disappointed for some reason. "Okay. I didn't think they would survive anyway. Is that all?"

Come visit me in my quarters. Let me hold you again.

But he kept those thoughts to himself.

"We are setting a course to Vosthea in one galactic hour. So get everything out of the airlock by then."

"Sure thing, boss." Then she disconnected the call.

Chapter 23

Delaney

Delaney brought the mug to her mouth and inhaled the nutty aroma that flooded her nose. This was as close to a hazelnut latte as she was going to get this far from Earth. She took a sip and moaned appreciatively.

“Good, isn’t it?” Sarah asked before taking a sip of her own.

“Would it be blasphemy if I said it’s better than the stuff back on Earth?” Delaney put her mug down on the low table in front of her and lounged back on the giant floor cushion.

“Not at all. I agree.”

Sarah was a petite woman with soft brown eyes and a thick mane of dark silky hair. She wore a comfortable-looking but still elegant silky dress with subtle beading, and a light touch of makeup that accented her delicate features. She wasn’t what Delaney had expected the mate of the outer planet’s largest Euphora producer, not to mention owner of an entire planet, to look like.

Her sister Chrissy, Zharor’s mate, looked more the part. She had colorful koi fish tattooed all over one arm and wore an indecently short dress encrusted in jewels. Her heels were so high they could only be for sitting in—though she’d walked in them earlier when they’d been showing Delaney the compound—and her bejeweled headband looked ridiculously heavy. Delaney had no clue how she kept it on.

They were in Kean’s stronghold on Vosthea. The crew had visibly relaxed the moment they landed, and Ulrek had

stepped out of the ship as himself. This place was a safe haven, but the rest of Vosthea was still dangerous for Ulrek and his crew.

Vosthea had started out as a hideout for criminals and other unsavory types. When Kean had taken over, he'd portioned out the planet and distributed each territory to leaders who'd pledged their allegiance to him. Though one could only trust crooks and outlaws so much.

Delaney appreciated Sarah and Chrissy's offer to show her around the compound, especially since most of the crew had gone off to see friends and get personal errands done while they were here; technically, they were still on leave for two more days.

The compound was beautiful, a perfect blend of nature and technology. The whole thing was built around an inner courtyard, though the word didn't do it justice. It was more like a park, with ponds, rivers, mazes of walkways, and wooded areas.

Delaney loved it. She wondered if they could bring a design like this to Reka 5.

They had returned to Kean's residence after the tour to enjoy some local joulka, the Tallean equivalent of coffee. It was grown all over the galaxy, but the joulka here was quite different from the stuff at Reka 5, since every planet produced a unique strain. Kind of like coffee beans, except the differences were a lot more noticeable to the average drinker.

Delaney's eyes landed once again on Chrissy's shoes as the woman crossed her legs. They looked like a pair of glass slippers, a la Cinderella, except they were dark red and had formations of colorless, clear crystals growing out of them. They were fit for a villain in a fairytale.

"I have to ask, how do you even walk in those things? I mean, they're stunning, but damn, they look dangerous."

Chrissy straightened a leg and turned her foot from side to side. "They're not too bad once you get used to them. This is

more Zharor's taste than mine. But he gets all excited when I put them on, so..." She shrugged. "Don't get me wrong, I love them, and they're gorgeous. I'm happy to wear them."

"Zharor likes to dress her and Zara up," Sarah said. "It's a Tallean thing."

Zara was Zharor and Chrissy's small daughter. Delaney had met the cute little tyke earlier, as well as Kanon, Sarah and Kean's son. Zara had been wearing a pouffy dress fit for a princess and loving every minute of it. An older Tallean woman had picked up the kids so the women could have a girl's day.

"I thought the fancy outfits were only something merchants did." Delaney thought of Jillian, who sometimes dressed similarly.

"It depends on personal taste," Sarah said. "I like things more understated, and so does Kean. But if Chrissy and I sit in on meetings, we have to dress to impress. It's like an advertisement of wealth and power."

"And you're okay just being arm candy at the meeting?" She thought back to the females from the Euphora deal back on Reka 5. They'd been dressed to the nines too.

"Oh no, we listen in and keep an eye on the transaction," Chrissy explained. "We take note of anything our mates might miss. It's also on us to get as much information out of the companions as possible."

"Some females really are just arm candy," Sarah admitted, "and know jack shit about what's happening. But sometimes, it's the opposite. The woman busting out of a corset is the one making the deal, and the guy's just there to show off his big muscles."

"I see." Tallean business really was as opulent and showy as she'd thought.

"But most of the time, they're more than just a pretty face. And some act dumb to try to get information out of you, so be

careful,” Chrissy said. “ You’ll have to be vigilant if you are accompanying Ulrek or Uzzar.”

“Honestly,” Sarah said, “I’m surprised that as Ulrek’s mate, you are dressed so casually. I’d have pegged him as one who liked to go all out. But I guess you do spend a lot of time on a ship.”

Oops. Delaney hadn’t even thought to clarify it when she first met the other two.

“Oh no, I’m not his mate.” *We’re just having the most mind-blowing sex ever.* “I’m his ship’s greenroom technician. Nothing more.” *Liar! You’re such a lying liar.*

Sarah wrinkled her nose. “Really? I’m pretty sure Ulrek told Kean you were his mate.”

“And Zharor said, and I quote, ‘Let’s go meet the poor female who’s Ulrek’s mate’,” Chrissy added. “*And he calls you his Star. That’s usually reserved for mates.*”

Delaney had known that but had ignored it, hoping it was just a term of endearment Ulrek tossed around with all the females he fucked.

“It’s okay, Delaney.” Sarah slid over and put a hand on her shoulder. “No judgement here. You’re among friends. Trust me, I never thought I’d end up married to the biggest drug dealer in the galaxy. It was a shock, too.”

“I mean, Ulrek is kind of a tough sell.” Chrissy leaned over to place her drink on the low table, her breasts threatening to spill out of her dress when she did so. “But he’s got some redeeming qualities, too. He is extremely loyal to his friends. Zharor used to hate him, but he saw how Ulrek would literally jump in front of blaster fire for Kean, and it changed his mind. He’s probably the type who’d level a planet for his mate.”

“No, I mean it. I’m not his mate. He hired me to...” But as the words left her lips, she got a sinking feeling in her belly. She covered her mouth with a palm as the realization fully set in. Hadn’t he mentioned Kean’s tailor? “Oh god. He really does think I’m his mate.”

“Uh oh.” Sarah exchanged a look with Chrissy. “Okay, so when Chrissy and Zharor first got together, he didn’t tell her she was his mate until he found out she was pregnant with his kid.”

Whoa. How had *that* happened? It took a lot of effort for cross-species pregnancies. She made a mental note to ask about that when she wasn’t freaking out about her own surprise change in marital status.

“It wasn’t as bad as that makes it sound.” Chrissy put a palm out. “I didn’t exactly give him the opportunity to tell me.”

Delaney thought back to her last meeting with Ulrek. She’d snuck out of his room and done the short walk of shame back to her own. She’d stayed hidden there or in the greenroom ever since, though she did go back to drop off the plant.

A tiny part of her had hoped he’d catch her while she was there, but he hadn’t. And then, when he’d contacted her through the ship’s system after, she’d secretly imagined him charging in to carry her back to his room. She’d felt guilty for even thinking it because of course she did.

“I’m so dense.” She scrubbed her hand down her face. “Ugh, the last time we were alone, I told him I hated his guts. I snuck out of his room.”

The two other women exchanged a look.

“But you’re okay staying at his place tonight?” Sarah asked.

Delaney paled. Staying at Ulrek’s place? She hadn’t even thought about that. There’d be nowhere to hide from the cuddling. And the nuzzling. And the waking up in his arms. And he’d probably insist she ate straight from his fingers.

Gah! Her heart wouldn’t be able to take it. She’d fall so fast she’d shatter into a million pieces when she hit the bottom.

“You have a genuinely terrified look on your face,” Sarah said, suddenly serious. “Do you need help? We can get you somewhere safe if you need us to.”

Chrissy put a hand up. “Hold on a second. I’m not sure keeping Ulrek away from the one he believes to be his mate is a good idea. You saw what happened when they tried to keep Zharor from me. And Ulrek’s even crazier than him.”

“We have rules here at the compound,” Sarah said. “Females are protected, and no one can force us to do anything we don’t want. Not even Ulrek. I don’t care how scary he is.”

Delaney didn’t want to stir up any trouble. “No, no. It’s not like that. He’s not locking me up and making me his sex slave. That part is totally consensual.”

“But?” Chrissy waved her hand, encouraging Delaney to explain herself.

Delaney sighed. “I just came out of one crappy relationship. I’m not ready for another. And plus, it’s *Ulrek*. They call him Ulrek the Horrible on Reka 5. He captained the ship that stole people from Earth. I can’t have a relationship with him.” Delaney looked around, realizing she was getting loud, but they were still alone. “I mean I know I have shitty taste in men, but this is going too far.”

“Do you like him?” Chrissy asked.

“No.” Such a lie. “Maybe...okay, yes. I do, okay? But I feel so guilty about it.”

“Because he’s Ulrek?” Sarah sent her a sympathetic look.

“One hundred percent because he’s Ulrek. It feels like I’m betraying Earth.”

“Man, that’s tough,” Chrissy said. “But ultimately, you’re not. He switched sides years ago. And denying yourself won’t change history.” She had a point.

“He isn’t the tyrant I thought he was,” Delaney admitted. “And he *did* feed my asshole ex to a coilbeast. But that still doesn’t mean it’s right.”

Sarah’s mouth fell open. “Wait. He did *what* now?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I have time.”

Chrissy nodded, her eyes wide. “So do I.”

Delaney drank more of her joulka and told them about getting kidnapped by Craig and Eric only to find out they were helping bounty hunters who were looking for Ulrek, and then having their time at Reka 5 cut short.

“I wonder if that’s why Kean was looking up the whereabouts of Gritarr,” Sarah mused.

“That’s the guy who sent the two bounty hunters,” Delaney said.

“Interesting.” Sarah leaned back in her seat. “He was Ulrek’s second-in-command back on the *Stellar Fortune* and betrayed him bigtime. The guy’s been after his bounty for years now.”

“Weren’t the boys talking for a while about luring him out into the open and just offing him?” Chrissy asked.

“Yup. I guess the plan is back on the table. I bet that’s what they’re discussing right now.”

Sarah’s comm buzzed on the table, and she glanced at it quickly. “It’s the guys. They’re heading back.” She squared a look at Delaney. “Last chance for us to whisk you away to your own room, if that’s what you want.”

Did she want to keep hiding from Ulrek? Now that Delaney knew he thought of her as his mate, it changed things. Talleans only had one mate. And if Ulrek thought that was her, then that was it.

Claiming someone was a mate was a huge thing. Like, life-changing huge. It was like proposing, except if the person said no, the one doing the claiming slowly—or not so slowly—went crazy from the rejection. If she really wanted Ulrek to suffer for his past, she could just keep denying him. Some rejected mates literally died from the heartbreak. She could destroy him just by telling him no.

Here lies Ulrek the Horrible, slayed by a broken heart.

She might have started out hating him, but she didn't anymore. Hadn't for a while, if she was honest. And every time she told him that she hated him, she'd really meant something else. But she wasn't ready to be his mate. Nope.

"I never forgave him, and a part of me feels like I never could. The other Tallean males on his ship had been on the *Stellar Fortune* too, but I don't feel animosity towards them. I even consider Berus a friend, and he was the one with the blaster, physically corralling people into the pen." Delaney huffed out a breath, glad to finally put all her thoughts into words. "I've talked to them all, and in my head, I don't see them as evil. I know 'just following orders' isn't an excuse, but at the same time, I see them as real people who were raised with different beliefs that they had to overcome. They deserve another chance. But with Ulrek." She spread her hands.

"It's because he was the captain," Sarah said. "And infamous. And he acts like a jerk sometimes. It's easy to focus all the blame on him. But Dominion captains don't make decisions. When the Favored tells them to jump, they ask how high."

"Yeah, I get that now. But I still can't just forgive him because he said sorry."

Sarah looked pensive. "In your head, is there anything he could do, within reason, to make up for what he's done?"

Delaney thought about it. "Speaking as your average Reka 5 colonist, the top answer would be *go die in a fire.*"

"Sounds like a lot of anger, which I get. But it's unfair to ask someone to do something you've already deemed impossible."

Damn it, why did Sarah have to make so much sense?

"I know what he'd done and continue to do for Reka 5, and appreciate it, but it was for revenge. It's all about revenge for him. He doesn't really care."

“I heard *Captain Uzzar* was recently responsible for freeing hundreds of humans bound for the inner planets. Maybe the next time you’re back on Reka 5, you can ask around about it.”

I frowned. “He never told me that.”

Even Chrissy looked surprised.

“No, because he’s not doing it for a pat on the back. Maybe it was only an act of revenge, but Ulrek is proud, and he’s lost a lot already. It’s easier for him to say that’s all it is than to admit he’s trying to make up for his mistakes. Especially since it’s already deemed impossible by everyone who matters.” Sarah pushed the hair off her face.

“I never thought of it like that. I have a lot to mull over.”

Sarah shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m wrong. I’m biased because Ulrek’s one of Kean’s closest friends. It’s hard to hate him when he’s saving my husband’s life on a regular basis. Do you need a place to hide out while you think?”

“No. I think it’s time we actually talked, like adults.” She also didn’t want to start these friendships asking for favors.

“I’m glad. I’d hide you if I had to, but I really don’t want to find out what Ulrek would do if I did.”

“Neither do I,” Chrissy agreed. She clapped her hands together. “Oh! I have an idea. How much time should we have before the guys get here?”

“Not too much. Why?” Sarah asked.

Chrissy stood, took Delaney by the hand, and pulled her toward her room.

“We’re going to get you dolled up for dinner.”

Chapter 24

Ulrek

Ulrek leaned into the high-backed leather chair in Kean's office. "They knew we were on New Rhea. They knew the details too, right down to which merchant I visited."

"What are you suggesting, Ulrek? You think there's someone feeding Gritarr information?" Kean always got straight to the point.

"Maybe. I don't think it's my crew on the Revenge, but I can't speak to the rest of my fleet."

"We also have a lot of people here at the compound—guards and workers—who know about your various goings and comings," the Vosthean ruler added.

Tuhror eyed the door warily, where two guards stood just outside.

Kean waved the idea away. "Not them. They are loyal."

"To you, perhaps. Not to Ulrek, nor me. The Dominion is offering a lot of credits."

It wasn't just for Ulrek, either. They'd put large bounties on Tuhror, Ckzarr, and Kirek too. The others who left the Dominion with them had been lower ranking and merited only trivial sums.

"I need to end this now," Ulrek said. "The other bounty hunters I can deal with when they come, but it's high time I took care of Gritarr."

The crew had spoken at their last casual meeting. Gritarr was his worst and toughest adversary, and it was time they got rid of him for good. They were done being civil.

“What do you suggest?” asked Zharor.

“I want to lure him out, and I want to use whoever is feeding him information to do it. Gritarr would never let the bounty hunters take me back to the Dominion without bringing me to him first. He’s like that. Always flaunting his achievements. He’d want to throw the fact that he’d captured me in my face.”

Tuhror snorted and rolled his eyes. “He’d probably make a big speech too and force us to listen to the whole damned thing.”

“I heard he’s playing mates with Neyala on Aton Station,” Zharor said. “The Dominion sent him there to recover the Station and keep an eye on the outer planets.”

“I have to find out who is slipping him information,” Kean said. “If they are in my compound, they will regret it.” He looked thoughtful, then pulled something up on his screen. “Aha. I think I have just the mission for you. There’s a Euphora delivery going to Phaeta Outpost.”

“That’s close to Aton Station.” Ulrek steeped his fingers. “Close enough that Gritarr might even decide to try to swing by to say hello.”

Kean grinned. “It is. The rendezvous spot is usually one of the abandoned stations on the moon.”

“Who is the delivery for? Can we trust them?”

Kean waved his concerns aside. “I don’t think we need to worry about the client. Let’s just say the Dominion doesn’t like them much more than they like you. They might help you just to spite the Dominion.”

Ulrek hummed, reviewing the map of the moon in question. “There are several abandoned stations on that moon. If we tell my fleet one time and location, and you give

another set of information to those working here, we can figure out where the leak is coming from depending on where and when Gritarr and his team shows up.”

“That would work. An extra ship waiting close by with a loyal crew will be there, should you need it.”

Ulrek checked the date of the mission. “It’s the same date I’m supposed to drop by the supply depots. We’ll leave Delaney and Tahra here when we go.”

“Definitely. I want Tahra as far away from danger as possible.”

When they had all the details finalized, Kean stood. “I’m famished. Let’s pick up some food and find our mates.”

“Your mate?” Tuhror eyed Ulrek. “Did you finally tell her?”

“Soon.” Tonight. She’d have a few days in his suite with him before the mission. He’d have a few days in his suite with her before the mission. Hopefully, it’d be enough time to convince her.

If she still shunned him, he wouldn’t have long before madness consumed him whole. He’d know by tonight. If the Stars were not in his favor, there’d still be time to finish the mission and make sure Tuhror took the mantle of captain without the threat hanging overhead.

“Good.” He turned to include Kean and Zharor. “You tamed warriors go home to your females. I’ll go to the bar. I’m too smart to get tied down by a female.” Tuhror put his hand to his chest briefly, then left.

His second-in-command had no idea Ulrek planned on gifting him the ship should he fail to convince Delaney to be his. It was the best option; he wouldn’t be fit to lead. Even now, he could feel the monster in him clawing to get out, and Delaney had only been avoiding him for a few days. How much worse would it get?

He wasn’t going to let who he was put the people he cared about in danger any more than it already had. His crew was

his family, and Ulrek would do anything for them, even give up his position as captain.

They stopped to pick up food and drink to bring back to their living quarters. Kean had kept a private suite for Ulrek on the same floor and wing of the compound as he and Zharor for him to use whenever he was not in space. He claimed it was the least he could do after Ulrek refused the section of Vosthea he'd offered him.

Before stepping into the semi-private foyer that joined their rooms, Ulrek stopped and turned to Kean and Zharor. "I have a favor to ask of you both."

"Ulrek asking for a favor? That is rare." Zharor looked surprised.

"If Delaney still rejects me as her mate by the time I leave for the mission, I want you to hide her from me and keep her safe."

Shock registered on their faces.

"When we first met, she hated me. I've already messed up her life once by taking her from Earth; I'm not going to do it again by forcing her to be with me. She ignored me for days on the ship, and I could feel the madness start. I don't trust myself. I won't be fit to captain. Tuhror doesn't know it yet, because I know he'd protest, but the ship will recognize him as captain if I fail to return to its helm."

Kean spoke first. "I swear to you it will be done. I hope for everyone that you manage to convince her."

"I hated you for years too," Zharor said, "simply for who you are. But I have learned that you are not who I thought you were. I'm honored you are trusting me with this. I accept."

Ulrek relaxed. Knowing that Delaney would always be safe, even from him, gave him peace of mind. "My thanks."

He schooled his features and walked into the foyer. The females met them inside, talking and lounging on the leather seats.

Ulrek's jaw dropped when he saw Delaney in the green and gold Tallean-style gown. It wrapped around her curves, shoving her breasts way up on display. Sparkling gems edged the low neckline. A high slit, also accented with gems, showed off her legs, which glowed with gold dust.

She didn't wear any shoes, probably because Sarah and Chrissy's feet were smaller, but her ankle was decorated with a beaded gold chain.

Ulrek almost forgot how to breathe. She was always beautiful, but right now she was ravishing. This was exactly what he'd imagined when he'd mentioned Kean's tailor-cum-dressmaker. She'd be perfect on his arm at his next Euphora or arms deal.

He wondered if she was wearing one of those annoying scraps of fabric humans called underwear beneath the dress.

"You going to sit, Ulrek? Or do you plan to eat standing?" Zharor said with a smirk. He'd already sat down next to his mate.

Fuck. He'd frozen in place when he saw Delaney. Ulrek placed the wrapped package of food on the table and sat down next to her.

The delicious-smelling skewers of perfectly-roasted, tender meat, bite-sized sweets, and local mead had nothing on Delaney. Especially when they went through the motions of what mated couples did, with Delaney taking nibbles of the food from his fingers and sharing delicate sips of his drink.

Any onlooker would assume they were three mated couples.

At the end of their meal, Nouma showed up with Kanon and Zara, and Ulrek felt a twinge of envy at his friends' collective fortune. This was what he wanted, though he hadn't realized it until this very moment. He'd always thought he'd continue captaining the *Revenge* until the Dominion finally caught him. Then he'd die in a ball of flames, taking down as many of his enemies as he could.

But a mate and offspring? A family?

"I'll return tomorrow to take the two little rulers again," Nouma promised.

"Nouma?" Ulrek said. "Can you call the tailor to come by tomorrow after the mid-day meal?"

"Of course."

Delaney didn't even hesitate when Ulrek opened the door to his suite and ushered her inside. She was a little tipsy from the sips she'd taken of his drink, and she leaned on him, hugging his arm.

"So this is your place here." She looked around, her eyes settling on the large couch.

He brought her over to it, sat down, and pulled her to stand between his legs, careful with her borrowed dress. The fabric shifted, giving him a good view right up her legs. That answered the question of whether she was still wearing her Earth underwear or not.

She was.

"Let's get this dress off you before we damage anything." If it was a dress he'd had made for her, Ulrek wouldn't mind losing a few gems; they could always get them sewn back on. But this was Chrissy's.

He peeled the fancy garment off her, kissing every piece of skin as it was unwrapped and exposed. She stepped out of the gown, and Ulrek laid it carefully over the back of his couch before pulling a mostly-naked Delaney into his lap.

"Wait, Ulrek," she put a hand on his chest. "We...we need to talk."

Ulrek frowned. According to things he had heard from the human males on his ship, those were not good words.

"We can talk in the morning."

"No. This is important. We have to talk now before the liquid courage fades." She reached a hand to his face, her

fingers brushing his skin lightly.

Ulrek grunted. "Okay. Speak."

Chapter 25

Ulrek

“Am I your mate?” Delaney’s words hung in the air between them.

Ulrek hadn’t hidden this fact from Kean or Zharor. Their mates must have told her. That was fine. He’d planned on telling her tonight anyway.

He cupped her cheek, and Delaney closed her eyes and leaned into his palm. Stars! He wanted to nuzzle her so badly. “Yes. You are.”

Her brows drew together. “You’re one hundred percent sure? You’re not saying that just to get what you want?”

“I’d never lie about something so important. You’re mine.” He rubbed his nose along the long column of her neck, inhaling her scent. “I know you hate me. But I promise I’ll spend the rest of our lives together trying to convince you not to if you’ll give me the chance.”

Delaney made a strangled sound as he nipped at her throat. “Ulrek.” She pushed him away, scrambling off his lap. “I can’t think when you’re touching me. Please. I...I don’t hate you. But I think you know that.”

He did. But she hated herself for not hating him, and that was worse. “You feel guilty for enjoying your time with me.”

“Yes. And the only reason I feel guilty is because I still believe you are the villain. I haven’t forgiven you.”

“I can’t change the past, but if you demand I fly into the nearest star to earn your forgiveness, I will.” Whatever it took to make her happy.

Her eyes dropped to her hands. “I’m not sure that would work.”

Ulrek felt all his hopes crash and burn. “Then let me hold you and pretend for the next few days. Then I promise you’ll never need to see me again.”

Delaney’s lips wobbled, and there were unshed tears in her eyes. “I’m afraid that won’t work either.”

“Then what do you want from me? I’m not a male to beg, but I’m on my knees for you.” And he was. He knelt beside her and dug his fingers into the couch, trying hard to ignore the voice in him that demanded he grab her, hold her, and love her.

“I heard you saved a bunch of humans from ending up in the inner planets recently.”

Ulrek blinked, surprised she was bringing this up. He knew more than anyone that it wasn’t enough. Nothing was ever enough. It was why he hadn’t told her about it.

“Yes. And no, I do not expect you to forgive me because of that. No one has, and no one will.”

“Why did you do it?”

“For revenge.” The rehearsed words came out so easily. “To spit in the Dominion’s face.”

There was a new look in her eyes, a calculated one, like she’d caught him in a lie. Ulrek had no idea what she thought she’d uncovered.

“I bet the Dominion hate that their turncoat is still messing up their plans after all these years.”

“Yes.”

“Except you didn’t do it as Ulrek. You did it as Uzzar. So the Dominion has no idea.”

Ulrek didn't reply.

"And you told me you did those last runs on Earth for credits."

"I did."

"What were the credits for?"

"I needed to get away."

"Where are those credits now?"

Ulrek frowned, not understanding where Delaney was going with this. "I spent them."

"Berus said the Dominion was going to waste the part of your crew who were loyal to you, sacrifice them to pirates. You promised them you'd get them out. You used the credits on them and the new crew. You used it to reach Tahra, bring her out of the inner planets, and pay for her schooling."

Ulrek set his jaws. "Tuhror is like a brother to me. Tahra is his only surviving blood. Berus, Kirek, Ckzarr are loyal, as are the others who now run the other ships in my fleet. And Vhast was just a youngster, barely out of the Academy. I couldn't let them die because of me."

He knew he was about to lose his mate forever because he couldn't lie to her. "I regret hurting you. I regret hurting the people of Reka 5, both Talleans and humans. But I also know that if I were given the same choices, I'd do it all over again. For them. They're my family. I'll never regret saving them. I'd die for them."

He waited for Delaney to tell him it was over. This was what she was waiting for, wasn't it? For him to regret *everything*? Wasn't that what everyone wanted from him? That, and to die in a fire? But one look at Tuhror's smug mug, Berus as he shoveled food into his mouth, or Vhast as he explored the outer planets with a grin, and Ulrek knew he'd never regret any action that led to them being here today.

But Delaney didn't tell him to leave. She just nodded and said, "They are good people. I like them. I'm not asking you to

regret saving them.”

Since he was laying his soul bare, he might as well tell her everything, even if she wouldn't believe him. “I'm not proud of the things I'd done when I was part of the Dominion, especially after living in the outer planets and learning a new way of life. It wasn't just taking humans from Earth. I have committed many more atrocities to the Talleans here in the name of the Goddess. Do I wish I could make up for what I did? Of course. But I know that's not possible.”

“I think I've heard enough,” she said quietly.

And there it was; it was coming. She was going to say the words that would destroy him. “Can I hold you one last time?” He clawed the couch, shoving down the dark monster that threatened to rip out from his skin.

“No.”

Stars! Why had he thought he could hold it together long enough to do the mission? He wasn't even sure he could survive long enough to get to the door. If he ran now, maybe he could reach Kean's door in time to warn him, have him protect—

“You can't hold me one last time because this won't be the last time,” Delaney said. “You claim it's impossible to make up for the things you'd done, yet you try anyway, hiding it under the guise of revenge. And don't deny it. There are plenty of other ways to get at the Dominion, but you only choose the ones that benefit the people you've wronged. And you do it under Uzzar's name, so I know it's not only to clear yours.”

Ulrek was silent as he processed the words. They almost didn't make sense at first.

“You want people to think you don't have a heart. But I see you, Ulrek. You *do* have a heart. But I get it; you're no typical hero, but you've never pretended to be one. There's a saying that heroes would sacrifice you to save the world, but a villain would sacrifice the world to save you. You'd sacrifice it all for the people you love and care about.

“I know some people will say that’s not enough. That you *have* to regret it all. That continuing to choose your family, because your crew *is* your family, over the greater good means you haven’t learned your lesson. But screw those people. I’d do the same for those I love, and maybe it means I’m a bad person too, but I don’t care. It’s enough for me. I know I’m only one person, but I forgive you, Ulrek.”

Delaney took a shaky breath. “I’m not saying you’re off the hook. And I’m not agreeing to the mate thing yet. Humans don’t just fall in love and say ‘I do’ like that.” She snapped her fingers. “I need time. But I’m willing to work with you and see where things go. Okay? We can date.” She made a face. “That sounds wrong. Let me try again. *We can test compatibility.*”

Ulrek was able to breathe again. Testing compatibility was a tentative yes, and in this case, the mate bond already existed, so Ulrek knew they were compatible. Elation filled him, and he reached for her, pulling her into his arms.

“Thank you.” He closed his eyes and thanked the Stars for the wonder they’d given him.

“But revert to your old ways, and I’ll be gone so fast.”

“I understand.”

Delaney blew out a breath as if she’d been the one waiting on the decision.

“It started off as just revenge,” Ulrek admitted. “But as I spent more time out here, it changed. I believe my crew feels the same. But seriously, if I’d done those things in my own name, everyone would be making bets on what my ulterior motives were.”

Delaney chuckled. “Yes. Yes, they would.”

They sat there in each other’s arms for a long moment before Ulrek carried her to his bedroom and set her on the bed.

“Ooh, this is nice,” Delaney purred as she luxuriated on the silky sheets. “We need to get a set of these for the Revenge.”

“Does that mean you’re moving into my quarters?” Ulrek tore off his clothes and tossed them on the bench at the foot of the bed.

“Maybe. It depends.”

“On what?” He sat down on the edge.

“On how well you convince me now.” Then she was tossing her leg over him, straddling him, and pressing her lips to his.

Ulrek wanted to roar in triumph.

This was the first time she’d initiated the wonderful human ritual of kissing with him. He kissed her back, hungry and greedy for everything he could get from her. He loved a good chase and struggle, but this was wonderful too.

She moved on him, her body pressing to his in all the right places. By the end of the kiss, he was hard and ready for her. He reached for her underwear, and it was already soaked. Too impatient, he ripped it from her.

Then he was thrusting into his mate and taking her to the stars.

Chapter 26

Delaney

Delaney, Gavin, and Tahra stepped out of the transport and into the sales yard of Ship's Alive, the purveyor of all things that grew in space. Unlike the greenhouses on Reka 5, which focused on everything needed in the colony, Ship's Alive focused strictly on plants and animals of the spacefaring variety that traveled well and had use on a ship.

A Tallean female with her hair in a knot greeted them at the door. "Have a seat. We're just getting the last of your order put together. The owner will be out soon." Then she went back to work tending to the tepins.

Tepins were the preferred livestock on ships because they were so quiet and easy to care for. The rotund flightless birds were delicious, too. They weren't exactly like Earth birds, because instead of feathers, they had downy fur and quills. But they did have beaks and bird-like clawed feet. The top of their heads sported crests that always reminded Delaney of tiny little Mohawks.

They'd ordered several dozens of these creatures since Berus could eat a few in a single sitting if they let him.

The rest of the crew was on board the ship, which had left for its special mission. Ulrek had called a private meeting and told them all about the plan. Most of the crew looked glad they were finally doing something to get rid of the thorn in their side, but Delaney was nervous. So many things could go wrong.

"You're thinking of the crew," Tahra said. "I was like that too when I first joined up. Every time they went off the ship for a mission, I'd sit in the medbay imagining all the horrible things that could happen to them." Tahra put a comforting hand on hers. "Trust me. It gets easier with every mission."

"I hope so."

That must be why they gave those staying behind such a long to-do list: to keep them distracted. Picking up the

supplies and bringing everything back to the hangar in Kean's compound was a lot better than sitting around in Ulrek's suite, wondering if he was in mortal danger.

Tahra got up to walk around the large warehouse, taking in all the plants and animals. She bent to check out something, and Gavin made a strangled choking sound, his eyes planted squarely on her ass. The two had been making eyes at each other all day, and Delaney was sure Tahra was bending over directly in front of Gavin in that short skirt on purpose. For a Tallean woman, that was considered subtle. With the number of hints she'd been dropping, both here and back on the ship, Delaney wouldn't be surprised if she pulled him into her room the next time he walked by.

"Why not just go for it, Gavin?" she asked when Tahra had walked a little farther off.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, come on. Don't play dumb with me. I'm not blind. And neither is the rest of the crew. Tell me, how long did it take for everyone to suspect something was up between me and Ulrek?" It was great to be able to call Ulrek by his real name here on Vosthea.

He snorted. "Please. First day."

"Right. So yeah, just go for it."

Gavin huffed. "It's not that simple. First, she's like fresh out of school. Second, and most importantly, have you seen her brother? He'd pummel me."

At a few inches past six feet, Gavin was not a small guy. He was built too, with lean muscles and broad shoulders. But still, he had nothing on Tuhror.

"Oh, I don't know. Talleans are pretty open about sex in their culture. But you already know that."

He *had* hooked up with Ulia after the baths, so it wasn't like he was unfamiliar with Tallean females. And Delaney was sure

Tahra had done her own form of hunting while on Reka 5. It wasn't like she was saving herself for him or anything.

"Still, I'm not going to risk it. I like being alive, thank you very much."

Delaney laughed. "Fair enough. So I kind of feel bad about asking, but what's up with Ckzarr and Roxy? It's getting hard not to notice them making eyes at each other, but as far as I can tell, everything's still PG-13 between them."

"Yeah, they're...complicated."

A movement at the door caught her attention. Two armed Tallean males who hadn't been there before now stood in front of their only exit, their weapons across their chests. A feeling of wrongness filled her. Next to her, Gavin stiffened, and his hand quietly went to rest on the blaster strapped to his hip. Tahra hurried back to them, worry plain on her face.

The Tallean employee who had greeted them before looked just as confused. She pushed her trolley right up to them. "Excuse me? Can I help you?"

They ignored her.

"Please move. I need to get these outside." She tried to push the trolley through them.

"Boss said no one in or out," one of the males snarled, shoving the trolley back at her, making her stumble.

The door to the office slammed open.

"You promised me Ulrek, and all I see are two useless humans and a female." There was a sound of something being hit.

Tahra grabbed Delaney's forearm. "That's Gritarr," she whispered.

Shit. Ulrek had set a trap for Gritarr, but Gritarr had done the same for him.

"I swear he said he would be here," a shaky male voice bleated.

“I should have listened to my source. He was sure the *Revenge* was doing a deal for Kean at Station 3.” Gritarr strode toward them, his boots loud on the ground.

Behind him were two more armed males. They were woefully outmanned.

He grinned when he saw Tahra. “Well, well. Looks like I didn’t waste a trip to this hellhole after all. Tuhror’s sweet little sister.” He looked over to Delaney. “And you must be the female they said was new to his ship. He did always have a thing for human females.”

“See, they are not so useless after all,” said the owner of the warehouse, a crafty look on his face. “You can trade them for Ulrek. Ask for him as ransom. How about I get part of the pay?”

Gritarr ignored him. He addressed his guards instead. “Take the two females.” He marched toward the door. “Oh. And kill the owner.”

Ulrek

Ulrek watched his navigational screen as the other ship disappeared away behind the planet. The deal had gone exactly as planned. He'd recognized the buyer right away. They were part of an alliance of mercenaries who had blacklisted the Dominion.

The pair he and Berus had met up with had recognized Ulrek immediately too. The female looked ready to kick him in the face...or lower down...with all her claws extended but had managed to keep it civil long enough to complete the transaction. The male kept a semblance of courtesy; Ulrek was sure he'd have gutted him under any other circumstances.

It was always nerve-wracking to conduct these missions as himself and not as Uzzar, but it was necessary. The more the players in the outer planets interacted with him, the better. They needed to see that he was on their side now and not with the Dominion. Delaney had shown him how important that was.

Kean had once been an enemy of the outer planets too, but he was well respected now, so Ulrek decided there might be hope for him yet.

That was one of the benefits of completing tasks on Kean's behalf: it usually meant the other party was less likely to forfeit whatever deal was in progress just to have a chance to strangle him.

Ulrek checked the scanners, but there was nothing yet at either of the locations they'd leaked to the compound and his fleet. There were no ships incoming either. Gritarr and his hired goons were nowhere to be seen.

"He didn't take the bait." Emil looked as disappointed as Ulrek felt. "Should we wait a little longer?"

"No. If he was coming, he'd be here by now." Ulrek knew Gritarr. He would've been here early, eager to snatch both

parties and collect multiple bounties. “We knew it was a gamble.”

He made the announcement to his crew and then contacted the destroyer class stealth ship currently acting as backup. The other ship turned and headed back to Vosthea.

“No problem,” Emil said, rubbing a hand over his short, buzz-cut hair. “We’ll try again next time. At least we’re still close to Vosthea. If you’re willing to go through the asteroid field, we can get back there in half a day. Just give the word.”

Ulrek deferred to Tuhror, since he’d be the one piloting through the maze that separated Vosthea from Phaeta Outpost.

“I don’t mind the challenge. I’m kind of disappointed nothing happened.”

“Aren’t we all,” Emil agreed grimly.

“We’ll keep trying. I really don’t plan on giving up so easily. I want him dead.” Ulrek hadn’t named his ship the *Revenge* for nothing.

Besides, he had a mate to protect now. Delaney didn’t think of him as one yet, but for Ulrek, the mate bond had solidified. She was it for him forever. Gritarr would pose a big danger if he ever found out about her. He wouldn’t hesitate to hurt Delaney just to get to him.

He’d hated leaving Delaney back on Vosthea, but it was the safest option. He’d given her, Tahra, and Gavin a list of things to pick up for the ship, including their order from Ship’s Alive. Gavin and Tahra knew their way around the city, and they’d been working with the same vendors for the past two galactic years. He trusted them.

He’d announced to his crew that he and Delaney were a couple but refrained from calling her his mate. Yet. He wanted to give her time to adjust to the idea.

Gavin’s comm contact flashed on the screen, and Ulrek connected the call. It was audio only.

“He has Delaney and Tahra.” Gavin sounded winded. “Gritarr was at Ship’s Alive.”

Ice-cold dread flooded Ulrek’s veins.

“I...” Gavin groaned in pain. “I tried to stop them.”

“*Stop moving,*” said a panicked female voice. “You’re going to bleed out.” There was a shuffling sound. “Stupid male, you’re all the same, Tallean or Human. Oh, Stars. There’s so much blood.”

The comm ended.

“Fuck. We need to comm Kean.”

Emil was already doing it. As he did so, Tuhror searched for the signal coming from the tracker embedded in the side of Tahra’s leg. The signal still showed she was on Vosthea. They would have to get closer to pinpoint its exact location, but it was a start.

“Kean,” Ulrek said, not waiting for his friend to greet him. “Gritarr got to Delaney and Tahra. My male is bleeding out at Ship’s Alive. Send someone to retrieve him and lock down all the docks. Ground every ship.”

“Fuck. I’m on it.”

“Tuhror,” Ulrek said. “How fast can you fly this thing?”

Tuhror reached for the ship’s comm. “Everyone, strap your asses down. It’s going to get a little bumpy.”

Chapter 26

Delaney

Delaney tried to disappear into the shadows as Gritarr backhanded the uniformed male who had just told him every port on Vosthea was on lockdown.

She and Tahra sat side by side in a hangar, a guard watching them diligently. They were no longer in a part of Vosthea close to Kean's compound. Gritarr had stuffed them into a shuttle and flown them to another district.

The last thing Delaney saw as they were dragged out of the warehouse was Gavin on the floor, bleeding from a blaster wound. She had freaked out, and one of the goons had thrown her so hard on the ground that she'd split open her lip. Tahra didn't look much better. She'd straight up punched one of the assholes, and in return, he'd hit her with the butt of his blaster.

The only thing keeping Delaney going now was the hope that Ulrek would find them, see that she was injured, and murder all of the sons of bitches. Slowly.

Gritarr had just been filming a ransom video telling Ulrek and Tuhror to meet him at Aton Station alone, or else, when an alarm had gone off, messing up his recording. Although it wasn't just his recording that was messed up now: his whole plan was out the window, what with the ports locked down.

The douche rocket paced the area in front of his ship.

Since Gritarr was Dominion, Delaney had thought his ship would look like a Dominion vessel. But it and the crew all

looked...normal, civilian. There were no insignias on their uniforms, and the ship almost reminded her of a merchant's craft. It reminded her of Jillian and Jakkan, who worked undercover in Dominion space. This was The Dominion's attempt to go undercover in the outer planets, it seemed.

It would've fooled her, too. She wondered if the cover extended to having fake wares on board. Hopefully she'd get rescued and not have time to find out. She wasn't dumb enough to believe she and Tahra could just up and run away. The place was crawling with armed thugs.

A male wearing a showy yellow and blue outfit stepped into the hangar with four armed guards, two in front and two behind. This must be the governor Kean had installed in the area.

"What is the meaning of this?" Gritarr demanded. "We had a deal."

"I do apologize. Kean's orders. All ships are to be grounded, no exceptions." The governor spread his hands. "If I let you take off now, we'd both be in big trouble. They are watching all movements. Much better to stay quiet. Lie low."

Gritarr looked like he was about to explode from frustration. "That wasn't the plan. You promised—"

"Plans change," the governor growled, baring his fangs. His eyes sparked with a hint of bloodlust. "Let's not forget I'm the one putting my livelihood on the line for you here. I could've refused your craft completely."

Gritarr clenched his fists at his sides.

"I came to warn you that they are checking all the hangars. According to the records, this ship is supposedly a merchant vessel. You have half a Vosthean hour to make that a little more believable." The pompous male glared at Tahra and Delaney. "As for those two, they were never part of the deal. Ulrek puts trackers on his crew. Get them out of here and block the signal before they get close enough to track it. If

they even suspect me, I will flay you alive, Dominion captain or not.” He turned and stomped out of the hangar.

Gritarr brought out his comm and tapped angrily on the screen. A few minutes later, a male dressed very much like a merchant—complete with a painted face and ridiculous shoes—stepped out from the ship.

“Make this believable, and when we get back, I’ll make sure you’re rolling in credits.”

The male grinned. “Of course, Captain.”

Gritarr snapped his fingers, and two of the guards that had accompanied him to Ship’s Alive were there in an instant and waiting for his command. “Grab the females. We are going to make our own way out.”

Ulrek

Ulrek gritted his teeth at the news that they had checked every hangar and had not found Gritarr or the females. The signal from Tahra's tracker had gone silent, too.

They were heading full speed back to Vosthea, but now Ulrek worried that was the wrong thing to do, especially if his mate and his medic were already off the planet.

A transmission came through from Kean's head of interplanetary defense, and Emil answered it. He did not look happy.

"We scoured our records. Shortly after the docks were locked down, a small shuttle managed to slip out here." A map appeared on the ship's screen with a location pinpointed. It was on a separate continent from Kean's compound, nowhere near a port or city. "The shuttle disappeared behind one of the moons. We are sending one of your ships over now, the one closest in orbit."

Ulrek swore. No one had expected a tiny craft to fly out from the wilderness. The vessel wasn't built for long-haul space travel but could most likely make it far enough to meet up with a larger space-faring vessel with a longer range.

The chances of the craft still being behind the moon were low, but just in case, Ulrek said, "Tell it not to engage. Our females might be aboard."

"Noted."

Gritarr could have abandoned the females when he found out the docks were locked down, but chances were he hadn't, and Delaney and Tahra were still with him on the ship.

He wouldn't hesitate to request help from any of the mercenary groups in the area. While some mercenary groups here refused to work with the Dominion, there were still plenty to choose from. Pirates, too, though he'd have to be very desperate to ask for help from them, especially if they

had even the slightest inkling Gritarr was after Ulrek's bounty. They'd want the bounty for themselves.

But with two warships near, no mercenary group who knew what they were doing would dare take the job, no matter how much Gritarr offered.

When the ship got behind the moon, there was nothing there, just as he'd expected.

He got Emil to pull up the star charts and find the closest habitable moon or planet.

If a mercenary vessel had come close enough to Vosthea to pick up the shuttle, they would all have noticed unless there was some remarkable new cloaking technology no one knew about. That was highly unlikely, which meant Gritarr was still nearby. Hiding, biding his time.

Had he gone down to the planet on his own after his ship dropped him off? Was he lying in wait for that ship now?

Doubtful. That wasn't how Gritarr operated. He liked to have soldiers with him for protection. Most likely, his ship was still on Vosthea, and he had flown out in his shuttle to hide himself and the females, waiting quietly with the cloak on.

"There is no way he went down to a place like Vosthea on his own with only a handful of guards," Tuhror agreed. He knew Gritarr just as well as Ulrek did. "You're right. His ship is still in one of the ports. He's waiting for the lockdown to lift."

"How long can a ship like that spend out in space?" Emil asked.

"Using no fuel, with just the life support and cloak on? Days," Tuhror said.

Damn. They didn't have days.

Ulrek commed Kean. "Lift the lockdowns; we're going to force him to make a move."

The first ship to leave Vosthea was not the one they were after. The second ship appeared on the surface to be a

merchant vessel. Ulrek knew better.

They watched it disappear behind the moon, taking the same trajectory the first craft had. They'd found their target.

“Force them to land on the next habitable planet. Then we end this.”

Delaney

Delaney rattled the bars again, even though she knew it was useless.

After being picked up by the ship, they'd shoved her and Tahra into a cell. Now they were on their way to Aton Station, where Gritarr would have the upper hand.

Next to her, Tahra tugged at the thick padded shield they had wrapped around her leg to block the signals coming from her tracker. They'd taped it on with something industrial strength, and no amount of pulling could get it off. All she was doing was tearing off bits of her skin. She was already bleeding.

Delaney put a hand on Tahra's shoulder. "Stop it. It's not going to come off. You're just hurting yourself."

The last time Gritarr saw her pulling at it, he'd threatened to cut her leg off to get rid of it, and Delaney didn't want to find out if he was bluffing.

Suddenly, the floor under them shuddered, and the ship's lights blinked. Delaney put her hand out to steady herself. Tahra tensed.

They waited, but nothing else happened.

Delaney sighed. For a moment there, she'd had visions of Ulrek storming the ship to rescue her. But that would be a ridiculously dangerous thing to do, especially since Gritarr was after his bounty.

Then it happened again, except this time, the ship jerked to one side and flung her on the floor, and there were soldiers running outside in the corridors now.

There was more shuddering, and for a moment, the ship's gravity disappeared. The weightless feeling was unnerving, and she grabbed onto the bars so that when the gravity system came back on, she wouldn't fall. Suddenly there was a whoosh, and she landed on her feet.

She recognized this feeling. They'd just entered an atmosphere.

"I think we're landing. But there's no way we're at Aton Station yet," Tahra said. "And the ship feels out of control."

The first moment of impact sent Delaney flying into Tahra. The two held onto each other throughout the rest of the turbulence. Then everything went quiet.

Gritarr stormed into the room, his uniform half on and half off. He unlocked their cell and grabbed Delaney by the arm. His two guards went for Tahra.

He marched the women out of the ship. The freezing cold hit Delaney's skin, and she shivered. They'd landed in a frozen wasteland. There was nothing here but ice. Vast fields and mountains of ice.

Her breath threatened to freeze in her lungs when she inhaled. A gust of wind hit her, and she thought her fingers and face were going to fall off. Even her eyeballs felt like they were going to freeze solid.

Her heart leaped when two ships landed in front of them. The *Revenge*! And another ship she didn't recognize. The hatch opened, and Ulrek stepped out, the rest of his crew behind him.

Gritarr held her and Tahra out in front of him like a shield. "Why, if it isn't the traitor Ulrek. How kind of you to join us."

"You're the traitor, Gritarr. You tried to murder me in exchange for my ship," Ulrek said calmly.

"I was loyal to the Dominion. Always. That ship should have been mine. *I* should have been captain." Gritarr's hands tightened on Delaney's shoulders painfully. "I worked just as hard as you. We did all those missions together. But it was always *you* who got the promotions, *you* who got the ship, *you* who got the gifts. Because you were Ulren's son. *I was nobody.*"

“Everything I received I shared with you and Tuhror!” The words came out as a roar.

“What about this female? Will you share her too? You’ve always had a thing for humans, haven’t you. A half-human crew.” Gritarr cackled. “Goodness, how ridiculous. You have stooped low. But I must admit, the females are quite...fun.”

The ass-wipe licked her, and Delaney instinctively bit his tongue.

He snarled and shoved Delaney down to the freezing ice. A guard came to pick her up.

“Delaney!” Ulrek roared, but Tuhror held him back.

“Oho! You seem particularly attached to this one.” Gritarr laughed. “Did you get sucked into a mating bond with an inferior human? That’s priceless.” Then he grabbed Tahra. “Tell me, Tuhror, how does it feel knowing you’ll always live in Ulrek’s shadow?”

“Hurt her, and you will cease to live.” Tuhror looked ready to burst into bloodlust.

“I wish I had been there to see your face when your beloved mother disowned you, Ulrek.” Gritarr continued baiting them.

Ulrek growled.

Then the guard holding Delaney went limp. He fell to the ground, taking her with him. The other guard fell too, a perfectly circular hole bleeding red in the middle of his forehead before the blood instantly froze on his skin.

Snipers!

All hell broke loose. Ulrek charged at them, his fangs elongating and his jaw unhinging. He pounced on Gritarr just as he changed as well. They fought viciously.

Delaney struggled to get out of the dead guard’s hold, but his arms were locked around her. Tahra helped, finally extricating her from his grip.

They looked around at the chaos. There were claws and fangs everywhere, and the sounds of battle filled the air. The two sides' uniforms were so similar that Delaney couldn't even tell who was friend and who was foe. Tahra pulled her toward the *Revenge*.

Suddenly, Gritarr was right in front of them. He aimed a blaster at Delaney.

"If I can't get what I want, then Ulrek will live without his mate."

He pulled the trigger.

Chapter 27

Delaney

Delaney paced the room, her worry spiraling out of control.

Ulrek lay on the bed, refusing to wake. The noble *idiot* had jumped in front of the blaster to save her, then proceeded to tear Gritarr apart even while he had a hole in his body. Delaney had spent the next few desperate minutes trying to hold his wounds closed as he bled out. The only reason he was still alive was that Tuhror had found them and gotten him onto the ship and into stasis right away.

He'd still been unstable when they transferred him to Kean's medical wing.

It had taken two full days before the medbed had chimed, notifying her that it had done all it could do and turned itself off. Kean's personal doctor, Ulkin, had stepped in at that point to check on him. Tahra's old tutor had white in his hair, but he still looked like he could take on a few dragus if he had to.

He'd pressed a bunch of buttons, causing the sides of the high-tech healing unit to fold down, making it look much more like a normal bed. Then he'd given Ulrek some sort of infusion that was supposed to hasten his healing.

"He should be waking any time now." He'd pointed to a button on the wall. "Press this when he does, and I'll come right away."

But that had been yesterday. Ulrek still lay unmoving on the bed.

He wasn't as pale as he'd been when he was first brought in, and his left hand, which had been too mangled to save, had been rebuilt. The new cybernetic appendage was supposedly just as sensitive as his natural hand, and stronger besides. The artificial skin looked almost like his own. Only the metallic plates at the forearm gave it away.

There was a knock on the door, and Kean stepped in with Sarah, who held a tray of food. She eyed the small table next to the bed adjacent to Ulrek's. There was still a tray there with food from last night. Tuhror had brought it for Delaney, but she hadn't had any appetite and had only drunk the light orange, fruity-smelling liquid, which had a bit of that metallic vitamin taste.

Delaney moved the first tray over to the window ledge to make room for the fresh one.

"You need to eat," Sarah said. "I heard you like fried jadroot, and we just happen to have some growing in our garden. We'd imported the plants straight from Reka 5. You know, a little taste of home."

There were disks of the classic Reka 5 pub food on the plate. It was sweet that Sarah had remembered.

"Thank you. I'll eat in a bit."

Sarah gave her a look that said she didn't believe her. "Girl, if Ulrek wakes up to find you've fainted from lack of food, he's going to be upset."

"I know. But I'm not hungry. I'm so worried."

"I get it." Sarah gave her a hug. "These Talleans are freaking tanks though. He'll be fine, trust me. He looks so much better already. Now: eat."

Sarah took her by the shoulder and sat her down in front of the new tray.

Kean was quiet today, probably considering that one of the ports on his planet would soon be in upheaval. He'd ordered the execution of the traitorous governor to be broadcast

across the entire planet. It was harsh and barbaric, but violence was the only language the criminals and crooks that had settled on this planet understood. Anyone considering plotting with a Dominion agent again would probably think twice now.

When Ulrek woke, he'd have to deal with a similar situation, albeit on a smaller scale. The location that Gritarr had mentioned at the supply depot, Station 3, had been the one deliberately leaked to his fleet. Someone on one of the other ships had squealed. Tuhror and Emil were monitoring the situation, listening in on all communications on board.

"Why don't you come take a walk around the compound?" Sarah asked. "The fresh air and exercise might improve your appetite."

Delaney shook her head. She didn't want to leave Ulrek, not even for a moment. She wanted to be there when he woke. She hadn't left the private room in the medical wing of Kean's compound since they got back, except to greet a very confused-looking Gavin when he woke up this morning. He was in the next room over.

"Thanks, but I'd rather stay here."

"I understand." Sarah gave her another hug, and she and Kean left, leaving Delaney alone with her mate.

Ulrek was no longer the villain, not to her. He was the hero who made sure to cure her headache before she worked in the greenroom. The hero who'd charged into the Reka 5 wilds to rescue her. The hero who'd jumped in front of blaster fire.

She wiped the falling tears off her face with the back of her hand, but they were immediately replaced by more. When she inhaled, it came out as a sob.

Ulrek was supposed to be awake by now, but he was still out cold. What if he never woke again? He did have a giant hole in him and was missing a hand. Tallean technology was advanced, but was it good enough to pull someone back from the brink of death?

“Wake up, Ulrek. Wake *up*,” she pleaded, her voice barely a whisper. “I’ll do anything. I’ll be the perfect mate. You can parade me around in outrageous clothes all you like, then peel them off me when we get back to the ship. I’ll eat from your fingers and drink from your cup. I’ll fall asleep with you every night and wake up with you every morning. I promise. Just,” she sniffed, trying not to become a bawling mess, “please, please wake up.”

No movement. Ulrek remained still. The only thing proving he was still alive was the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest. What if he was stuck in a coma like this forever? Comas were rare in Talleans, the doctor had explained earlier, but not unheard of.

“I’ll even tell you I love you. Every day. Because I do, damn it. Just wake up already.” More hot tears, more choked sobs.

Nothing.

Finally she curled up beside him, hugging his arms, and closed her eyes.

She didn’t know when she fell asleep, but when she woke again, it was to see Ulkin stepping into the room.

He frowned when he noticed Ulrek was not yet awake, and it made her even more worried. But instead of focusing on Ulrek, he turned his attention to Delaney. She’d spent a few hours in a medbed herself, recovering from a sprained wrist, a concussion, and that split lip. He frowned at the uneaten food on the window ledge.

“You must eat to heal fully.” He put his hand out for her wrist.

“Yes, I know. I’ll try. But I’m so worried,” she said as the medic felt around her joints before passing a small device over them.

“Why? Ulrek is fine.”

“But he hasn’t woken up yet.”

Ulkin rolled his eyes in a very human-like expression.
“Ulrek, I know you are awake. Get up. Your whole crew is waiting for you.”

Ulrek

Ulrek opened his eyes and gave the old medic a sheepish smile. Busted.

“Ulkin, good to see you again.” It had been a while since he’d been injured badly enough that Ulkin had had to patch him up. The last time was two galactic years ago, when the Dominion had launched their failed attack on the outer planets.

“Your female has not been eating because she’s so worried about you. Stop being lazy and do your job as her mate. Feed her.” He came over and picked up Ulrek’s left hand.

It was only then that Ulrek realized it was a cybernetic replacement. The foreign appendage mocked him from the end of his arm.

Fuck. He’d been injured a lot worse than he’d thought. Something had felt off with that hand, but he’d experienced similar sensations plenty of times when healing. He never would’ve guessed he’d lost it entirely.

Ulkin put a baton with a screen attached to one end in his hand. “Squeeze this.”

Ulrek tried. At first, nothing happened, so he tried again. The new fingers moved, squeezing the baton.

“Stars! I said squeeze it, not destroy it. This equipment is expensive.” The medic glowered at him.

Oops. Ulrek reduced the pressure. He’d have to practice using the new hand and be careful when he touched Delaney. He’d never forgive himself if he hurt her by accident.

“I will send you daily exercises to perform. You should have full use of it with practice.” Ulkin turned to Delaney. “Make sure he does them. If he’s anything like Kean or Zharor, he’ll think he doesn’t need to bother.”

Then the medic left, grumbling about how he was going to be “treating these youngsters from his deathbed”. He wasn’t that old; he still had decades left.

Delaney looked at Ulrek. “You’ve...you’ve been awake the whole time.”

“I woke the minute I heard you crying.” He took her hand in his good one, glad to have her touch. “I apologize. I didn’t know you were so worried you weren’t eating.”

“How much did you hear?”

“Of you talking to me? Begging me to wake up? All of it.”

She scrunched up her face. “Then why the hell didn’t you open your eyes? You let me continue thinking...thinking...”

“Well, you were promising such wonderful things; I thought maybe if I held out, the deal would keep getting sweeter.”

Ulrek watched Delaney’s face run through a series of emotions: first confusion, then surprise, then—

“You *ass!*” She smacked him on the shoulder with the back of her hand.

Ulrek grinned. This was exactly the response he expected and wanted. He’d never get tired of her fire.

“I thought you were never going to wake up.” Her anger dissolved quickly and her voice went quiet. “I was so scared I’d never be able to talk to you again and tell you...” Her lower lip wobbled, and she let out a sob.

“That you love me? And you’ll be the perfect mate?” Ulrek finished for her. “Yes, I heard that part too.”

“Yes,” she agreed, trying not to cry. “I do. I don’t care anymore who you used to be. That’s in the past. I love you now, and I’m not giving you up. Ever.”

“I love you too, my Star. You already are the perfect mate.” He tugged at her arm, and she fell onto the bed and on top of him.

He wheezed. Shit. He must've been injured really badly. Delaney didn't weigh much, but every part of him hurt.

Delaney scrambled off him. "Crap. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have put my weight on you."

"I was hurt bad, wasn't I?"

"Yeah. You had a big hole in you. I thought you were dead. Don't ever scare me like that again."

Ulrek frowned. "That's going to be hard to do with this bounty still on my head. We got rid of Gritarr, but eventually, someone else will replace him."

Delaney set her jaw. "Okay, so we take a stand. We make sure everyone who comes after you or betrays you gets a bloody death and broadcast it same as Kean is doing with that governor."

Who had stolen his Delaney and replaced her with a bloodthirsty vixen? Oh, who was he kidding. He'd known this was in her all along, and he loved it.

But what was this about a governor?

"Doesn't Kean have a huge bounty on his head too?" Delaney asked before he could inquire about that.

"He does. And every year, he throws a huge party and invites everyone into the compound, tempting the disloyal to make their move."

"Perfect. Then let's do that. Eventually, it's going to be known as the impossible bounty, and only someone very stupid or really arrogant would try for it." She reached for her comm, which was on a nearby table. "We can get started right now. I'll comm Tuhror. Maybe he and Emil have discovered who the snitch in your fleet is."

Ulrek pressed his lips in a thin line. A snitch in his fleet. That was disappointing, but it was almost worth it just to see Delaney like this. This was the fire that he'd known his mate would need. She was perfect. The Stars had known.

Ulkin insisted Ulrek needed help getting back to his suite. At first, Ulrek protested that he didn't need it, but his attempt to stand shut him up fast. He looked down at his body in dismay. Much of the skin on one side of him was new, and he had lost weight, despite all the transfusions. His body had used a lot of his reserves to heal.

They polished off the food sitting on the table as they waited for Tuhror to arrive. Ulrek was ravenous and wanted to scarf down all of it, but he made sure he gave Delaney a bit of everything first.

After Tuhror arrived, the trio stopped at the next room over to check up on Gavin. He was up and reading something on his PPC. A quick glance saw it was some sort of maintenance guide; Gavin had strange tastes in reading material, but it was one of the reasons he was so good at his job.

Just like Ulrek, Gavin had lost some of his mass to the healing process, but judging by the trays of empty dishes stacked on the table, he'd probably gain it all back soon. Having never worked on humans at such an extensive level, Ulkin had insisted the mechanic stay in the medical wing for observation for a few more days.

"We found out who leaked the information," Tuhror said when they were in the privacy of his suite. "Gritarr didn't clear the message records on his comm. We commed every contact he connected with and recorded the voices when they answered. An analysis found a match on one of our ships. We sent the male a message posing as Gritarr and asking for new information in exchange for a large sum of credits. He bit."

"Who is it?" Before his second-in-command could answer, Ulrek stopped him. "Actually, no. Don't tell me." He'd had enough bad news today. He didn't need to know who had betrayed him. The name wasn't important.

"What do you want done with him?"

Ulrek thought of what Delaney just suggested they do with every person who dared betray them: a bloody and very public death. "My mate has a marvelous idea."

Chapter 28

Delaney

Delaney closed her eyes as Ulrek pressed the tip of the Euphora tab to her neck. There was a barely audible hiss and a mild sting that disappeared even before it started. At first, nothing happened.

“Open your eyes, my Star.”

She blinked up at the most gorgeous green eyes she'd ever seen. Ulrek held her on his lap, watching her with amusement. He was so beautiful. Was that even the right word? Dangerous and beautiful. Delaney reached to touch the smooth skin of his face, tracing a fingertip over the crease.

The world changed around her, becoming friendlier. Her worries faded. Ulrek grinned, showing off some badass fangs.

When had she developed the thing for fangs? She leaned closer and kissed one of them, earning her a chuckle. She smiled, wondering why she'd been so hesitant to take the Tallean drug again.

She'd tried it once before with Craig and had hated it. She'd felt out of control the whole time and had thrown herself at her ex-husband like she was desperate. He'd laughed, and so had his friends. They'd called her a slut, which had stung, ruining the high.

But this was different. Ulrek cupped her face in his palms, pulled it in, and kissed her reverently on the forehead. She let out a soft, happy giggle. Then he turned her around on his lap to face their friends, his arms never leaving her. A hand

snaked under the high slit of her skirt to stroke her thigh. A feeling of safety and well-being filled her. Everything was perfect.

She was acutely aware of all the places their bodies touched and the half-hard cock pressing against her leg. She wiggled on Ulrek's lap, and he groaned.

"Behave, my Star. If we start now, we'll miss our own party," he whispered into her ear. "Later. I promise."

Ooh, a promise sounded good. She wiggled a little more for good measure.

Delaney surveyed the room. They were surrounded by their friends. The crew was all here, as were Kean and Zharor and their mates. The only people who would make it even better were Angie and her mates, but they were back in Reka 5. Delaney would have to be content to celebrate with them at the larger event.

They'd decided to do two separate mating celebrations. This one here in the private wing of Kean's sprawling estate was something small and intimate with people they loved and trusted.

The other one, in a few months, would be the official one, a giant event where everyone who was anyone would receive a gilded invitation, even enemies. Kean was an old hand at ferreting out schemers and conspirators, and he assured them that a mating ceremony was the perfect occasion.

Delaney bit back a laugh as Tahra attempted to ply Gavin with more alcohol. She sat next to him and used every excuse she could to touch him. There were moments Delaney wondered if Gavin's will would break right then and there, and he'd end up fucking her right on the table. But then Tuhror glared at them from his seat. Talk about being stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Roxy and Ckzarr sat as far from each other as possible, but every time they thought the other wasn't looking, they stared

at each other. Delaney wondered how long they were going to deny their attraction to each other.

Gavin had healed remarkably well, considering he too had had a giant hole in his body. He still favored one side, but the last she heard, he and Ulrek had been in the training simulator trying out the new missions released just this week by Hullean Visions.

The music changed, and the first notes of a new song started. Delaney recognized it. The group was from Reka 5, and they specialized in fusing distinctly Earth melodies with the driving, tribal-sounding beats found in Tallean music. This song was written using an Arabian maqam and had a definite Middle Eastern feel.

Delaney loved how humans had learned to share and appreciate each other's cultures way out here on the other side of the galaxy. Was it a bastardized version of the real thing? Sure. It was about as authentic as deep-dish pizza was to Italian cuisine or General Tso's chicken was to Chinese food. But these little bits and pieces were all they had left of Earth. The only other option was to lose them forever.

It didn't matter that she'd never stepped foot in the Arabian desert, climbed the mountains of Mongolia, or gazed upon the river valleys of China. The moment she heard these songs, it was like her brain recognized home.

Maybe it was the Euphora messing with her head, making everything feel more intense, but Delaney had a sudden pang of homesickness. Ulrek sensed her change in mood immediately.

He turned her in his lap and, with his kisses, reminded her that she'd made a new home here in the outer planets. She was surrounded by friends, and more importantly, she had a mate who loved her.

Ulrek bounced her on his knee to the rhythm of the song, and soon she was dancing in his lap, and he was looking at her like she was the Stars themselves.

“Come dance!” Sarah extended a perfectly manicured hand to her.

She and Chrissy were tearing it up on the tiny dance floor. Chrissy had taken off her shoes, a gold and green pair that matched her dress. She had so many rings on Delaney wondered how she moved her hands at all.

“Go, my Star. Have fun with your friends.” Ulrek gave her leg an affectionate squeeze.

Delaney laughed and made her way to the dance floor.

Ulrek

Ulrek watched as the love of his life wiggled and shimmied to the beat. He'd felt the change come over Delaney the second the song had started and understood perfectly. Hearing, tasting, or smelling something from his home world always made him nostalgic too.

It was both a blessing and a curse for many who took to space for work and ended up settling far from home. It could bring many happy thoughts but could quickly devolve into something darker if left unchecked. The key was to strike a balance between remembering the past, appreciating the present, and looking forward to the future.

He didn't think his past would ever stop haunting him, but now that he'd found his mate in Delaney, his present and future were bright. He couldn't wait to start every day with her. Life was an adventure that they would take together.

She was ravishing in the dress he'd commissioned for the event, and Ulrek couldn't take his eyes off her. The dressmaker had managed to capture and display every curve of her body in the best way. Delaney had insisted on wearing white since she never had a real wedding dress the first time around.

White or not, Ulrek wasn't sure this dress would be acceptable at most Earth ceremonies. The neckline was cut very low to showcase her breasts, which were pushed up and together to form a generous cleavage. The slit was cut so high that every time she moved, it showed the matching crotch covering she wore underneath, just the way he liked it.

As a song with a slow beat came on, her movements slowed, becoming sexy and sultry. Ulrek resisted the temptation to stride over, pick her up, and toss her over the nearest couch with everyone watching. The night might well end that way anyhow, but the party had only just started, and there was no rush.

The food arrived, and Delaney returned to his side to eat. The Euphonia still shone in her eyes, and she had that relaxed look on her face that he loved so much. He was glad she was able to enjoy the substance with him after her first less-than-ideal experience with it. She could rub up against him all she wanted; she might end up bent over the table, but he'd never laugh at her.

They'd opted to save the Tallean-style entertainment—bloody fights, knife-throwing competitions, and sex performances—for the official celebration they were hosting when he was fully healed. But they'd gone all out with the menu today. His friends, crew, and mate deserved the very best.

Problem was, it was hard to concentrate on all the wonderful flavors with Delaney eating from his fingers. All he could do was focus on the way her lips wrapped around every little morsel. She closed her eyes and hummed at the myriad of flavors paraded in front of them and wiggled her hips at the ones she loved the best, as if she had to express her enjoyment physically.

Eventually, though, Ulrek caught on. The little minx was doing it on purpose. "Just you wait," he murmured, just for her ears. "I'll have you bent over this table with your ass in the air before you know it."

She shuddered and pretended not to hear, but the scent of her arousal filled the air.

As they cleared the table in preparation for the final course, Delaney slid off his lap. She exchanged several glances with Tahra, and then cleared her throat. Everyone turned to her.

"I know it's not customary for the female to give the male a mating gift, but I got one anyway because...well, I wanted to, so there."

A gift? For him? In Tallean culture, it was the male's job to shower the female with many gifts throughout their mating, starting on the day of the celebration, should the couple

decide to have one. The traditions varied from planet to planet, colony to colony, but most lacked the formality and rigid customs of a human-style wedding.

Apparently, in human weddings, they danced after the food, not before, which did not make sense to him. Wouldn't you want to work up an appetite?

"Is this some human custom I didn't know about?"

Delaney shook her head. "I just really wanted to give this to you, and it happened to be delivered today, so..." She shrugged. "Here we are."

She and Tahra went to one of the doors and opened it. Ulrek smelled it immediately: the intoxicating fragrance of kima flowers. They wheeled out a gorgeous potted specimen in full, magnificent bloom.

There was a chorus of "ooohs" and "aaahs," but Ulrek couldn't make a sound as the scent filled his lungs. This scent encapsulated all the happy memories of his youth. He stood and stepped toward the plant, joining Delaney next to it.

It smelled even better here with her delicate perfume mingling with the flower, and instead of fixating on his past, he looked to his future.

"Thank you." He wrapped her up in his arms. "Thank you, my Star. This...this is perfect."

Delaney looked up at him, her soft brown eyes sparkling. "I'm glad you like it. I just hope I can keep this thing alive."

"I have complete faith in you." He pulled her off her feet to nuzzle, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. The nuzzle turned into a kiss.

"Hey! Mind the plant," Tahra exclaimed, wheeling the rarity back a few feet to safety.

Ulrek was done waiting. He considered for a moment just taking her right here on one of the tables, but the next room over had nice soft couches and giant floor cushions. He

guided her legs around his hips before releasing her from the kiss.

“Honored guests, please enjoy your meal. We’ll be back shortly,” he announced as he strode to the door with Delaney giggling in his arms. “I have a mate to please.”

Epilogue

Ulrek

Ulrek never thought he'd retire. He'd always expected to meet his end in a ball of flame. But these days, the *Revenge* no longer terrorized Dominion vessels. He'd considered gifting it to their son, Derek—a portmanteau of both his and Delaney's names that was conveniently also a real name in her language of English—but there were better vessels now. The *Revenge*, once one of the best ships credits could buy...or, in his case, steal... was now just another outdated ship.

No matter. It had served them well, and his crew were all set up to live out the rest of their lives doing whatever they pleased.

Even if Derek had wanted it, it would be a few more years before he'd be ready to run a ship of this own. He'd finished his schooling and was currently learning the ropes working on one of the other ships in Ulrek's fleet—though the fleet technically wasn't his anymore, but belonged to his holding company, New Horizon Corporation.

Delaney had insisted they not hand their son everything on a silver platter. Their offspring was going to work, she said, just like everyone else did, and when he proved himself worthy and inspired enough good males and females to work for him, then and only then he'd get a ship to captain. If that was what he wanted.

He found Delaney in the garden doing what she loved. She had lines on her face now, and her hair was streaked with gray, but she was still the most beautiful female he'd ever

seen. It never failed to amaze him how lucky he was to have found her.

Next to her was a pair of rambunctious dragus pups. Some crazy human on Reka 5 had started breeding them years ago to help guard against wild dragus attacks. The pups had white patches on their fur and floppy ears, traits that differentiated them from their wild cousins.

Through their years of travels on the *Revenge*, they'd raised both dragus pups and Earth dogs on the rowdy ship. But for protection, dragus was best.

"How's the garden coming along?" Ulrek asked as one of the pups—they hadn't named the pair yet—started digging up a plant she'd just put in.

"No. Argh. Bad boy!"

Delaney scooped the creature up. It was huge in her arms, and when it struggled to be let down, Delaney had to let it go. It went right back to digging.

"Great, except they keep trying to 'help.'"

Ulrek scooped up the pup as she fixed the plant.

"I heard back from the trainer. He's sending someone over. They are on their way from Reka 5."

Ulrek had lots of experience wrangling soldiers and crew. These big little floofs were something else entirely. They were adorable but destructive.

"Oh, thank fuck!" Then she paled. "Shit, what time is it? I totally forgot we had dinner with Kean and Sarah tonight."

They'd ended up choosing to retire on Vosthea, though they planned on taking trips to Reka 5 every year to celebrate their midwinter festival, which included many Christmas customs from Earth.

It had taken years, but they'd built their home from the ground up, working on it together between missions. The piece of land was just outside of Kean's compound, close

enough to Vosthea's largest port to be convenient but far enough away to give them some privacy.

Ulrek never did take Kean up on his offer to govern a district on Vosthea, but his friend hadn't minded.

And they rarely worried about his bounty now. Anyone who thought it might be a good idea to turn him in was already dead. That didn't stop him from making sure his land was well protected.

"We still have time. Let's get you dressed." He set the pup down and followed Delaney as she headed back into their home.

The two pups followed behind them, taking turns pouncing on each other.

She opened her wardrobe and stared at the vast array of choices.

"That one," Ulrek said, pointing instantly to the dark red gown with the lacing down the back. The bodice was beaded all over with a kima flower motif and was a favorite of his.

She picked it up and held it up to herself in front of the mirror. Ulrek licked his lips, imagining cutting it off her later. The laces on that dress never survived more than one wear before they had to be fixed, but it was worth it.

He helped her into the dress, pulling the laces tight. He loved the way it hugged her curves in all the right places. She slipped on a pair of matching shoes, closed-toe ones that only humans could wear. They had a thick platform and pointed heels; Delaney claimed the platform made them more comfortable than they looked. Ulrek was doubtful of that but would never complain. They were hot.

"How do I look?" Delaney asked, catching his eye in the mirror.

"Delicious."

Ulrek stepped closer behind her and trailed a finger across her collarbone. His other hand snaked around her body,

pressing her back against his growing erection.

Her lust filled the air. “Ulrek, you *just* got this on me.”

“Mm-hmm. And I’m about to get it off.”

He was about to scoop her up into his arms when he had an even better idea. He let her go.

“You have ten seconds,” Ulrek said as he peeled off his shirt and tossed it over the nearby chair. It was always most fun when he let her have a head start. “Run, Delaney.”

She kicked off her shoes and backed away, looking around for the exit. She knew precisely what was going to happen.

“When I catch you, I’m going to fuck you so hard you won’t be able to walk for days.”

Delaney let out an excited laugh and started running.

With a giant grin, Ulrek started to count.

THE END

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