

A sci-fi holiday tale. The background is a blue, icy, snowy landscape. A muscular alien with long, dark, flowing hair is the central figure. He is holding a red heart playing card (the Ace of Hearts) in his right hand. The overall tone is festive and futuristic.

A SCI-FI
HOLIDAY
TALE

YOOOL

HOLIDATE WITH AN ALIEN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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HOLIDATE WITH AN ALIEN



TANA STONE

BROADMOOR BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1



Brooke

“*A*re you sure you didn’t do this on purpose?” Dani wrinkled her nose as we entered the bar.

Her reaction wasn’t unwarranted. The dingy place smelled of sour ale and even more pungent bodies. Our shoes stuck to the floor as we walked, and I was pretty sure the things I saw scuttling in the corners weren’t dust bunnies.

“Do what?” I assumed my most innocent facial expression, even though my lips quivered. “We needed to stop to refuel.”

Dani folded her arms across her chest, nearly hiding the Valox insignia emblazoned on one side as she eyed me with suspicion. “There are other outposts with refueling stations, Brooke.”

I twitched one shoulder and winked at her. “None of them have the same bootleg whiskey from Calderon.”

“Or card games running in the back room.”

I pressed a hand to my heart in mock surprise. “Are you implying that I rigged our journey, so we’d need to stop here and refuel, while I helped lighten the purses of these good folks?”

My copilot snorted a half laugh as we both surveyed the slack figures leaning against the long bar or precariously perched on rickety stools or sagging over empty tankards. Calling these

drunks, down-on-their-luck mercenaries, and washed-up pirates ‘good folks’ was an undeserved kindness.

As much as I wanted to pretend that I didn’t know what Dani was implying, my fellow resistance pilot and closest friend was right about me. I’d known very well where our patrol route would take us. I’d known which bar we’d visit. I’d known what would happen as we walked through the door. My heart raced and my fingers buzzed with the possibility of holding well-worn cards in my hands, the paper soft at the edges and the colorful figures faded as they peered up at me. I’d known I wouldn’t be able to resist.

“Sometimes I wonder why you joined the resistance when you love this so much.” Dani shook her head, but the expression on her face wasn’t judgmental. Almost everyone who’d ended up fighting with the Valox had some kind of dodgy past. Mine just happened to involve a father who’d taught me to play cards and win. The only differences between me and my low-life dad was that I didn’t cheat, and I would never have left my kid behind when the empire came looking.

“I can love cards and crushing the empire at the same time.” I patted my chest. “My heart is big enough for both.”

I didn’t have to state the obvious. I was an even better pilot than I was a card player, and that was saying something. I also detested the Zagrath, and I’d found a home with other renegades who felt that same way. Even though we’d all but destroyed the empire, with the help of the Vandar, there was evidence that it hadn’t been entirely eliminated, which was why we still flew patrols to look for signs of the enemy.

“Let’s hope this time we don’t get chased out by a Sporolian with a bad temper and a barbed tail.”

I laughed at the memory, although I agreed with Dani. That wasn’t the way I wanted to leave the outpost. Not this time.

“I promise not to take any big wagers,” I told my friend. “I’d be content with a little extra for holidays gifts.”

Dani muttered a curse under her breath. “I’d almost forgotten about the holiday party coming up.”

“How could you forget?” I grinned at her. “Christmas is one of the few carryovers from Earth traditions that I like. Presents, cookies, cheesy songs. What’s not to like?”

She shook her head at me and laughed. “Your obsession with Christmas is almost as unexpected as your gambling skills.”

Dani wasn’t the first person to be startled that a human female with unruly brown curls usually pulled up in a ponytail and a smattering of freckles could be so ruthless at the card table. I didn’t look like the gamblers that frequented card rooms, which was a crucial part of my strategy.

“What can I say?” I winked at her. “I’m full of contradictions.”

The green-skinned bartender spotted us lingering inside the doorway, and his beady eyes narrowed even more. It wasn’t the first time I’d visited the place, although I did like to allow time between my visits so patrons would forget how badly I fleeced them each time.

“Hey Zank!” I strode to the end of the bar and slapped a dull, silver disc on the scarred surface, hoping to pre-empt any complaints with a show of credits. “You still have some of that Calderon whiskey?”

The alien eyed the currency, grunted, and reached beneath the bar for a bottle of dark-amber liquor that changed colors as he poured it into two glasses. “It’s been a long time since you showed your face around here.”

I took my glass and swirled the contents. “Miss me?”

He emitted another grunt, but it wasn’t unfriendly. The credits he deftly swiped from the bar probably helped. “No game today.”

My excitement instantly deflated, even though I made a point not to let it show. “No worries. We’re just grabbing a drink while our ship refuels.”

Dani slid her glass from the bar and clinked it with mine. “To refueling without having to run for our lives.”

I took a slug of my whiskey, but I couldn’t fully savor the smooth burn of the liquor or the sweet kick when it bit the

back of my throat or the heat when it hit my stomach. I was too disappointed.

“You know you don’t need to buy a gift for me.” Dani turned and propped her elbows on the bar behind her. “The memory of your face when you realized that you’d won a shipment of Pavellian humming beetles at the card game on Vorren is gift enough.”

I shot her a look. “It took weeks to find all of them after they escaped from the crates, and even longer to find a buyer. You know, I can still hear them humming sometimes.”

“I know! It was my ship they escaped in, too.” Dani unconsciously scratched at her arm and shuddered. “I hate insects.”

We both started laughing at the memory, and I tossed back the last of my whiskey. “Point taken. I need to make sure I don’t accept vague wagers.”

Dani rolled her eyes. “That was so *not* my point.”

“Okay, okay. I could probably enjoy the party without buying the perfect gifts for everyone.”

She snapped her fingers and pointed at me. “That was my point. Besides, you might have more to worry about this year.”

I put my glass on the bar and tapped it for a refill. “What does that mean?”

Dani shifted from one foot to the other, her gaze dropping. “Remember how I told you that Gregor is interested in you?”

“The new grease monkey?”

“Mechanic,” she corrected, “but, yeah. The guy with short, blond hair and lots of confidence.”

I frowned. “He’s not my type.”

“I’m only telling you what Mika overheard in the mess hall. He’s planning to use the holiday party and the free-flowing booze to make his move on you.”

I cringed. “He already asked me out, and I said no.”

“Like I said, he seems very confident.”

The bartender filled my glass, and I quickly pounded it, welcoming the bite of the whiskey as it slid down my throat. What I did not welcome was guys who didn't take no for an answer. Did he think I was playing hard to get? Did he think no meant maybe? Did he think I just needed to be convinced? Or maybe he thought I was the kind of woman who wanted to be flattered and pursued and chased until she gave in.

I wasn't.

Suddenly, I dreaded the holiday party I'd been so excited about, which made me even angrier. I'd always loved the weird Earth holiday, with its fat man dressed in red and his little-people assistants and his flying delivery livestock. None of it made any sense, which was one of the many reasons I loved it. It had also been something that my mother had loved, and my few memories of her were meshed with recollections of colorful presents stuffed into decorated socks and silly songs about reindeer and bells that jingled.

I squared my shoulders as the alien whiskey churned in my belly. “No way am I going to let some newbie mechanic ruin Christmas for me.”

Dani nodded with just as much resolve. “Damn straight. We'll just have to find a way to stop him from hitting on you.” She held up a finger as I opened my mouth. “One that doesn't include sedating him or tying him up for the duration of the party or getting him abducted by space pirates.”

“Good idea.” I nudged her. “Let's consider space pirates our Plan B.”

She sighed. “So, what's our Plan A?”

Before I could think of one, Zank braced his thick arms on the bar and leaned over. “If you still want a game, a player just walked in.”

I swiveled my head toward the silver-skinned alien standing inside the door, and tried to keep my breath from hitching as I eyed his bare, muscular chest and dark hair spilling down his shoulders. Things were looking up.

CHAPTER 2



Yool

*M*y nose twitched at the familiar scents—sweat, cheap liquor, desperation. I eyed the dank bar and the patrons hunched over empty tankards as twangy music played in the background. It was good to be back.

My engineer groaned as he waddled up to me, his bald, blue head only reaching my waist. “I can’t believe we’re back in this shithole. You truly are a glutton for punishment.”

I thumped a hand on his shoulder, almost knocking him off his feet. “What do you mean, Wyn? The last time we were here, we left with a heavy purse and a pretty female in my bed.”

“Your purse and your bed,” my friend grumbled. “We’re on a schedule this time, remember?”

I ignored his reminder. “Our client wouldn’t begrudge us a break. Besides, don’t I always share with you? The winnings, at least.”

My Rellian crew mate muttered darkly under his breath about our clients not being understanding in the least. Again, I tried not to pay attention to Wyn, even though he was right. As smugglers who moved various contraband throughout the sector, we were not known for having the most easygoing clients. We were paid handsomely to ensure that their often-illegal cargo reached its destination without delay.

Since the Zagrath Empire had been crushed, we didn't need to dodge imperial enforcers anymore, but we did have to steer clear of competing smugglers or space pirates out to commandeer our cargo. I gave the customers in the bar a quick once-over, satisfied that none of them appeared to be a threat—or capable of standing without assistance.

My gaze snagged on two humans at the end of the bar who were talking to the bartender. Now that was something you didn't usually see at a place like this. They were clearly military, but not imperial soldiers. Rebels maybe, but the one with the curls pulled up high looked too innocent to be part of the scrappy rebellion forces in this part of space. Even the dark-haired one who looked less than pleased to be here didn't strike me as a fighter.

“Don't even think about it.”

I glanced down at Wyn, who was glaring at me with his shirt arms crossed tightly over his chest. “What?”

“You know what I mean, Yool.” His pale blue eyes narrowed, although they never blinked. “We do not have time for you to charm a female into your bed this time.”

My mouth fell open as I pretended to be offended at his very astute and completely accurate accusation. I'd been wondering which of the humans would be easier to charm out of her uniform pants, and I'd almost settled on the wide-eyed one with curly hair. She might look like she'd never fallen into bed with a stranger, but I did love a challenge.

“Who said anything about bed?” I adjusted the strap crossing my chest and strode toward the bar. “I'm here for a drink.”

Wyn followed me, as did his complaints. When we reached the bar, I gave him a quick hoist onto a stool and leaned my forearms on the edge as I pretended to eye the bottles lining the wall behind the heavysset bartender. I hoped he didn't recognize me, or at the very least that he wouldn't toss us out on our asses.

The last time we'd patronized his bar, the female I'd ended up taking back to my bed had been the establishment's only

waitress. It was only after we were lying together naked and catching our breath that she'd mentioned being the owner's niece.

I swallowed and didn't meet the bartender's gaze. I couldn't be the only Zarbling who'd visited, although I might be the only one who'd banged his niece. At least I didn't spot the female in question, which was a relief. I wasn't the type of smuggler with a female at every outpost. I was more of a love-'em-and-leave-'em guy, heavy on the leaving.

"What can I get you two?"

I released a breath, grateful that Wyn and I hadn't been recognized. Then again, it had been a while since our last stop. Maybe I wasn't the only smuggler who'd enjoyed the pleasures of the bar's staff.

"Two Parthian ales," Wyn answered for me, slapping a coin on the bar.

I would have preferred a smoother drink, but Wyn controlled the purse until we got paid, and he didn't need to tell me that we were running low on funds. That was why we'd taken the cargo no questions asked. It was also why I knew my engineer wouldn't put up too much of a fight if I could get in a card game. As much as he complained, my winnings were what kept our ship in good repair.

The bartender slid two glass tankards to us, the contents sloshing onto his thick, green hands. Before he turned, I leaned forward. "You wouldn't happen to have a game room, would you?"

I knew very well that he did, but I felt no need to remind him that I'd been inside the room, won big, and then bagged his niece.

His dark, bushy eyebrows lifted as he studied me.

I tried not to flinch under his assessment, praying that nothing about me jogged his memory.

"I might." He flicked a wary glance down the bar. "You don't mind playing with females, do you?"

I blinked at him, then stole a glance at the pair he clearly meant. “The humans?”

“One of them mentioned liking cards, but I don’t know how much she’s played.” He shook his head. “She might not be your speed.”

I put a hand over his to keep him from pivoting away. A female who didn’t know what she was doing? It was too good to believe. “I don’t mind. I’m an amateur myself.”

Wyn choked on his ale, but I pointedly ignored him.

“You sure you just want a friendly game?” The bartender folded his beefy arms as he appraised me. “The big players usually come in later. You could wait for them.”

I shook my head, trying not to seem too eager. “A friendly game to pass the time is perfect.”

He grunted, seeming to accept this, and jerked his head for me to follow him to the other end of the bar.

“Don’t wait up for me,” I whispered to Wyn with a sideways grin before I followed.

“This is a mistake,” he said under his breath.

“How could a card game with some sweet human females be a mistake?” I patted him on the back. “I’ll take their money and be back on the ship before you know it.” My pulse quickened as I spotted the curly-haired female looking at me with wide-eyed curiosity. “If I’m lucky, I’ll bring a guest.”

Wyn groaned so loudly that a nearby alien slumped over an empty glass jerked and looked up. “If you were as smart as you are handsome, we’d be the richest smugglers in the galaxy.”

I frowned at this, even though I didn’t mind being called handsome, even if it was by my friend. “How could I be so good at cards without smarts?”

“I stand corrected. When you’re making decisions with your brain, you’re great. It’s just that you put your dick in charge way too often. Like now.”

I backed away from him and toward the far end of the bar. “I promise you I’m not thinking with my dick this time. You’ll see, once I show you my winnings.”

I spun around and left Wyn complaining to himself. Part of me knew that he had a point. In the past, I’d made some bad decisions and they usually involved females. But this was the opposite of that. This was a surefire way to score some quick credits. I eyed the pretty female smiling at me as I approached, and my heart tripped. Part of me felt guilty that I was going to take all her money, but I pushed that aside.

You can always offer to comfort her in the best way you know how.

This made me feel better. No female could resist my charms once I was pouring it on like the sweetest Valorian syrup. And I’d yet to meet a female I couldn’t please, even if they weren’t always thrilled that I had to run off. But that was part of the fun. No strings attached. No commitments. No regrets. At least for me.

I stopped in front of the women and gave them my most sultry smile. “I hear you’re interested in a game?”

“If you don’t mind being patient with me.”

I inclined my head at the pretty human who’d spoken, as she cocked her head at me, and her curly ponytail bobbed. My fingers buzzed in anticipation, although I didn’t know if I was more eager to get my hands on the cards or on her. She was right. I needed to be patient.

I held my arms wide. “It’s just a game, right?”

She giggled as the thick-necked bartender led us toward the back room and excitement arrowed through me.

This was going to be fun.

CHAPTER 3



Brooke

J eyed the alien across the table. He'd walked right into my trap. Actually, he'd practically run.

I gave him another syrupy-sweet smile, even as Dani shot me a warning look from where she stood at the door with her arms folded and one ankle crossed over the other. I knew better than to pour the innocent and clueless routine on too thick, but it was hard not to, with my opponent eating it up so eagerly.

In part, I had Zank to thank. The bartender had told me what he knew about the Zarbling smuggler and his mechanic sidekick, and the details of what had transpired the last time to pair had been at the bar.

As soon as the duo had entered the place, Zank had stiffened and leaned over to me. "If you still want a game, a player just walked in." He'd glowered at the silver alien before turning back to me. "Name's Yool. He's a cocky bastard, so as long as you pour on the charm and the innocence, he should be easy for you to take."

I'd been suspicious at first. Zank had never been especially forthcoming before. "Why are you telling me this? I thought you didn't believe in playing favorites."

Zank had grunted at me, his jowls quivering. "I don't, but this smuggler charmed my niece and only waitress, screwed her, and then took off. She's refused to come back to work since."

“That explains the shit service,” Dani had muttered so low only I could hear her.

“So, you want me to beat him and teach him a lesson?”

Zank’s frown had twitched into a smile for the briefest of moments. “If you can humiliate him while you lighten his purse, even better.”

I didn’t mind the sound of that. I wasn’t a fan of outlaws who bed-hopped, and inflicting some penance on a callous ladies’ man could be fun. As long as he wasn’t clever enough to know he was being set up. I eyed him more carefully as he sidled up the bar. He was tall and broad, with long, dark hair and a definite bad-boy vibe. I could see the appeal, although I’d made a point of avoiding guys like him. “I’m pretty sure I’ve never played him before.”

“Good.” Zank straightened. “I’ll make sure he thinks you’re a novice.”

Zank knew all too well that I was no such thing, but I’d always tipped him well enough to keep him on my side.

“Are you sure about this?” Dani had asked, once the bartender was moving away from us.

“Come on.” I nudged her with my elbow. “I’m entitled to a bit of fun, especially since the holiday party is a bust for me.”

My friend had let out a tortured sigh. “Fine, but I expect a nice present.”

I grinned, excited by the thought of some extra funds I could use to get gifts for my friends. “Consider it done.”

It hadn’t taken long after that for Zank to work his magic and for Yool to approach us. Then we were being escorted to the room behind the bar, where a single round table was illuminated by a few dangling pendant lights.

“Your play.” His voice was smooth and seductive as he leaned back in his chair and peered at me. He hadn’t even glanced at his cards again, but he was doing an excellent job of pretending to be relaxed. His shoulders were loose, and his

arms were hooked lazily on the arms of his chair. The leg that occasionally jiggled under the table was his only tell.

I made a point of glancing nervously at the pile of credits in the center of the table and gnawing my bottom lip. “So, I can raise or call?”

Yool gave me a patient smile. “That’s right. If you think your hand is good enough, you can raise my wager.”

“Good enough,” I mumbled, flicking up the edges of my cards. The action was unnecessary. I knew that my hand was great, but I didn’t want him to know.

I shrugged. “I guess I can raise.” I plucked a metal bar from my pocket and placed it in the center, making sure to give my hand the faintest tremble.

Yool’s eyes widened slightly but his grin didn’t fade. “You’re sure you want to raise? The pot is already pretty big.”

I was fully aware of how big the pot was. I’d purposefully lost the first handful of games so he could win some credits from me and become overly confident. When I was sure he was feeling brash, I’d changed tactics. As I’d expected, Yool had gone all-in, putting everything he’d won from me and all his own credits in the center. With any other player, I’d suspect he had the cards to back it up, but I’d been watching this alien carefully. He was smart, but he was cocky, and that was going to be his downfall.

I hesitated, pressing my lips together as I stole another furtive look at my cards while Dani rolled her eyes by the door. I ignored her. I was having too much fun. Besides, I was almost done with the cocksure smuggler. “I think, I’m sure.”

His brow furrowed for a beat as he jammed a hand in his pocket. He straightened and cleared his throat as he glanced at the squat, blue alien sitting next to him who wasn’t playing. “I need a hundred credits, Wyn.”

The alien made a squeaking noise. “You want my credits?”

Yool cut his eyes sharply to his shipmate. “You know I’m good for it.” He narrowed his eyes knowingly, and the

message was implicit. Beating me was a sure thing, and his friend would easily get back his money.

Wyn slid his gaze to me. He didn't seem as easily fooled as Yool, but he also wasn't sure if I was really as bad a player as I seemed to be.

I gave him my most guileless smile, hoping that would convince him that I was the last person in the galaxy to run a long game on his friend.

He finally huffed out an exasperated breath and slapped a small metal bar on the table. "Fine."

Yool slid it to the pile with a too-smarmy-for-his-own-good smile. "Ready to call?"

I was almost ready to bring the game to a close but part of me really wanted to make the smuggler squirm, and I wanted to see what else he might be willing to wager. I locked my gaze on Dani and gave her an almost imperceptible nod, which was the signal for her to step in.

She strode over and dropped fifty credits onto the table. "Well, if friends can join the fun..."

"Thanks," I said in my perkier voice.

Yool's mouth gaped for a moment as he sat up. He looked at his friend, who shook his head firmly. Then he stared at the pile of credits in clear agony. He was so close to winning it all from me. At least, that's what he thought.

"I've heard that players can wager things other than credits," I offered innocently, blinking at him.

The alien perked up at this suggestion, running a hand through his hair and offering me a seductive smile. "That's true. What do I have that might interest you?"

I suppressed the urge to laugh at the not-so-subtle implication. The guy might be hot by almost anyone's standards, but did he really think I wanted to sleep with him? I wondered if he'd gambled with his body before—not that it wasn't an impressive body. He was big enough to intimidate just about

any male and built enough to make most females do a double-take. I gave myself a mental shake. Not that I was most females.

Then something struck me. He *was* intimidating. One look at him would make most guys turn tail and run, especially if they thought he was my boyfriend. That annoying Gregor wouldn't dare make a move on me if he thought I was with Yool. First off, he'd probably worry that the brawny alien would kick his ass. Then, he'd have to acknowledge that he couldn't compete with someone so attractive and charming.

I hated to admit that Yool was charming, but I would have no problem using that charm, if it served to stave off unwanted attention from other guys. I couldn't stop myself from smiling as I thought about the plan that I'd just hatched.

"I want you to be my boyfriend."

His silky smile dropped. "You what?"

"What?" Dani almost tripped over her own feet as she jerked up.

"Just for a holiday party at the Valox base," I said. "I need you to pretend to be my boyfriend so another guy will leave me alone."

Yool's shoulders relaxed. "If you win this game, you want me to go to a party and pretend to be your mate?"

"Boyfriend," I corrected, "but, yes."

He shrugged, clearly convinced that I would soon lose, and the deal would be moot. "I agree."

I smiled and sat up, instantly dropping my ditzy persona. "Great. I call."

Yool also sat up straighter, confusion and doubt flickering across his face for the first time. He fanned out his cards.

"A full house." I didn't take my gaze off him as I flipped over my own cards to reveal a straight flush that beat his hand. I winked at my new fake boyfriend. "Not bad, babe."

CHAPTER 4



Yool

“*F*ace it.” Wyn jogged to keep up with me as I stormed through the rundown outpost toward our ship. “You were played.”

I shot him a dark look but didn’t slow my pace as my boots pounded on the cracked, dusty paving stones. The orange haze that perpetually hung over the alien planet and made it seem like it was always dusk prompted us both to cough, another reminder why it had been so long since we’d stopped at this particular refueling station. “I was not played. The female got lucky.”

My mechanic barked out a laugh as we dodged a heavily painted female eager to attract our attention, her sweet, cloying perfume following us even when she didn’t. “She managed to pull off a straight flush and take all your credits—and one hundred of mine—plus get you to agree to pretend to be her boyfriend all by being lucky?”

I stopped so abruptly that Wyn almost stumbled over his feet. “That’s right. Beginner’s luck.”

Wyn’s unblinking gaze unsettled me, as did the sinking feeling that he was right. I’d been played. Somehow the sweet, wide-eyed female who the bartender claimed was a complete novice player had ended up taking me for a ride. Not that I was ready to admit as much to my crew mate though.

Then a thought jolted me. *Zank*.

I curled my hands into fists. “Why that lying, cheating...”

“Exactly.” Wyn shook a stubby finger at me. “I didn’t know about cheating, but she definitely misrepresented—“

“Not her.” I cut him off. “Zank.”

Wyn’s blue brow creased in confusion.

“The bartender.”

A look of understanding crossed his pinched face. “The one whose niece you screwed and ditched?”

“I didn’t ditch her. I merely left the planet as planned.” I resumed walking as it all started to become clear to me.

“In the middle of the night without waking her or leaving a note?”

I cast him a murderous look as we left the dirty streets of the outpost behind, and the shipyard came into view. Wyn knew me too well. “I never promised to be anything but a bit of fun.”

“You did to this one.”

“Brooke.” I repeated the woman’s name. I hadn’t paid too much attention before we’d started playing, but I knew it now. I also knew she was a pilot with the Valox resistance, she expected me to accompany her back to her hidden base, and her friend and fellow rebel pilot thought it was a horrible idea.

As much as I agreed with the woman called Dani, I’d flinched when she’d questioned Brooke’s sanity.

“Are you insane?” She hadn’t bothered to lower her voice as Brooke had scooped her winnings into a leather satchel. “You want to bring a smuggler back to the base for the party?”

Brooke had beamed as she’d popped the last bar of credits into the bag. “Isn’t it brilliant? Gregor would never think of making a move if he thinks I’m with this guy.”

Dani had slid a disapproving gaze to me. “I mean, you’re right, but that doesn’t change the fact that your fake boyfriend

is a cocky smuggler and a not-so-great gambler.”

I'd bristled, even though I was still sitting at the table, shellshocked as the women discussed me. “I'm usually a great gambler.” I still hadn't figured out how the pretty woman who'd seemed so baffled by the game had pulled out such a big win. That had been before I'd put two and two together when it came to Zank.

Brooke had given me a genuine smile. “Maybe when you're not so sure you're going to take a clueless female's credits.”

Wyn let out a low whistle, which brought my thoughts back to the present. “I have to give her credit. This Brooke managed to get a promise from you when no other female has.”

I did not need a reminder that I didn't believe in commitment, and that my affairs were shorter than the lifespan of a Urvellian fruit fly. I made no pretense to the contrary. Relationships brought nothing but problems, and love meant eventual heartache. I'd seen that with my own parents' bitter split, and I'd promised myself that I'd never go through that again.

Part of me was irritated that I even had to pretend to be in a relationship, but I reminded myself that it was fake.

“She cheated, and I made the promise when I thought she was being honest and I would win,” I grumbled, now that I was sure Zank had set me up, and she'd been in on it from the moment I'd approached her.

Dust kicked up around my feet as I walked across the shipyard toward my battered ship. It wasn't the prettiest bird, but it had carried me and Wyn and our cargo all over the galaxy. The scuff and dings in the gunmetal-gray hull made it easy for me to convince authorities that we were nothing but junk collectors, all the while our secret hold was jammed full of contraband.

“Does that mean you're thinking of going back on your promise?”

I paused outside my ship, reaching up and finding the hidden release to open the hatch. It hadn't occurred to me that I could

renege on my deal, but what did I have to lose? I'd already lost all my credits. Was I really supposed to drop everything to play escort to a female I just met?

Then I shook my head, disgusted that I'd even considered going back on a bet made across the gambling table. I might not think twice about sneaking from a female's bed in the dark of night, but I didn't cheat, and I didn't go back on a deal. Even if it was made under false pretense.

"You know I don't go back on my word."

Wyn raised one shoulder. "You've never promised to pretend to be in love before."

I grabbed him under the armpits and hoisted him through the round hatch and into the ship. Then I grabbed the sides of the opening and pulled myself up so that I was sitting inside with my legs dangling through the hatch. I inhaled the familiar scent of fuel that permeated my ship. For once I was happier to leave the smoky backroom of a bar and return to my old vessel. "No one said anything about pretending to be in love."

Wyn shook his head. "You'll at least have to pretend to like her. The whole point of it is to convince some other guy that she's taken."

I thought about the pretty human and how her eyes had sparkled as she'd looked across the table at me. Then I remembered how nicely her curves filled out her flight suit. Pretending to be attracted to her would not be a problem.

"Come on, Wyn." I jumped to my feet. "You know me. I can be very convincing when I want to be."

Wyn grunted. "I know. You convinced me to loan you a hundred credits."

"Which I'll pay back as soon as we get paid for our delivery." I headed for the cockpit. "Which reminds me, you'll have to finish the run solo."

"What?" Wyn's voice squeaked as he followed me through the ship.

“You can pilot the ship, and the Terreli know you. The drop-off should be easy.” I paused at the door to my quarters. “If we delay until I’m done with this boyfriend ruse, they might not pay us in full.”

Wyn glowered at me. “So, I pay for your stupidity again?”

I ignored him, even though I did feel a pang of guilt that I was leaving him to finish the run. We’d always operated as a team. And he was right. The only reason I had to dump this on him was because I couldn’t resist a game, and I’d allowed myself to be played because I was so cocky.

I slid the door to my quarters open and hurriedly jammed some clothes into a rucksack. “You’re just upset that you won’t get to witness me playing boyfriend.”

Wyn’s frown morphed into a wicked grin. “If this female was a good enough actress to convince you to lose the biggest pot of your life, I think the greater pleasure would be in watching her pretend to be infatuated with you and watching you try to resist her.”

I hooked the bag over one shoulder. “I wouldn’t count on it being an act. I’ve charmed plenty of females before—and resisted them all.”

Wyn made a sound in his throat that told me he wasn’t so sure, but he did give me an idea. If I was going to all the trouble of pretending to be in love with Brooke, I might be able to get her into bed after all. My heartbeat quickened at the thought. I was going to be such a convincing fake boyfriend, I’d have her begging me to fuck her.

I clapped a hand on my friend’s arm. “Losing might not be so bad after all. Double or nothing I get her in bed by the end of the deal.”

“That female?” Wyn shook his head, but his smile was confident. “You’re on.”

CHAPTER 5



Brooke

Dani flopped into the co-pilot's seat of our ship with an audible sigh. "Would it matter if I told you what a bad idea this is?"

"This isn't a bad idea." I took my seat next to her in the cockpit. "It's genius. Maybe my most brilliant plan ever."

Dani shot me a sideways glance. "Or your worst ever."

"That's the problem with genius." I engaged the engines, welcoming the throaty purr beneath my feet. "Sometimes it looks like madness before it works."

"And sometimes it's just bonkers."

I ignored my friend's mumbled complaints as we wordlessly went through the process to fire up the ship and depart the outpost and planet. "Admit it. Watching that cocky alien's face when I showed him my hand and he realized he'd lost it all was priceless."

Dani's mouth quirked into a crooked grin. "I'd never say no to an arrogant guy getting his ass handed to him, but why did you have to make that deal with him? Everything was going great until you went rogue."

"The deal is the best part." I scanned the readouts scrolling across the glossy, gray screen in front of me, checking fuel levels to be sure that we'd gotten the full tank we'd paid for and ensuring there were no system alerts.

“Having to fly back to the Valox base with an alien smuggler and pretend that he’s your boyfriend is the best part?”

“I wanted a way to keep Gregor from hitting on me during the holiday party and ruining it for me. Now I’ve got one.”

“Isn’t that going from bad to worse?” Dani swiveled her seat to face me. “You might avoid Gregor, but now you’re saddled with a total stranger. Plus, if you’re pretending to be his girlfriend, you’re going to have to put on a convincing show, since no one’s ever heard of this secret boyfriend before. And where is he going to stay? Your quarters only have one bed, in case you’d forgotten.”

I hadn’t thought about all that. How was I going to explain a guy no one had ever seen or heard of as a boyfriend I was crazy enough about to bring him to the base and holiday party? I couldn’t exactly claim to be head over heels for him and then put him in his own quarters.

My pulse quickened at the thought of sharing a bed with the big alien, then nerves fluttered in my stomach. It had been a very long time since I’d shared a bed with anyone, mostly because I rarely got involved long enough to reach that point. In my experience, guys ended up leaving, so I didn’t let myself get attached enough for it to hurt when they did.

I shook off those thoughts. “He can sleep on the floor. Comfortable accommodations were never part of the bet.”

Dani folded her arms over her chest and gave me a skeptical look. “And how are we explaining the existence of this boyfriend no one has heard of before? Just so we get our stories straight.”

“I’ll claim it was love at first sight. I saw him at the bar—that part won’t be a lie—and our eyes met across the smoky room.” I dragged one hand through the air as if painting the scene. “We slowly walked to each other as patrons parted and music played—”

“Please no.” Dani groaned. “Do not make me have to retell that cheesy-ass story. Can’t we just say you checked out his package, and then it was lust at first sight?”

I gave her arm a playful shrug. “You’d rather say that?”

She laughed and pivoted back to the controls. “Kind of. I think anyone who knows you would buy my version over you suddenly becoming romantic.”

I bristled at this. “I can be romantic.”

She slid a gaze at me that told me she disagreed. “You are the least romantic person I’ve ever met, Brooke. Not that I disagree. Fairy tales are crap, and most guys are jerks. I just don’t think folks back at the base will believe that you had a complete about-face.”

I frowned, tapping my fingers on the smooth screen to initiate a final engine check before take-off. As much as I hated to admit it, Dani was right. I’d never been shy about my disdain for romance or the idea of true love or even long-term commitment, something I probably should have remembered before I decided to claim I had a boyfriend after I’d loudly and proudly dismissed the concept altogether.

“Then we go with your idea. I was struck by how gorgeous he is, and also by his impressive package. Everyone will believe that, right?”

“I would.”

Dani yelped at the deep voice, and I spun around, my heart racing. Yool stood behind us in the doorway to the cockpit, with a self-satisfied grin on his face.

“How long have you been there?” I stood quickly and advanced on him, my pounding heart giving full to my irritation.

The tall alien didn’t move when I stopped right in front of him with my hands on my hips. It didn’t help that he loomed over me and was so broad that I couldn’t even see around him. He folded his arms over his bare chest to match my stance. “Long enough to hear that you think my package is impressive.”

Heat flamed my cheeks. “I don’t. That’s only the story we’re using to explain why I’m showing up with a boyfriend no one has heard about before.”

His cocky smile didn't waver. "Curious. I take it that boyfriends aren't common for you?"

"I don't believe in long-term relationships."

His dark eyebrows rose slightly. "Neither do I."

I released a breath. Maybe this wouldn't be so hard, after all. "We have one thing in common, then."

"Aside from both being excellent card players."

I tilted my head at him. "I let you win every game—until I didn't."

His silvery cheeks darkened as if they were flushed, and his eyes narrowed. "Only because you had an unfair advantage."

"Are you trying to renege on the deal?" Dani asked, from where she'd pivoted her chair around to watch. I could hear the hopefulness in her voice. "Is that why you're here? To tell us you won't come with us?"

"Not a chance." Yool didn't take his gaze from me. "Never let it be said that I don't pay my debts."

Dani let out a disappointed sigh and swiveled back to the controls.

I held the alien's intense gaze. "So, you're an honorable smuggler?"

"Something like that." He hitched the leather satchel higher on his shoulder. "I'm here to go back to your base and play adoring boyfriend, as requested."

Now that he was standing in my ship, the reality of my impulsive decision hit me. My heart was pounding just standing this close to him. What was going to happen when I had to do more? There was one grain of truth to my lie. I did find the alien very attractive, and something about him seemed to arouse an unconscious desire within me.

I cleared my throat. "If we're going to do this, we need some ground rules."

"Sounds fun, darling," he deadpanned.

I glowered at him. “First off, do not call me darling.”

“No? You don’t like that one?” He tapped one finger on his chin. “What about sweetums?”

Dani made retching sounds behind me, and I wrinkled my nose. “Hard no.”

“If you’re my girlfriend, I think I would have a pet name for you. No worries. We can keep working on that.”

As much as I despised the idea of a pet name, I let it slide. “Where did you learn Earth terms like sweetums? I’ve never met an alien smuggler with such a solid command of human slang.”

“You aren’t the first human I’ve known.”

The tone of his voice and the quirk of his brow left no doubt in my mind of the intimacy of his knowledge. I bit back a groan and ignored his comment. There were more important boundaries to set. I held up a finger. “Number one, you’ll be sharing my quarters to make this convincing.” His pupils flared but I kept talking. “But you’ll be sleeping on the floor.”

“This gets better and better,” he said under his breath.

“It won’t be for long. Besides, this isn’t real, which means don’t even think of trying to get into my pants.”

Yool shifted his weight from one leg to the other. “Maybe I should be the one reminding you of that, considering your comment about my pack—”

I waved a hand in the air as I cut him off. “Fine. I promise I won’t try to get into your pants, either.”

He turned and started walking away. “You say that now.”

I watched him saunter toward the back of the ship, huffed out an exasperated breath, and sank back down in my seat. “Aggravating alien. I wasn’t done telling him the rules.”

Dani looked at me, her grin all wickedness and delight. “I think I’ve changed my opinion. This is going to be fun.”

CHAPTER 6



Yool

“So, this is the infamous resistance base?” I stood at the top of the ship’s short ramp, as Brooke and Dani strode down it and made the metal rattle. If I’d been expecting a high-tech operation, or a hive of activity with ships shooting from the hangar bay while pilots raced across the floor and mechanics loudly banged on metal as they repaired battle-scarred fighters, I was sorely disappointed.

Maybe the rebel flight deck had been like that once, but now the barebones operation was almost eerily quiet. The steel walls were dingy, and dirt peppered the floor from the earthen ceiling that was crisscrossed with metal beams. I breathed in the dank, loamy air, wondering how deep underground the base lay and swallowing a flutter of claustrophobia.

I’d heard plenty about the Valox resistance both before they teamed up with the Vandar to crush the empire and afterward, when they’d become less of a resistance and more of a patrolling force. The rebels were known for being scrappy and secretive, and only those who joined their ranks knew the location of their base. Even though the Valox no longer needed to hide from Zagrath forces intent on destroying them, they still operated like they were being hunted.

As a smuggler, I could appreciate that. You could never be too careful when you were on the wrong side of the galaxy’s law.

It was why I hadn't been offended when Brooke had insisted on blindfolding me upon our approach to the base.

Now I swung the black fabric in one hand. "Should I save this for later, moonbeam?"

Brooke shot me a murderous look over her shoulder, while Dani grinned.

"So, that's a no to moonbeam?" I shoved the blindfold into my pocket. "Noted."

Brooke's co-pilot elbowed her as the wide double doors at the far end of the hangar bay slid open with a groan, and a pair of human males approached.

"We thought you two might have encountered more space pirates," one of the men said, before his gaze landed on me.

"No space pirates." Brooke's voice had risen several octaves as she gave me an unusually bright smile.

Dani cleared her throat to draw the attention away from her friend. "We sent a transmission about our extra passenger. He's just here for the holiday party."

"People are bringing significant others, right?" Brooke asked with a chirpy laugh that sounded like a Benli sparrow being throttled.

"This is your..." The other man's question drifted off as I strode down the ramp and threw an arm around Brooke's shoulders.

"Boyfriend." I gave both men my most winning smile, the one I used when I wanted to convince inspectors not to expand their search of my ship. "But you can call me Yool."

This seemed to render them both speechless, so I gave Brooke a squeeze. "Should I tell them how we met, or do you want to, schnookums?"

Brooke opened and closed her mouth without answering.

"I like to hear you tell it," Dani said, one of her brows lifting in challenge.

"Yes, why don't you tell them, muffin top?"

I instinctively glanced at my waist, which was clearly devoid of any type of muffin top, but kept an adoring smile plastered on my face. “I’d love to, sugar lips.”

“You know what?” Dani broke in again, but this time she grabbed both guys by the arms and started walking with them toward the doors. “Why don’t we save the storytelling for later? I, for one, am dying for a shower and bed.”

“What about the party?” I asked.

“That’s not until tomorrow night.” Brooke told me, as her copilot led the men away from us and toward the doors.

I fell in step behind Dani and the Valox soldiers, keeping my arm looped over Brooke’s shoulders as I lowered my voice. “Muffin top?”

She gave me an innocent look, one I remembered all too well from our card game. “You don’t like that one?”

“I think you can do better.” I inclined my head to the two men in front of us who were being distracted by Dani’s questions about the latest activity at the base. “Who are they?”

“Just two other pilots that joined the resistance around the same time we did. They’re no one you need to worry about impressing.”

“Neither one is the guy you need to convince?”

She gave a small shake of her head. “No, but they’re tight with him.”

“So, they need to believe our story?”

She nodded, as we walked through the sliding double doors that needed oiling and entered a corridor with a low ceiling that was obviously cut into rock and dirt. The air was even cooler as we continued deeper within the base, walking through long passageways lined with metal doors. I tilted my head to take in the odd paper cutouts hanging from the ceiling even as Brooke reached up to touch one, murmuring something about the snowflakes looking good.

I dropped my head so that it was close to her ear, as if I was whispering affectionately to her. “Do you think they believe

us?”

Before she could answer, another man appeared from around a corner, stopping Dani and the two soldiers in their tracks. I felt Brooke stiffen next to me, and I didn't need her to tell me that this was the reason I was there.

I sized up the human quickly. He was tall for an Earthling but lean instead of muscular. His hair was light brown and swept neatly to one side, and his Valox uniform was spotless. This was a resistance fighter? I fought the urge to scoff openly.

“Brooke?” He looked right past Dani and the two men, his gaze pinning the female who was pressed against me.

“Hey, Gregor,” she said lightly. “Good to see you.”

From what I remembered, he and Brooke weren't involved and never had been, but the look he was giving her was more than a little possessive. The look he then bestowed on me was practically venomous. “Who is this?”

“Her boyfriend,” one of the other males said with an emphasis on the second word as both men walked closer to their friend.

Gregor flinched before shaking his head as if trying to dislodge something as he stared at Brooke. “You don't have a boyfriend. Everyone says you don't believe in them.”

She tipped her head back to meet my gaze, her own so filled with adoration I almost believed the act myself. “What can I say? Yool changed my mind.”

“Everyone hates the patriarchy until a big dick swings their way,” Dani muttered so low I wondered if anyone else heard her. The way Brooke pressed her lips together, I suspected she had.

“Love at first sight.” I slid my hand down so that it circled her waist, unable to ignore the alluring curve of her hips as my palm slid lower.

“Love?” All three men asked, disbelief dripping from their voices.

“More like lust.” Brooke reached one hand behind her and closed it over my drifting hand, the result being that we were

both holding one of her ass cheeks. “Right, babe?”

Heat arrowed through me, and my cock twitched to life. “Whatever you say, sweet cheeks.”

Challenge flashed in her eyes. I could see that she was about to come back with a pet name I would despise, so I grasped her face with my free hand and crushed my mouth to hers. Her surprise was palpable, but within moments she sank into the kiss, her lips and her body melting into mine. The jolt from her eager response almost made my knees buckle, and I held her tighter to keep from swaying. When I tore away, she was gazing at me with a dazed expression.

“Now you know what my life has been like since these two met.” Dani broke the stunned silence in the corridor, as she jerked a thumb at us and rolled her eyes in mock exasperation. She hooked her arm in Brooke’s and tugged her forward. “I guess we should let you two get to your quarters, right?”

We pushed past the men as they looked on with slack-jawed faces. Once we’d left them behind, Dani turned to us. “I had my doubts, but I think you two just might pull this off. For a moment there, you even had me convinced that you were a couple.”

I managed to nod at the woman even though my heart was pounding, and my skin prickled as if I’d been electrocuted. I’d kissed Brooke to keep her from talking and to quell any doubts, but I had not anticipated *that*.

This is all an act, I reminded myself. Nothing more. Even as my pulse spiked from thoughts of her lips moving urgently against mine, I told myself that it could never be real.

CHAPTER 7



Brooke

“*T*his is it.” I stepped into my spartan quarters and waited for Yool to follow. I’d never been particularly self-conscious about how I lived before, but looking at my bare walls and basic, gray bedspread made my cheeks warm.

Who cares what he thinks? The alien smuggler is nothing to you but a means to an end, I told myself. An end that was much closer to becoming a reality, now that Gregor had seen us together.

Even so, I shifted from one foot to the other as the door swished closed on Yool, and he scanned the interior of the room that contained a double bed with a nightstand, a desk and chair, and a dresser. No window. No rug. No photos in frames.

He didn’t comment, but he did glance down. “This is where I’ll sleep?”

Now that I was staring at the cold, steel floor that didn’t even have the advantage of an area rug, guilt gnawed at my insides. Also, the guy was so big he’d take up the entire space on the floor beside my bed, which meant I’d have to leap over him to reach the bathroom. “I guess it doesn’t look too comfortable.”

He shrugged. “I’ve slept on worse.”

“You have?” The Valox base wasn’t known for creature comforts, but had he really had worse accommodations than a

steel floor?

He gave me a slow wink. “I’m a smuggler, babe. I’ve had to hide in my ship’s own secret hold with Wyn lying on top of me for over a day. This is practically luxury.”

That was good to know, but I didn’t know if I would be able to go through with forcing him to sleep on the floor. Not that I was going to share that with him—yet. “Babe?”

He held up his palms. “Do I need to remind you that you called me babe first?”

He was right. I had, but thinking of that only served to remind me of the kiss that had happened next. My heart tripped in my chest. “I guess babe is better than schnookums.”

“Are you really complaining, *muffin top*?” He gave me a pointed look.

I couldn’t keep my gaze from wandering to his waist. Actually, his stomach was corded with muscles and about as far from a pillowy muffin top as possible. I forced myself to return my gaze to him, noticing a smile teasing the edges of his mouth. “You’re the one who started with the pet names.”

His expression was guileless, but his eyes sparkled with mischief. “I thought you’d like them.”

“You thought a Valox resistance pilot would like to be called sweetums?”

“I’ve never dated a member of a resistance before.” He tilted his head. “Or a pilot. I don’t usually date.”

I scoffed at this. “I find that hard to believe, especially after what the bartender told me about your reputation.”

“I never said I didn’t enjoy females, but I never make it to the dating stage.”

My face warmed at the implication, even though I wasn’t surprised. That tracked with his reputation and persona. “Well, you’re doing a good job of fooling people so far.”

He bowed his head slightly. “I’ve never enjoyed a job so much.”

Even though his words made my pulse flutter I huffed out an irritated breath. “Don’t get any ideas about method acting. You’re still sleeping on the floor.”

His smile vanished and he gave me a mock salute. “Understood, boss.”

I rolled my eyes. “You don’t have to call me boss.”

“I don’t know.” He scrunched his lips to one side as if contemplating something. “That might be my favorite pet name so far.”

I bit back a name I would have liked to call him that wasn’t so flattering, and I jerked my head toward the bathroom door. “You can have first shower while I go check in with my commander.”

Yool’s cocky expression morphed to one of genuine interest. “You have your own shower?”

“One of the perks of being a pilot. Private quarters, my own bathroom, and...” I paused, as I thought about any other perks to flying for the Valox. “Actually, that’s about it as far as perks. Also, the water is moody. Sometimes it’s scalding and sometimes it’s ice. If you’re lucky, it will split the difference for you and stay warm.”

He looked at the bathroom door with real longing. “I haven’t bathed with warm water in longer than I can remember.”

I always thought that the life of a smuggler was exciting and glamorous, but of course, it wasn’t. Real smugglers usually had raggedy ships and lived hand to mouth, which clearly described Yool’s life. “Then I hope you enjoy it.” I spun on my heel to leave but then paused at the door. “But if you use up all the warm water and leave me to shower in ice water, I will make you pay.”

He laughed, the sound a throaty rumble that told me he wasn’t scared of my threats. “Whatever you say, boss.”

I glared at him over my shoulder, and he instantly looked abashed.

“I mean, babe.”

I groaned, not sure which was worse as I stomped from my quarters, leaving him to his shower and probably using all of my warm water. My palms were damp, and I rubbed them on the front of my dark uniform pants as I walked through the web of corridors. Not even the sight of the paper snowflakes hung overhead for the holiday party lifted my mood.

Why did the alien unnerve me so much? Sure, he was big and brawny, with hair I wanted to run my fingers through, but it was more than that. I'd been around hot guys before—and even charming ones like him—but Yool was different. Perhaps it was because he could never be more than a fling that made him so tempting.

“But he isn't your fling,” I whispered to myself. “You're only pretending he is.”

Would it be so bad if we did have a fling? We were already putting on a show to convince Gregor that I was taken. What would be the harm in making that real? It wasn't like an alien smuggler who was a confirmed ladies' man wanted anything but sex, anyway. Maybe Yool was actually the best guy I could pick to have something fun and meaningless.

He didn't believe in commitment. I didn't believe in commitment. Neither of us would become clingy or get their feelings hurt when it was over.

Then I shook my head hard. That wasn't the deal. Even if it was perfect, there was no way I was going to suggest it to Yool. He already thought he was the universe's gift to females. Telling him that my act wasn't completely an act would be like tossing gasoline on his cocky fire.

Nope. He would be insufferable if he knew the arousal he'd provoked with his kiss. I'd just have to ignore my racing heart and sweaty palms and stick to the plan. The holiday party was soon, and then he'd be off the base, and we'd both go back to our regular lives.

“If I don't explode before then.”

“Did you say explode? What's exploding?”

I hadn't been paying attention to where I was walking or to the woman who'd walked up behind me. I put a hand to my chest as I whirled around. "Emily! I didn't know you were behind me." When I saw her wide eyes, I quickly added. "Nothing is exploding. I was talking to myself about how I can't wait to eat so much at the holiday party that I explode."

The blonde pilot's expression relaxed, and her shoulders sagged before she hooked her arm through mine. "You headed to the command center, too?"

I nodded. "You were on patrol?"

"Yes, but once again, I picked up nothing."

"If the Vandar are right and they're hiding in the Jarvelon sector, then we shouldn't detect them."

Emily bit the corner of her mouth. "I know, but something doesn't feel right, especially after the Kassel Run mercenaries attacked our pilots as they were escorting Thea back to the base. Those guys never come to this part of space."

I agreed with her that the mercenaries had been bold, but I told myself it was only because their leader had been obsessed with Thea. The battle against the Zagrath would not be anywhere near here. I squeezed her arm. "Don't forget that the empire still doesn't know how to find us. This base is still secret, so even if they try to retake this sector, we don't have to worry about an attack."

My fellow pilot exhaled loudly as we reached the entrance to the command hub of the subterranean base. "You're right. I'm being a worry wart." Then she beamed at me. "Besides, it's almost Christmas. Nothing bad can happen at Christmas."

CHAPTER 8



Yool

I stood with my hands braced on the rough, stone wall as hot water pounded on my back. Steam filled the small bathroom, and I inhaled the scent of the flowery soap I'd used to scrub the grime from my skin. The water now ran clear as it pooled around my feet, and tension from the last few smuggling runs drained from my body.

I vaguely remembered Brooke's orders that I not use all the hot water, but it was impossible to think clearly when the heat was loosening the knots in my shoulders and allowing me to forget about the credits I owed to the Griflings, the bounty on my head on Olestia, and the debt I now owed Wyn for finishing the delivery for me. Standing under hot water in a bathroom in a rebel base somewhere underground made it possible for me to pretend that none of that was hanging over my head. For the moment, all I needed to focus on was fulfilling the deal I'd made with the human.

The thought of Brooke sent heat straight to my cock that rivaled the heat pouring over my body. Gods, the female was driving me mad, and she didn't even know it. I curled my hands into fists as I tried to regain control of myself and tell my cock not to stand at attention as my thoughts drifted to the pretty pilot.

I'd been sure I could pretend to be her mate without succumbing to the carnal urges that had always gotten me into

trouble, but every touch from her sent tingles buzzing across my skin. Even a look from her made my heartbeat quicken.

As if the water had a direct line to my brain, the soothing warmth of the water instantly turned frigid. My breath seized in my chest as I fumbled with the rusty handles, but no matter which way I turned them, the water remained icy. I flattened my body to the wall in a desperate attempt to avoid the blast of water as I gasped for breath and flipped off the flow. Finally, I danced from the shower and stood on the floor with cold water streaming off my body and puddling around me.

I snatched a scratchy, brown towel from a nearby hook as I swiped a hand across my face and released a tortured growl. Served me right. Brooke had warned me about the mercurial water temperature.

I roughly toweled off my body and strode naked from the bathroom and back into the sleeping area. Although the space was larger than my bunk on the ship, it was about as cozy. I'd expected a female's quarters to be, well, more feminine, but maybe every room at the base was required to be the same.

I glanced at the metal floor that was now splotched with wet footprints. I did not relish sleeping on that later, but I'd been honest when I'd told her that I'd slept in worse places. What I hadn't told her was that the worst place I'd slept in was actually a cell in a dungeon on Zerros Prime. My gaze scanned the pristine floor. At least here there were no rodents with wings and wide, flat feet that made continual slapping sounds as I'd tried to sleep.

Being a smuggler meant I'd experienced little actual comfort, so even though the rebel base was underground, and Brooke's quarters were barebones, they seemed almost luxurious to me. I eyed the bed greedily, putting one hand on the mattress to test it out. It was firm but much softer than any floor. Then I imagined sharing the bed with Brooke, curling my body around her smaller one, and my cock thickened.

I groaned. This was not part of the plan. I was supposed to come here, pretend to be into the human, and then leave. If I got lucky, I might get her into bed. What I had not counted on

was how crazy she was making me. I'd kissed more than my share of females—and maybe a few other aliens' shares—but never had one left my head spinning like kissing Brooke had. Even thinking about it made my rigid cock ache.

“Get a grip,” I muttered to myself, casting a glance at the door as I was still naked. I snatched pants from the rucksack I'd brought and stepped into them, the fabric catching on my still damp legs.

I tried to push thoughts of the female from my mind, since every time I thought about her, my cock hardened. Maybe the only way out of my predicament was through it. Would it truly be so bad if I wasn't pretending? Not that I wished to be anyone's boyfriend. That hadn't changed. But I wouldn't mind if instead of pretending to bed the female, I actually did.

Then I remembered her expression when I'd called her babe. There was no way Brooke would go for it. She'd made it clear that she needed me for one purpose only—to pretend to be her boyfriend. She didn't want anything real from me.

“Her loss,” I grumbled, even though I knew it was really mine, especially considering how painfully my balls would ache at the end of all this.

Adjusting my cock in my snug pants, I left the pilot's quarters. I couldn't stay in the bare room waiting for her. Not when my stomach was reminding me that I'd missed at least one meal.

I might not know the layout of the underground base, but I remembered the way we'd come, and I also recalled clearly where I'd picked up the faint aroma of food. I retraced my steps, nodding at a few curious Valox soldiers in the corridors, until my nose twitched.

There was a kitchen, and it was close. My stomach growled at the distinctive smell of baking bread and the even more enticing scent of something sweet. Sugar wasn't something that was easily procured in every part of the galaxy, but I was aware that humans were overly fond of it, so it wasn't surprising that it was on a base where a good portion of the fighters were human.

I followed the aromas until I heard the telltale clattering of pans, and soon I found myself standing in the wide, arched doorway of a sizable kitchen. The air was warm and laced with spice as figures stood over steaming pots and at tall worktables. The movement in the bustling kitchen stopped as confused gazes locked onto me.

“Yool!” For the first time, I was relieved to hear the voice of Brooke’s copilot.

Dani was standing at a waist-high, wood-topped counter, and she was chopping something. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that Brooke sent you to help us with the party prep. She’s a sucker for Christmas cookies.” She waved me forward with her knife. “Everyone, this is Brooke’s...boyfriend, Yool.”

The wide eyes popped even wider as their heads snapped first to Dani and then to me.

“Boyfriend?” A female with pale-green skin dropped her spoon into the pot she’d been stirring. “Brooke?”

Dani gave a casual shrug. “I know, I know. She’s not the type. I guess she got overcome by the Christmas spirit.”

A woman with pale-yellow hair made no secret of eyeing me up and down. “She got overcome by something.”

Dani put down her knife and threw a stained dishtowel at the woman. “Behave, Alli. Brooke might be the jealous type.”

I liked the thought of Brooke being jealous over another woman ogling me, but then I remembered that this was all part of the ruse, which Dani was in on. But it was a ruse I’d agreed to, so I gave the cooks my most charming smile as I met Dani’s gaze. “Like you said, I’m here to help my girlfriend’s friends prepare for the party.” Then I frowned. “What are Christmas cookies?”

A curvy female with a wild mane of fuchsia curls sidled up to me and popped something round and warm into my mouth before I could object. “So?” She bumped me with one hip and winked. “What do you think of my famous ginger-spice cookies?”

I didn't know what ginger was, but I moaned out loud as I chewed the soft, sweet disc that she'd called a cookie. Flavor exploded in my mouth as I savored every bite and finally swallowed, while everyone in the kitchen seemed to hold their breath awaiting my answer. "I think that might have been the best thing I've ever eaten. Can you teach me how to make them?"

The woman who'd given me the cookie smiled brightly and squeezed my bicep. "A guy who looks like you and likes to cook? Brooke might have to fight me for you, honey."

CHAPTER 9



Brooke

“That’s done.” I shared a relieved glance with Emily as we exited the command center and left behind the beeping consoles and static buzz of incoming transmissions. The rest of the Valox base might be in the holiday spirit, but the hanging paper snowflakes and strings of white lights hadn’t made it to the dimly lit hub jammed with consoles and star charts all blinking and dinging simultaneously.

“You don’t think we should be worried, do you?” Emily released a heavy sigh as we put some distance between us and the bustling space that was so at odds with the festive atmosphere of the rest of the underground base.

She didn’t need to elaborate on her question for me to know what she meant, but I stole a quick look at the blonde’s pinched expression and gave her a comforting smile. “About a few base-wide anomalies and system malfunctions? Not at all.”

Even though we’d both reported finding no signs of the Zagrath encroaching in any of their old territory or attempting to regain any of the planets they’d once occupied—and I’d pointedly left out any mention of bringing an alien smuggler into a card game so I could take him for everything he had and make him pretend to be my boyfriend—our commander had wanted our opinion on some odd happenings at the base.

“You know the resistance has been put together using junker ships and salvaged equipment, right?”

“I guess.” My fellow pilot twisted her lips to one side. “I didn’t study up on the history of the resistance before I joined, but I guess rebels are rarely well funded.”

“Exactly,” I said, as we walked down the corridors beneath an uneven canopy of weathered, paper snowflakes that swayed in the artificial breeze from the ceiling vents. “This entire base was constructed by burying a giant, abandoned battleship in the ground, and it wasn’t cutting-edge technology back then. It’s bound to have issues.”

Emily nodded, seemingly comforted by my reasoning. Even though what I’d said was true—the Valox base was rickety and constantly in need of upgrades and patch jobs—I wasn’t as cavalier about the commander’s revelations as I portrayed. The anomalies and malfunctions that had been occurring with increased regularity weren’t the kind of things that were a result of normal wear and tear. I’d seen enough aging ships to know that.

They also appeared to be happening in only certain systems in the base—defenses, communication, life support. The precise areas any enemy would want to target. Knock out our defenses, remove our ability to call for help, and then trap us all underground with no air. Even thinking about it made my stomach do an uncomfortable flip.

I shook off my doomsday thoughts and reminded myself that I always did this. I had a bad habit of taking a grain of a problem and imagining the worst possible scenario and scaring the life out of myself in the process. Dani claimed I did it as a form of self-protection. I vividly imagined the worst that could happen, which never came to pass, so that the reality was always a relief.

Even though I’d made fun of her armchair assessment and called her “Shrink” for a month, she’d been right. Making my mind go to the scariest option did make it easier for me to cope with my often-dangerous reality. I’d been doing it since I’d been stuck bumming around the galaxy with my erratic

gambler father, who could never be relied on. Losing my mother had been my original worst-case scenario, but I'd survived that, which meant I could survive anything.

"You don't think the anomalies are dangerous?" Emily asked earnestly, reminding me that she was younger and newer to the danger of flying for the resistance than me.

"No more dangerous than those combat landings you like to do."

Pale-pink splotches mottled her cheeks. "You never know when you'll need to do one of those in a battle."

"If we had battleships to land in."

She laughed. "Right. I guess that would help."

As we continued down the corridors toward the personal quarters, I detected familiar aromas and was grateful for the easy opening to change the subject to something less scary. "Have they started baking cookies without us?"

Emily took a deep breath, and the worry left her face. "I hope so, since I'm a shit cook."

"You don't have to be a good cook to make Christmas cookies." I grabbed her by the arm and tugged her forward, excitement propelling me forward.

Baking cookies with my mother was one of my favorite memories from childhood. She'd loved everything about the holiday, and she'd always gone all out to make it special, even when we didn't have much. I could remember how eagerly we'd saved up our sugar and spices, not having any desserts for months leading up to when we'd start baking. Then we'd spend an entire day baking cookies and pies, our small house being filled with the aromas of cinnamon and ginger. Breathing in those scents now took me right back to that feeling of being happy and loved.

As we got closer, the smells became more pungent and the sounds of laughing and clattering grew louder. I couldn't help grinning, knowing that I would find my favorite people hard at work baking food that I equated with the happiest times in my life.

“I can’t believe you started without me,” I said loudly when we reached the doorway.

Smiling faces peered up at me from inside as they stirred batter and spooned dough onto steel baking sheets. But one face made my heart trip in my chest. What was Yool doing here? Hadn’t I left him in my quarters taking a shower?

“Hey, babe!” He gave me a cheery smile and waved a spoon covered in chunky cookie batter.

I blinked at him wordlessly. I didn’t know how to process him being in my perfect holiday scenario, although I guess I didn’t have anyone to blame but myself for bringing him to the base. Did I really think I could silo him off from my special holiday friend activities and trot him out only when I needed him?

Yes. Yes, I had.

Mariah gave me a mischievous wink as she cocked her fuchsia head of curls at me. “You didn’t tell us you had a boyfriend who could cook. You’re lucky I don’t steal him from you.”

I fought the urge to tell her that she could have him once the holiday party was over, but that thought didn’t make me any happier, so instead I forced myself to smile. “He’s full of surprises.”

Yool handed his spoon to one of the Validian twins who were munitions experts and walked over to slip an arm around my waist. “I’ve learned how to make something called eggnog snickerdoodles. Want to help?”

I gaped up at him, completely discombobulated by seeing the rough-edged alien smuggler wearing an apron, his silver face dotted with bits of flour. What floored me even more was the look of wonder in his eyes. This wasn’t an act. He was actually enjoying himself.

“Can I steal you for a moment?” I grabbed his hand and jerked him from the kitchen, ignoring the hoots that followed us as I marched him back to my quarters.

CHAPTER 10



Yool

“Do you not like snickerwhatchamadoodles?” I asked, as Brooke practically dragged me down one corridor after another.

When she’d first appeared in the entrance to the kitchen, she’d looked happier than I’d ever seen her. Then she’d spotted me, and she’d looked like a Klepian muskrat caught in headlights. I’d thought she would have been happy that I was playing my role as her supportive boyfriend to perfection, but I got the feeling from her vise-like grip on my hand, that she was anything but pleased.

Once we were inside her quarters, which still held the lingering scent of the flowery soap I’d used, Brooke released my hand.

“Am I playing it wrong?” I pulled the apron over my head and tossed it onto the bed. “Do you not want me to pretend to be your loyal and friendly boyfriend?”

She hadn’t spoken, and she wasn’t facing me.

“I could pretend to be an alien overlord,” I suggested. “I would definitely have to drop the pet names and order you around more.” I cleared my throat and deepened my voice. “Get in bed now, mate.”

She spun around, her chest heaving and her eyes flashing.

“So, that’s a no.” I still didn’t know why she was so upset, although I’d learned that females didn’t always make sense to me. “What about a submissive guy? We could pretend that you’re the Dom, and I take your orders.” I frowned as I contemplated this. “No. That’s not going to work for me. Sorry, babe.” I tapped a finger on my jawline. “I don’t think I’m that good of an actor.”

She held up a hand. “Stop.”

“You don’t want to hear my other ideas?”

She shook her head, and her hair swung around her face. “No more.”

I hesitated as I stared at her. “No more ideas? No more talking? No more...?” The sharpness of her words made me think that she was done with more than just my weak ideas about boyfriend personas. Was she done with me? Was she letting me out of our deal?

That possibility should have thrilled me. After all, I was supposed to be counting the moments until I’d fulfilled my part of the deal and could return to my smuggling ship and my normal life. But instead of feeling thrilled, my heart sank.

There was absolutely no reason I should feel regret over leaving the Valox base. That would mean I wouldn’t have to attend the holiday party and pretend to be someone I wasn’t so I could scare off the man I’d met in the corridor. Thinking of Gregor and the way he’d looked at Brooke sent a pulse of possessive desire through me. She couldn’t be picking him over me, could she? Was that why she was releasing me from our deal?

Just as quickly as I’d been overcome with a pang of sadness at the idea of leaving, I was overwhelmed with the urge to stay. Not because I needed to uphold my end of the bargain I’d made, but because I didn’t want to leave Brooke. Especially if Gregor was going to be anywhere near her. As crazy as it was, I felt like she was mine to protect.

My heart pounded with the strange realization. Brooke was mine.

I braced my hands on my hips and stared her down. “I’m not leaving.”

She looked taken aback, the surprise of my statement diffusing some of her own anger. “I never told you to leave.”

“You said ‘no more’.”

She pressed her lips together for a beat. “I meant that I didn’t want to pretend anymore.”

I kept my gaze locked on hers as I turned these words around in my head. How was that any different from releasing me from our deal? Gods of the sky, this female was infuriating. “What does that mean?”

She turned and started pacing a small circle on the floor, her boots rapping against the hard steel. “I don’t know, but I do know that seeing you with all my friends doing the thing that I used to love doing most with my mother made me realize that this is wrong. Lying to all these people I care about is wrong. I don’t want to trick them all into thinking you’re this wonderful, great boyfriend when you’re not, even if it will keep me from being annoyed by Gregor. You’re going to leave, and I’m going to have to explain that you were never real, or I’ll have to keep up the ruse and tell them you were a jerk, so I dumped you.”

“Bold to assume you weren’t the jerk to me,” I said under my breath.

Brooke shot me a look but didn’t stop pacing. “I thought this was a great idea, but that was before you came here and made everything complicated.”

I frowned at her, my confusion deepening. “How did I make it complicated?”

She flapped a hand in my direction without making eye contact. “By not being who I expected you to be. You were supposed to be a hot alien who was a bit of a jerk.”

I tilted my head at her. “And I’m not?”

“Oh, you are, but you’re too good at pretending to be a perfect boyfriend. I was supposed to be able to toss you aside with no

problem because you're actually a total dick, but then you bake cookies and pour on the fake charm with my friends and ___”

I grabbed Brooke's arm to stop her manic pacing. “I was not acting when I was with your friends.” I wrapped an arm around the small of her back and pressed her body to mine. “And I'm not acting now.”

Then I crushed my lips to hers.

CHAPTER 11



Brooke

The universe seemed to shift beneath my feet as Yool's lips captured mine. It was a good thing he was holding me so close because otherwise my knees would have buckled.

What was happening? Just moments ago, I'd been so frustrated with him I could barely see straight, and now all I wanted was for him not to stop kissing me. I lifted my hands, raking them through his hair and holding him to me. I needed more of his touch and more of the way his touch made electricity dance across my skin.

I was almost lightheaded with desire as he deepened the kiss, parting my lips forcefully and claiming my mouth. Every fiber of my being was screaming *yes* even as my rational brain knew it was wrong.

But why was it wrong? Didn't I deserve a little fun? Hadn't I earned a treat for the holidays after all my long patrol runs searching for rogue imperial ships?

I'd been fighting giving in to my attraction to the alien, but now as his hands roamed up my body and his palms cupped my breasts, I couldn't remember why. I moaned into his mouth as he thumbed my nipples through the fabric of my flight suit, making the flesh pebble and ache to be freed.

Lifting one of my legs and hooking it as high as I could around his hips, I ground myself into him. When I was met with impressive hardness, I tightened my grip on his hair, jerked his head back, and ripped my lips from his. “I’ve been a good girl, you know.”

He was panting as he blinked at me. His black pupils had swallowed his gray eyes, and they sizzled molten even as he furrowed his brow. “Have you?”

I nodded, dragging in a ragged breath. Suddenly, I didn’t care if Yool wasn’t actually boyfriend material and definitely didn’t have long-term potential. I didn’t care that he was exactly the type of hot charmer I should have been avoiding. The fact that he would absolutely leave the base and I would never see him again didn’t matter to me anymore. I also didn’t give two shits about what would happen to my perfect plan if we gave in to our urges. I’d done such an amazing job of protecting my heart and focusing on work, that I was so horny I was on the verge of exploding. “I think I’ve been too good.”

A velvet growl rumbled his chest. “Too good? Then maybe you should try being bad for a while.”

His words thrilled me and made desire trill my pulse. “Isn’t that what I’m doing right now?”

He made another dark sound in his throat as he leaned down and dragged his tongue up the length of my neck until he reached the delicate skin behind my ear, which he nipped.

My legs wobbled, and I clenched my hooked leg tighter around his hips, savoring the rigid bar of his cock and imagining everything I wanted to do to it and to him. For some strange reason, being with Yool freed me from my usual inhibitions. Besides, I would never see him again. I could do or say anything to him, and I instinctively knew he wouldn’t care.

“Santa doesn’t bring presents to naughty girls,” I whispered.

He hesitated, but then quickly spun me around and pushed me onto the bed, pressing his body on top of mine while he

pushed my legs apart. “I don’t know this Santa, but I give gifts to naughty girls. Do you want to be a bad girl for me, babe?”

The thought of being his bad girl made my body ignite. I nodded, biting my bottom lip to keep from crying out.

“Say it.” He tangled one hand in my hair, pulled my head back, and twisted it so that our faces were even so he could crush his mouth to mine again.

I panted when he broke the kiss, my body aching for more. “Say what?”

“Say that you’re my bad girl,” he husked, “and no one will ever know that I fucked you so well that I ruined you for any other cock.”

My pussy throbbed as my eyes rolled into the back of my head. I didn’t even care that Yool’s arrogant side was on full display. I had a strong feeling that he could back it up, especially if I was about to come just from his dirty talk.

“I’m your bad girl.” I twisted my head to meet his gaze. “But only yours.”

Predatory hunger flared in his eyes as he jerked me onto all fours. “Let’s see how bad my girl can be.”

CHAPTER 12



Yool

I groaned, grinding myself into her as I bent my body over hers, tipped her head back, and delved deeper into her mouth. She moaned again, the sound desperate. I was lightheaded as my tongue tangled with hers, the taste of her intoxicating. She was no shy female, her own tongue urgent as it stroked mine and explored my mouth without hesitation.

There was no question that I'd had my share of females, and most of them just as practiced and free with their affections as I was, but this human fighter pilot was not what I'd expected. First, she'd fooled me with her sweet and innocent appearance and taken me in the card game, and now her raw hunger startled me. Had I truly expected her to be as wide-eyed and pure as she looked?

She's a resistance fighter, Yool. Not some sheltered creature who'd never been with a male, although I despised the idea of her with another. And who was this Santa she'd mentioned? He might not bring presents to naughty girls, but I gladly would.

Then I reminded myself that this was just a bit of fun. A bet, actually. I'd been so confident I could charm her into bed that I'd gone double or nothing on my wager with Wyn. Not that I cared about that now. Not when she was beneath me and my body buzzed with need, my shaft aching to be released.

I ripped my mouth from hers and knifed up, running my hands down her body until I reached the waistband of her dark pants. I hooked my thumbs beneath them and tugged hard to jerk them off. The sight of her round ass and the sheer, black panties covering it made me bite my lip to keep from growling.

Brooke lifted her knees to help me as I roughly yanked her pants completely off and tossed them onto the floor. She made a move to turn to face me, but I gripped her hips to keep her in place, pressing a palm into her back to press her head into the mattress. “You said you wanted to be my bad girl.”

Her eyelids fluttered as she craned her neck to look at me, her elbows braced on either side of her head. “What are you—?”

Her question died on her lips as I bent down, forced her knees apart, and tilted her ass cheeks up. I flipped around so that my face was beneath her, and I pulled her panties to the side with my finger, sliding it through her slickness. “You’re so wet for me, bad girl.”

Her only response was a desperate whimper as she rocked her hips forward, bringing her sweetness closer to me. I grasped her ass and brought it fully to my mouth, savoring the honeyed juices slippery on my tongue. Sliding my tongue through her heat, I quickly found the bundle of nerves I knew were the pleasure center for humans.

Brooke’s hands fisted the sheets as I swirled the tip of my tongue. The faster I circled, the more her hips twitched. But I didn’t care. The sound of her breathy cries and the feel of her body arching as she came closer to release only drove me to work her sensitive nub with more intensity. I slid a finger inside her, the sensation of her snug heat making my cock throb with need.

As I moved it in and out, my finger keeping pace with my gentle sucking, Brooke’s body spasmed around me. She bowed up, her tight clamping around my head as her body exploded around me. She was still pulsing around my finger when I flipped her onto her back and sat back onto my knees, wrapping her legs around me.

Her breath came out in ragged bursts as she sat up, licking her lips as her fingers skimmed their way up my chest. Then she whipped her shirt over her head to reveal a black bra that matched the panties that were still on, even though they were soaked. With her gaze trained on me, she reached her hands behind her back and unhooked her bra and slipped the thin straps down her arms. When she tossed both garments on the floor, locking her eyes on mine, her pupils darkened and flashed with challenge. I loved that I hadn't needed to tell her to take it off or do it for her. She wanted me to see her high, round breasts that quivered as she fell back down onto the bed.

I took my wet finger and dragged it down her neck and then down each breast, circling the flushed, pebbled nipples one at a time before continuing the trail down to the smooth mound covered by black fabric. I slipped my finger beneath the fabric again and dipped it inside her. Her pupils flared as I dragged it back out again and put it in my mouth, sucking it clean.

Her mouth gaped as I returned my finger to beneath her panties, slid it inside her, and drew it out again. She grabbed my wrist and guided my slick finger to her own mouth, taking it inside and sucking hard. "Now we're both on the naughty list."

I didn't know what she meant by this, but there was no doubt that if there was such a list, I'd been on it for a long time.

"I think you like being bad," I told her.

She shook her head. "Only for you."

Even if this wasn't true, I liked hearing it. I wanted to think she was only bad for me. "That's right. You're my bad girl, aren't you, babe?"

Her only answer was to let her legs fall open. "Why don't you find out how bad I can be for you?"

Hunger rocketed through me, and I jerked the front of my pants down to free my cock. It sprang up proudly and again, her mouth fell open. This made me think she'd never seen a Zarbling cock before, especially when her gaze locked on the thick length of it, the hard bumps that swirled around the shaft,

and the elongated crown with raised stripes sweeping down from the tip.

I hesitated, waiting for her to back away. Instead, she curled one hand around the base and let her fingertips feather across the textured length. With a wicked smile, she guided it down between her breasts, pressing them together to cocoon it. I moved my hips back and forth, the friction of her soft skin around my cock almost too much.

I dropped my head back, unable to watch her without fear of bursting, and scraped my hands roughly through my hair. As much as I loved the sight of her perfect tits, I did not want to spill on them. Not when what I wanted most was to be inside her.

With a husky grunt, I pulled away and tore at her panties, ripping the fabric from her body. I spread her legs wide and notched my cock as her entrance. “Tell me what you want, my gorgeous bad girl.”

Her chest hitched as her gaze drifted to watch the silver crown of my cock against the paleness of her skin. “I want you to fuck me hard.”

Molten heat fired inside me, sending frissons of pleasure dancing across my skin. I attempted to steady my uneven breath as my gaze devoured her, and I pushed inside her just enough for her eyes to widen and her breath to catch. “You are sure you can take all of me?”

She inhaled quickly, her lashes fluttering as her eyes rolled back in her head for a beat. “I *need* to take all of you.”

I had never worried about being too much for a female, but this one was so small. I pushed in a little more, but Brooke lifted her hands to my chest muscles and dug them into my flesh. “Don’t hold back. I want you to fuck me like you’re punishing me.”

I hissed as she dragged her nails down my skin, the pain provoking a strange pulse of pleasure. I should be punishing her for tricking me out of my credits. What I shouldn’t be doing was wondering what it would be like if she *was* my bad

girl and not just a fling. With a growl, I drove my cock mercilessly into her.

CHAPTER 13



Brooke

I gasped as he entered me, the sudden intrusion making all the air leave my lungs. He paused once he'd filled me to the hilt, holding himself as my body adjusted.

Curling my arms around his back, my fingers slipped on his bare flesh that was already slick with sweat.

He hissed in a breath as my fingertips caressed his flesh, then he touched his forehead to mine.

I managed to release a shaky breath.

His forehead furrowed, a rivulet of sweat trailing down his temple. "Am I hurting you?"

"I told you I wanted it hard."

He dragged himself out slowly and then pushed back in, the stretch burning less. The muscles in his neck were strained, and his jaw ticked as he clearly fought to maintain control.

I curled my hands so that my fingernails bit into his flesh. I dragged my nails down, scoring his skin with pink welts. "Hard and rough."

His eyes went black, and he opened his mouth in a silent roar, arching his back and thrusting deep inside me. He didn't hesitate as he reached back and grabbed my ankles, spreading my legs as wide as they could go and driving into me.

I moaned with each hard thrust, loving the feel of being filled by his thickness and savoring the look of him as he pounded into me, his long, dark hair falling into his face and his jaw clenched. His sculpted chest muscles were tensed, and his corded stomach rippled as he thrust into me, his rhythm savage.

His gaze raked my body as he lifted my ass off the bed, his eyes locking on the place where our bodies joined and his expression dark and dominant—and surprised. “I didn’t think your tight, little body would be able to take me.”

“I told you I could take you,” I said between stolen breaths, even though I’d never had a cock as big as his—or one with so many raised bumps and striped, and it felt like he was splitting me in two, but in the best way possible.

“You did,” he gritted out, his eyes flaring hungrily. “And you told me you were a bad girl, but I didn’t believe you.”

I propped myself up on my elbows. There was something so hot about watching his dark gray cock thrusting inside me and knowing that I was taking every bit of him.

“You like watching yourself being fucked?” he husked out, his gaze meeting mine.

I nodded, pulling my bottom lip up in my teeth. Then I put a finger in my mouth, dragging it out and sliding it down to my clit. “Do you like watching this?”

Yool lost his rhythm for a second as he watched me circle my finger around my clit, his gaze dark and intense. It didn’t take long for the sensations to storm through me and for my body to start clenching around him.

“Again,” he said, his words more of a command as he stroked deep and then pulled out for a moment, pressing the crown of his cock to my tender clit.

I let out a silent gasp, as the pressure made me come even harder. The only noise that came from him was a stifled snarl as he flipped me over, bending me at the waist. I fisted my hands in the sheets as he bent his legs and grasped my hips, tilting my ass up to give him better access.

“Such a pretty ass,” he groaned, grabbing one ass cheek and squeezing it.

I twisted my head to look at him, his massive, textured cock standing out ramrod straight from his body. I twitched my ass at him. “You aren’t done, are you?”

He gave me a crooked smile, then slapped my ass with one open palm. “That’s for being an impatient, naughty girl.”

“Ow!” I jerked, but he was holding my hips tight.

“I thought you said you could handle anything I gave you.”

I wiggled in his grasp. “Just because you’re bigger than me, doesn’t mean—”

He bent over and lowered himself, spreading my legs with his knee and burying his cock inside me. “Doesn’t mean what?”

I couldn’t help letting out a moan of pleasure as the new angle went even deeper.

“That I can do what I want with your perfect little body, and fuck you until you scream? I thought that’s what you wanted, babe.” He started stroking deep, his words sending heat simmering over my flesh. “You wanted me to be bad, didn’t you?”

Even as my legs wobbled and my eyes fluttered, I fought to snap back a response to the cocky alien. “You’re fucking me so well, maybe I’ll have to try more alien smugglers. See if the rest of them can fill me like you do.”

It was meant to tease him, but Yool grunted brusquely in response, his grip around the fleshy parts of my hips tightening. He dropped himself forward, his hands braced by the sides of my head as he bent his face so that his voice hummed against my ear. “I don’t think so, babe.”

I hated arrogant guys, and possessive ones even more, but for some reason, his dominant words excited me. I’d gone out of my way to make sure no man could stake a claim on me but now I hungered for the feeling of being possessed, even if it was by a cocky criminal like Yool.

Still, I leaned my head back, twisting around to husk in his ear. “I told you I was a naughty girl.”

His arms scooped me up so that I was sitting in his lap with my legs ringing his waist. He returned his hands to my hips so he could move me up and down on his cock. “And I told you that you were *my* naughty girl, and I don’t share.”

The new angle hit new spots as he moved my hips so that my clit brushed the bumps at the base of his cock, and soon I was gasping as a third release barreled toward me.

“Oh, yeah?” I threaded my hands into his long hair as I rode him, my body trembling and jerking. “Then you’d better mark me as yours.”

A snarl escaped his lips as he drove me down hard and fast. I screamed as my pussy clenched around his cock over and over, but before I could catch my breath, he tossed me back on the bed and pulled out so he could explode onto my chest. I arched my back as the hot liquid covered my breasts.

We were both panting when he bent over me and feathered a kiss across my lips and then flopped onto his back beside me. “I don’t think you’re a bad girl, Brooke.”

I rolled my head to look at him as his chest rose and fell. “You don’t?”

“You’re too good to be bad.”

I laughed at this. “Well, I think what we did definitely knocked me off Santa’s good girl list.”

His brow wrinkled. “Who is this Santa, and why does he have a list of good and bad girls?”

“And boys,” I added, amused that he truly didn’t know about Santa, but not completely surprised. Christmas had become secularized long before Earth had devolved and become a virtual wasteland, but the traditions had been carried forward by many humans. Even the religion was still practiced in many colonies. But it was the jolly old elf, presents, and cheerful, wintery decor that I’d embraced and brought to the Valox base.

Yool didn't wait for me to tell him. He stood and walked leisurely to the bathroom, ran the water for a few moments, and returned with a wet cloth.

I propped myself up on my elbows, startled to see that the liquid on my chest was iridescent silver. I guess I shouldn't be surprised since he was a silver-skinned alien. What was an even more pleasant surprise was how gingerly he cleaned my chest, although his tender touch did nothing to make my nipples less peaked.

He returned the towel to my bathroom, returning to the bed and lying on his side as he eyed me with a pointed look. "Santa?"

I released a breath, charmed by the fact that he was jealous of an imaginary fat man. Between this and how gently he cleaned me, I felt a strange pang that he would be nothing but a holiday fling. "I suppose I should explain Christmas to you."

CHAPTER 14



Yool

“So, this Santa creature dresses in a red suit and flies through the air powered by...?” I glanced at Brooke as she led me through the corridors with dangling paper decorations brushing the top of my head.

“Reindeer.”

“And reindeer are magic creatures?”

She gave me a half shrug. “I guess, but it’s never specified how they can fly. They just can.”

I shook my head at her fantastical tale. “And you are sure this Santa isn’t an aged Carvolian? They also have white fur and ride flying creatures.”

“I’m sure Santa isn’t a Carvolian. He’s from Earth.” Then she cocked her head at me. “Don’t Carvolians have fur covering their entire bodies?”

“Once they’ve reached maturity.”

Brooke laughed and shook her head. “Santa is an elf, but not one of the hot blond versions who’re good with a bow and arrow.”

Her clarification wasn’t clarifying anything. “But he can deliver presents all over your planet in the span of one Earth sleeping cycle? That seems like a better skill than agility with a weapon.”

She hooked her arm through mine. “Like I said, it’s a myth.”

“But many myths are based on some element of truth or natural phenomenon. Perhaps your planet had Hexlings visit long ago.”

“Doubtful. No other species made contact with Earth for millennia.”

“Not that you knew of, at least.”

This made her shoot me a startled look, but then we were walking through a wide, open door and into a larger space than any I’d seen in the base so far, aside from the hangar bay. The floors were still steel, but the ceiling was high enough that my head wasn’t in danger of bumping it. Metal tables were scattered—some long and rectangular and some small and round, but all of them scuffed and dented. Valox fighters in dark uniforms sat at tables or leaned against a bar that ran along the back wall, and the room held the distinctive scent of booze.

Benches and chairs scraped against the floor as we entered, heads craning to track us. I recognized some of the Valox who’d been in the kitchen with me, but none of the males who straightened.

“We’re here to help with the party prep,” Brooke told Dani, when her copilot approached us holding an armful of string lights.

Dani eyed us both, her dark brow lifting slightly. “It’s about time. What happened to the queen of party decor?”

Brooke’s cheeks took on a faint, pink hue. “I’m here now.” She swiveled her head, frowning as she assessed the few paper cutouts dangling from the ceiling. “Where’s the tree?”

“You were serious about that?” A female with light-yellow skin that was in stark contrast to the bright blue coils of hair cascading down her shoulders walked up to us holding a pair of scissors.

“About the Christmas tree?” Brooke shot Dani a look. “Of course, I was serious. We have to have a Christmas tree.”

Dani put a hand on Brooke's arm. "Sweetie, we're on a rock planet with zero vegetation."

She slid a hesitant glance at me, as if wondering how much she should reveal to me about the location of the rebel base. Not that learning that the planet we were currently under the surface of was rocky would narrow down the field of potential locations. The universe was filled with rocky planets devoid of life. Not that I even cared to learn the location of the Valox base. I would never be returning.

"A Christmas party without a tree?" Brooke's disappointment was evident in her deflated tone.

"What is a Christmas tree?" I asked. Her explanations of her favorite holiday hadn't made much sense to me yet, but I was intrigued by the idea of vegetation being a crucial part of a holiday. "Do you cook the branches or leaves?"

Dani grinned wickedly at me. "Grilled Christmas tree. That's a new one."

Brooke looked scandalized. "We don't cook the tree. We decorate it."

"Why?"

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Because it's a really old tradition, and it looks pretty."

I held up my palms in surrender. "I believe you."

The yellow-skinned female handed Brooke the scissors. "There's plenty to decorate even without a tree. We need more snowflakes and things to put on the tables."

Brooke exhaled deeply and smiled. "You're right, Velia. The lack of a Christmas tree won't make or break the party, and there can never be too many snowflakes."

"What *will* make or break the party is if we run out of Cerillian rum for the punch."

I bristled at the male voice. This human I remembered from meeting him in the corridor upon our arrival, and he was the reason I was there.

“Hey, Gregor,” Dani said with an artificial brightness in her voice. “You’re here to help?”

The male with short brown hair and a spotless uniform didn’t even glance at Dani. His gaze was firmly locked on Brooke, which prompted me to slide my arm around her waist and him to frown.

Brooke tensed, only relaxing a fraction when my arm circled her waist, and I shifted closer to her. “I thought you didn’t care about Christmas.”

Gregor flinched, his gaze moving from my arm around Brooke and then to her face. “Why did you think that?”

“You never seemed interested when we talked about it before.”

“I remember you laughing when we talked about throwing an authentic holiday party,” Dani added.

He visibly squirmed, gave Dani a murderous look, and bestowed a slippery smile on Brooke. “I guess I changed my mind.”

“Great.” Brooke slapped the scissors she’d been given into his hand. “You’re on snowflake duty.”

He opened his mouth, clearly to retort, but the female with bright-blue hair motioned for him to follow her. “I’ll show you how they’re made.”

She tugged him away from our group, and he looked back with a mask of regret and confusion on his face. If he’d thought he would be able to make a move on Brooke while prepping for the party with her, my presence and his assignment away from her had put a stop to that. Dani joined him, talking loudly to further distract the man from us.

Just in case he hadn’t gotten the message, I let my hand slide so that it rested possessively on Brooke’s hip. She peered up at me with one brow raised in question.

“Have I told you how sexy you look when you’re excited about Christmas trees?”

She tried to give me a severe look, but she couldn’t stop the grin that split her face. She leaned into me as she whispered, “I

would say that you're going overboard in your role, but we blew past that a while ago."

My hand drifted down to her ass, and I felt Gregor's furious gaze on us, even though I could only see him from the corner of my eye.

"Regrets?" I whispered back.

She hesitated for a beat before shaking her head and laughing off my question. "Of course not. This is going even better than I expected. By the time you leave, everyone should be completely convinced that we're together."

The reminder that I would be leaving made me hold her even closer. For the first time in my life, I was not counting down the moments until I left a female. In fact, I was dreading it. "You could always keep me."

I'd said it in jest, but the words had spilled out before I'd even realized they weren't entirely a joke.

Brooke's smile faltered for a beat before she released a whoosh of breath. "For a second there, I thought you were serious. Can you imagine a Valox pilot shacking up with a smuggler?"

The problem was, I could, which shook me to my core.

CHAPTER 15



Brooke

“*W*e may have reached critical mass on snowflakes.”
I scanned the pile of white tissue paper cut into various patterns.

Dani held up a finger. “There can never be too many snowflakes.”

Her impression of my voice was spot-on, although I didn’t want to admit it. “I don’t sound like that.”

Everyone sitting around the table with me laughed. Clearly, I did sound just like that. Ignoring my co-pilot, I picked up a paper decoration. “We still need to hang all of these.” Then I swiveled my head to take in the room as it struck me that Yool had excused himself a while ago. I’d assumed he was grabbing something to nibble on or was going to the bathroom, but he wasn’t next to the table of snacks, and no one spent this long in the bathroom. At least, I truly hoped he didn’t. I wasn’t well versed in the bodily habits of the Zarbling.

Dani held up a spool. “I have string.”

String was good, but what we needed was height. “You didn’t happen to see where Yool went, did you?”

Dani wrinkled her brow, as if noticing for the first time that the alien wasn’t sitting with us anymore. Then she craned her neck. “Didn’t he make a drink run?”

“Nope.” My nerves jangled, setting off faint alarm bells in the back of my brain. I’d never intended to give the smuggler free run of the rebel base. It wasn’t that I thought he would do any damage or try to gather information he shouldn’t have, but guests weren’t common at our secret base. I’d managed to convince the commander that he was a one-time visitor who would leave right after the party, but with the understanding that I was responsible for Yool.

That hadn’t seemed like such an arduous task when we’d been in bed together, but now that I didn’t have eyes on him, I realized that my plan might have holes. Sure, I hadn’t told Yool that he needed to stay in my line of sight at all times—that seemed a bit much—but I’d fooled myself into thinking he wouldn’t want to leave my side. Especially after...

Don't be an idiot, Brooke. Great sex doesn't mean he's obsessed with you.

From what the bartender on the outpost had told me, Yool fell in bed with females as often as I jumped into cockpits. As connected as we’d seemed in my quarters, this was probably no big deal for him.

Dani jumped up and thumped a hand on my shoulder. “I’ll find him.”

I didn’t stop her, even though keeping track of Yool was not her job. I did not want to be seen chasing down my pretend boyfriend, and I definitely didn’t want anyone to hear me chewing him out for wandering off.

“You look like you need a drink.”

I stiffened at the sound of Gregor’s voice, but I took the tall glass he handed me, curious that the contents were bright green. “What is this?”

“The Cerillian rum punch for the party.” He gestured his head toward the bar where bottles were lined up and several pilots were mixing the contents into larger jugs. “I thought you should be the one to test our blend.”

I hated to admit that it was nice of him to bring me some to sample, even as I took a small sip. “Thanks.”

He swung his leg over the steel bench so he could sit beside me with one leg on each side of the long bench. “So, what do you think?”

I couldn't explain why the man's attention bothered me, but it was probably the presumptuous way he acted around me. Since he'd joined the resistance and arrived at the base, he'd homed in on me and acted as if we were inevitable. He sat a little too close, stared at me too intensely, and made a point to touch me in subtle ways—like the way his knee now brushed mine.

I scooted back. I understood that it was hypocritical of me to be annoyed by Gregor's touch, which felt premature, but not be bothered by Yool touching every part of me intimately. I didn't care. There was something about Gregor that creeped me out, and even this seemingly sweet gesture rubbed me the wrong way.

Still, there was no reason to throw the punch in his face just because he sat next to me and brought me a drink. Besides, the punch was tasty. It was just the right blend of tart and sweet, and most importantly, I couldn't taste the rum.

“It's good.” I took another sip. “You sure there's booze in here?”

He swept a hand across his side swept hair and gave me a sly smile. “Oh, it's in there.”

I glanced at the glass I'd halfway drained. He wouldn't have put something aside from Cerillian rum in my glass, would he? Then I gave myself a mental shake. Gregor might not be my type, but I was sure he wasn't some kind of sexual predator. I tossed back the rest of the drink and handed him the empty glass. “Thanks again. That hit the spot.”

I turned back to the table that was strewn with scraps of paper and completed snowflakes, hoping he'd get the hint and leave. Instead, he swung his other leg over so he was fully facing the table. “I wasn't very good at making these, which is why I switched to working on the drinks, but maybe you'll be a better teacher than Velia.”

Velia was sitting across the table from us, her pupil-less eyes narrowed. “There was nothing wrong with my teaching.”

“I think I’m actually done making snowflakes.” I started to stand but Gregor put a hand on my arm to stop me.

“I know what you’re doing.”

This stopped me, and my heart seized. “What am I doing?”

He smiled at me like I was a child. “You’re playing hard to get. You want me to fight for you, Brooke.”

My jaw dropped. “You think Yool is here to make you jealous?”

He shrugged. “Why else would you show up with an alien who’s clearly not your type?”

“Not my type?” He might be right that Yool wasn’t exactly the kind of guy I’d ever envisioned myself with, but he didn’t know me well enough to say that. “And who is my type? You?”

“Well, yeah.” He slid closer to me. “We’re both rebel fighters. We’re both human. What kind of future could you have with an alien who looks like he picks pockets for a living?”

I stood and fisted my hands by my side. “You don’t know him.”

“I know he’s not the kind to stick around.”

This hit me in the gut. As much as I hated it, Gregor was right. Not only was Yool not the kind to stick around, but our deal also ensured he wouldn’t.

“Talking about anyone I know?”

I spun around, relief flooding through me as Yool sidled up to me and curled an arm around my waist. Without thinking about it, I allowed my body to sink into him. “You’re back.”

His dark eyes flashed as I peered at him. “Of course, I am.”

At that moment, all my previous doubts vanished like wisps of smoke, and I felt ridiculous for letting my mind spin off and imagine the worst. All that mattered was that he was here now.

“Ready to leave?” Yool asked without sparing a glance at Gregor.

My heart tripped as I thought about returning to my quarters. I was more than ready. Then, the base-wide alarms began to wail.

CHAPTER 16



Brooke

The anticipation of my racing heart instantly morphed to panic. The sirens weren't the ones that would send me running to my ship because an attack was imminent, but ones indicating something was very wrong.

I pivoted to Yool. "I need to go figure this out. Can you meet me in my quarters?"

He nodded, concern creasing his face. "Go."

I grabbed his hand, even though that felt like an intimate gesture since everyone around us was rushing around too much to notice. But I hadn't done it to convince my colleagues that we were a couple. I'd done it to reassure myself and him that everything would be okay. His return squeeze, and the solid warmth of his hand, made my pulse steady. Then I let go and ran from the room, matching Dani step for step as we made a beeline for the command center.

The sirens continued to shriek overhead, red lights flashing at intervals along the corridor so it glowed crimson. The walls and floor didn't shake, though, which was a good sign. I also didn't smell smoke, only the pervasive dank scent from being subterranean. So, there was no attack and no fire. Even though I didn't slow my pace, my panic had subsided. My biggest fears about living underground were being buried alive from an attack or being trapped as a fire tore through the base.

Dani and I dodged other Valox fighters who were also rushing through the corridors, but after rounding one too many corners at a run, we burst into the command center. Our entrance would have normally made everyone turn around, but the hub buzzed with energy as officers yelled over the sirens and static hummed in the background.

“I know this isn’t an attack siren, but do you need us to send out defensive fighters?” Dani asked, beating me to it.

Commander Warren glanced up from the circular strategy board that she and several of her officers were gathered around. Before she could answer, the sirens ceased their deafening scream. “You’re right. This wasn’t an attack.”

“More system malfunctions?” I asked, remembering what she’d told me and the other pilot, Emily, when we’d last reported.

Warren scraped a hand through her dark bob, the silvery strands glistening in the lights from the monitors and blinking star charts. “A big one. I have the mechanics checking on our power hub, where the sirens were triggered.”

I stiffened. “The power hub?”

Our commander nodded grimly. She didn’t have to tell us that the power hub contained life support systems, as well as the juice to keep our shields active. We had backups, but if enough failed we would not only be sitting ducks, but we’d also be dead.

Dani exchanged a worried glance with me then she turned her attention back to our commander. “I’d feel better if we had more patrols around the base.”

Warren held her gaze for a beat. “You two just got back from a long shift. I’m not sending you out again.”

Dani opened her mouth to argue, but our commanding officer held up a hand. “Send Carmichael and Darrow. They’re fresh.”

Dani didn’t look happy, but she squared her shoulders. “Yes, sir.”

The doors to the command deck swished open again, and Gregor entered. This time, his pristine uniform was wrinkled and had a dark stain on one of the sleeves.

“What did you find?” Warren asked, before I could wonder what he was doing in the command hub. I’d never seen him anywhere but on the hangar bay fixing ships or in the residential area.

“My chief is still in the power hub, but he wanted me to bring you the report in person.” Gregor stood with his feet braced wide and his hands clasped behind his back. “The siren was set off because the power relays that provide power to the defensive systems were damaged. That triggered backups to kick in and alarms to sound.”

Our commander matched the mechanic’s stance. “How were the power relays damaged?”

Gregor cleared his throat and snuck a brief glance at me. “They were cut.”

“Cut?” Warren stared at him. “Are you telling me that my base has been sabotaged? This isn’t just another malfunction?”

Gregor shook his head, and his bangs flopped forward. “There was no malfunction. The wires were intentionally cut, commander. I saw them myself.”

Dani didn’t look at me, but I could sense that she was making a point not to, and I knew why.

Warren cut her gaze sharply to us. “Get those defensive patrols into the air, pilots.”

“Yes, sir.” Dani and I didn’t salute because even though our rebel force might have a chain of command, we didn’t believe in paying homage to any one leader. It was part of the reason we’d all joined a resistance. But we did respect Commander Warren, and we gave her nods that were close to bows before spinning on our heels and striding from the command center.

Once we were outside and the doors were closed behind us, I grabbed Dani by the sleeve to bring her to a stop. “When you left to look for Yool—”

“I didn’t find him,” she said, as if anticipating my question. “I ended up meeting up with him outside the rec and walking in together.”

“You don’t think...?” I allowed my question to drift off, unwilling to put voice to the concern that was now all that occupied my mind.

Dani shook her head. “Why would he have any reason to sabotage the base, especially while he’s in it?”

“Anyone who sabotaged the base is in it,” I reminded her. “Unless they’ve found some way to escape through tons of rock without being noticed, aside from flying out, which we would notice.”

“Yool is still here.”

I folded my arms over my chest. “Since when are you a fan of him?”

Dani bobbed one shoulder up and down. “I guess I don’t think he’s the type to sabotage a rebel base. What’s his motive? It’s not like he had any way of predicting that he’d meet you, lose a card game to you, and agree to a ridiculous scheme to be your pretend boyfriend. Not even you with your strategic brain would be able to foresee something like that.”

I exhaled. She was right. Yool might not be on the right side of the law very often, but there was a big difference between smuggling bootleg liquor and sabotaging a rebel base filled with hundreds of fighters. “You’re right. But where did he go when he disappeared right before the sirens sounded?”

Dani started walking and threw an arm over my shoulders to bring me with her. “Only one way to find out. You need to ask him while I take care of sending out the new defensive patrols.”

The thought of asking Yool if he’d been anywhere near the power hub made my heart race. I didn’t want to accuse him of being a saboteur. Not when things were going so well, and I needed him to keep pretending to be enamored of me. But, more importantly, I needed to know if the alien I’d brought into the Valox base was going to destroy us all.

CHAPTER 17



Yool

Even though I'd managed to make my way back to Brooke's quarters, I hated waiting while the entire base was in turmoil. I might not know much about being a resistance fighter, but I knew plenty about dealing with unexpected crises. When you flew a battered ship, had to avoid inspectors, and were always dodging competitors with a grudge, crises were a daily occurrence.

The sirens had stopped screaming, which I hoped was a good sign. Since Brooke had blindfolded me on our approach to the Valox base, I didn't know much about it, except that it was underground. That fact hadn't bothered me when we'd arrived, but now I questioned what I was doing there. What had started as a game of cards gone wrong had suddenly gotten real.

I sank onto the bed and put my head in my hands. This was the perfect time to cut and run, so why wasn't I more eager to leave? Usually, I'd have my shoes on and be sneaking out of an open bedroom window by now.

Brooke.

Just thinking her name made my heart do an uncomfortable flip in my chest. What was it about the human that made her so different? No one would deny that she was beautiful, especially if you liked bipeds and didn't mind skin that wasn't silver. I thought of the pale-brown dots on the bridge of her nose and then remembered the feel of her curls when I'd

tangled my fingers in them. No, there was something more about her that I couldn't resist.

"Which is exactly why you should run," I told myself. I'd seen what heartbreak looked like, and I didn't want any part of that. Not that my heart had ever been in danger before. "And it isn't now. This is a deal. That's all." And a bet, I reminded myself, although I'd lost my desire to collect from Wyn.

Come to think of it, I wouldn't tell Wyn that I'd bedded the female. He could keep the credits, and I'd keep my memories.

I emitted a rough growl as I realized how soft I'd gone already. Since when did I pick a female over my purse? Since you met *her*.

My mental torment was interrupted by Brooke rushing into her quarters breathing heavily.

I bolted to my feet. "Are you—?"

"Where were you?" she asked before I could finish asking her if she was unhurt.

The words didn't make sense to me. "Where was I? I came back here like you asked—"

"No, where were you when we were preparing for the party? You disappeared for a while. Where did you go?"

I opened my mouth, startled by her sharp tone. I didn't want to tell her that I'd sweet-talked my way into sending an unauthorized transmission to Wyn. For one thing, I knew I wasn't supposed to be drawing attention to myself while I was at her base. But more importantly, I didn't want her to know what I'd asked my smuggling partner to do. "Nowhere in particular. I just needed to walk around a bit."

She jutted out one hip and rested a hand on it. "You went for a walk around the base for no reason?"

"I needed a break from making paper chains, which would never hold anyone in captivity for more than a moment. I don't know if you are planning to use them in a holiday bondage game, but they are very flimsy."

She blinked rapidly before shaking her head. “We aren’t going to have a bondage game at the party. The paper chains are for hanging.”

I frowned. I couldn’t imagine what these rebels intended to hang with paper chains, but I hoped it was feather light.

“Dani went to look for you, and she didn’t see you wandering around.” Her gaze was pleading. “Are you sure you didn’t go near the power hub?”

“Power hub? I have no idea where there would be a power hub in this base.” What did she suspect of me? Then it hit me. “You think I had something to do with why the sirens were sounding?”

Brooke didn’t drop her gaze, but she shifted her feet. “I don’t know what to think. I’m pretty sure you’re lying to me about where you were, but I can’t imagine why if it doesn’t have some connection to the damaged security system.”

I closed the small distance between us and took her hands in mine, welcoming the softness of her skin. “I promise that I had nothing to do with whatever has happened. Do you truly believe I would cause harm to the place where you live?”

Her chest hitched as she gazed at me. I could see in her eyes that she wanted to believe me, but she couldn’t.

“You do not need to believe me.” I knew that I would be able to prove to her that what I’d been doing had nothing to do with her the damage to her base and everything to do with the Christmas she loved so much. “I will show you.”

She tilted her head, the disbelief in her gaze being edged out by curiosity. “How could you prove it? Do you have an alibi?”

I actually did have an alibi. The Valox crew member I’d bribed with a promise to tell him how to pleasure Scarlettian twins could vouch that I’d been at a transmission console. Once Wyn received my transmission and did what I’d asked him to do, he would be further proof that my intentions were pure. After he got over the shock of my bizarre request.

The door beeped before Brooke could press me further on my alibi, and she released my hands, stepped toward the door, and

pressed a square button to open it. Two Valox in dark uniforms with matching sashes stood outside, and their gazes snapped immediately to me.

“We need to question the Zarbling.”

Brooke took a step toward me, even though she was the shortest of the group. For a creature so small, she radiated fierce energy. “Why?”

“There has been a report that he was spotted near the power hub earlier today.”

“Like half the base,” she shot back. “That doesn’t mean anything.”

One of the males eyed her with open disdain. “Do you want to join your alien lover for questioning?”

I bristled, fighting the urge to launch myself at the armed Valox. Then I drew in a breath. I’d been in worse situations than this, and I’d been called much worse than someone’s alien lover. I did not like the way these males eyed her with scorn, but I could deal with them later.

Putting a hand on Brooke’s arm, I met her gaze and gave her what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “I will answer their questions.”

She put her hand over mine, and I could detect the faint tremble.

I leaned down so that only she could hear my whispered words. “I promise I’ll be back in your bed soon, naughty girl.”

Her quick inhalation of breath was the only giveaway that she’d heard me, as I straightened and turned toward the waiting Valox. I sensed Brooke’s gaze on me as I confidently allowed myself to be led away. I had nothing to hide from the rebels. Only from Brooke.

CHAPTER 18



Brooke

I walked numbly into the crew rec, surprised to see the ceiling covered in hanging snowflakes with red paper chains swagged down the length of the bar. Even the usual techno beat had been replaced by vintage Christmas songs from Earth. It had been hours since they'd taken Yool from my quarters, but I'd heard nothing yet.

I didn't even know exactly where they'd taken him. As far as I knew, the Valox base didn't have interrogation rooms like the Vandar, who called the special chambers on their warbirds their *obleks*. Our base was for our crew, and even at the height of our fighting with the empire, we'd never had a reason to bring prisoners here. I guessed there might be a brig, but I'd never even heard of anyone being thrown in it.

"There you are." Dani walked up to me, her eyes instantly widening. "What's wrong?"

"They took Yool."

Now her brows shot up. "Who took Yool? Are enemy combatants on the base?"

"We took him." I let her lead me to a nearby round table for two with four mismatched chairs jammed around it. "Valox security came to my quarters and took him for questioning."

Dani flicked her fingers through her dark hair. "It must be standard operating procedure since he isn't part of the crew."

There's no way they think he's involved with what happened in the power hub, right?"

I wanted so badly to believe Yool. My heart told me that there was no way he was guilty, but at the same time, my gambler's instinct told me that he'd been lying to me. Not about being innocent, but about where he'd been when he'd left the rec. That was the part that was eating away at me. He wasn't telling the truth about where he'd been, but I refused to believe he'd been cutting wires in the power hub. Not only did it make no sense, but I knew in my gut that he would never hurt me.

But how well did I truly know him? Aside from some mind-blowing sex, I knew nothing about his past or his family. I didn't know where he'd grown up, or how he'd ended up being a smuggler. All I knew for sure was that he'd kept his end of the deal and he'd awakened something in me I thought had been gone for good. Even now, it was those dormant feelings that told me he wouldn't betray me.

"Of course, he isn't involved," I told Dani, mustering up more bravado than I felt. "But you know they need to find someone to blame. Who better than the outsider?"

Dani gnawed her bottom lip. "He was missing right before it went down. Do you think they know that?"

"They claim he was spotted near the power hub."

Dani let out a tortured sigh. "Fuck me." She waved one hand over her head toward the guy behind the bar. "We're going to need two Nerilian whiskeys over here."

"I know he didn't do it," I said, more to convince myself than my co-pilot. "But he won't tell me where he was when he was missing."

"He *is* a smuggler, Brooke. Smugglers aren't exactly known for honesty."

"Drinks up, Dani!"

She jumped from her chair, darted to the bar, and snatched the two glasses from the bar, sloshing blue liquid over the rims as she hurried back to our table. She handed me one and took a sip of hers.

I swirled the contents of my glass, watching the blue liquor change shades as it moved. “I know I shouldn’t trust him.”

“But you do,” Dani finished for me.

“Go ahead.” I took a drink and made a face as I swallowed. “Tell me that I’m being an idiot.”

“I don’t think you’re an idiot. You’re the most instinctive pilot I’ve ever flown with, and you’re the best gambler I know. If it’s a choice between trusting your gut and some random witness, I’ll believe you every time.”

For some reason, hearing Dani say that made my eyes burn. My gut was screaming at me that Yool was innocent, and having my friend validate my feelings was such a relief I almost burst into tears.

“Drink,” Dani ordered, maybe because she saw that I was about to break down and knew I wouldn’t want to do that in front of my colleagues.

I chugged the rest of the whiskey, the slippery alien booze both sliding easily down my throat and scorching it as it went. I was so busy trying not to gasp for breath that my eyes were instantly dry.

“What do we do?” Dani asked, slamming her own empty glass on the table.

When I stared at her, she gave me a gentle shove. “Come on, Brooke. I’ve seen you with him. I don’t know exactly what’s gone on, but I know you well enough to know that this is more than a game now. Are you really going to let him take the fall for something bad that someone else did?”

This made me sit bolt upright. “You’re right. Of course, you’re right. I need to tell the commander that Yool is innocent. Which means that they haven’t found who actually tried to take down our security system.”

“Which means we’re all still in danger,” Dani added, jerking to attention as a pair of pilots strode into the room.

“Are these the pilots who went out to fly patrol around the base?”

She nodded as they approached us. “Anything to report?”

The men exchanged a look. “Nothing but the ship we escorted into the base.”

My spine straightened. “Not one of ours?”

A pilot snorted out a laugh as a short, blue alien with a shiny, bald head waddled in flanked by two Valox. His gaze locked on me, and he scowled. “All right, girly-girl. What have you done with Yool?”

CHAPTER 19



Yool

“*W*hy would I sabotage your base?” I stared at the Valox security chief across a dented metal table. My hands were no longer cuffed, so I could fold them across my chest in the only act of defiance I dared, considering the pair of armed guards posted outside the heavy, steel door leading into the spartan room.

The man gave me a half shrug that seemed almost lazy as he eyed me, his own arms crossed. “Smugglers aren’t known for having allegiance to a cause. How do I know you weren’t sent here by the Zagrath to infiltrate us before an attack?”

I slid a quick glance to the walls that were the same dull metal as the table and did nothing to muffle our voices. No mirrors, which meant no one was watching. That was either good for me or very bad.

I leaned forward and rested my forearms on the edge of the table. “I don’t work for the empire. In case you don’t know how smuggling usually works, I avoid imperial ships. That’s why I’m paid well. I could always get contraband past their patrols.”

“That was then. Now that the empire has fallen, maybe there isn’t a market for smuggling. Maybe you needed to change tactics to survive, and the empire was willing to pay well for a saboteur.”

I shook my head. “Wrong again. The empire might not have been destroyed, as you claim, but I haven’t encountered any of them. If they’re around, they aren’t recruiting the likes of me. Besides, how could I have known that I would meet Brooke and lose...” I paused in mid-sentence when I realized that no one knew about the card game or the deal we’d made. As far as they knew, I was her boyfriend. Unfortunately, that story did make it harder for me to prove my innocence.

The man straightened. “Lose? Lose what?”

I gave him a wolfish grin. “Lose my mind over her, of course.”

“That’s right. You and Brooke.” His voice dripped with disbelief. “One of our pilots has a secret boyfriend who happens to be an outlaw.”

“Outlaw sounds so judgmental.”

He grunted at this, clearly not amused by me. “Tell me about the transmission. You claim you were sending a transmission during the time you were missing from the rec.”

I exhaled and dragged a hand through my hair. Now I could confess the true reason I had disappeared, although my current predicament made my secret—and my determination to keep it secret from Brooke—seem silly. “I was sending a message to my crew mate, Wyn.”

“Another smuggler?”

I fought the urge to snort out a laugh. “He is on my crew, so yes, he’s also a smuggler, which is why I reached out to him.”

This piqued my interrogator’s interest, and his pupils widened, but he let me continue.

“Wyn knows how to find things, even unusual things. It’s what makes him such a good smuggler. Not only do we transport cargo that needs to be hidden, but we’re also known for acquiring rare or unusual items for our clients.”

“Like weapons?”

I huffed out a breath, disappointed at the single-mindedness of the man. “There is nothing rare about a weapon. No, our

clients usually ask us to locate items specific to their unique tastes.”

The man’s face remained blank.

I shook my head. Was I going to have to spell it out? “Nurillia is known for its aphrodisiac serum, but they only produce a few bottles at a time. Lunava Prime breeds sweet-looking pets that can devour enemy combatants by the dozen. Ulluvia Alpha runs an underground market for various pleasure toys that would make the randiest soldier blush.”

Understanding crossed his face followed quickly by a frown. “Is this why you contacted him? You wished him to bring you a pleasure toy?”

Now that I thought about it, maybe that should have been what I asked Wyn to procure for me. The thought of using a digglevolt with Brooke sent heat straight to my cock.

I shifted in my seat. “No. I asked him to find a particular type of flora.”

“Flora?” His gaze narrowed at me. “Is that a type of depraved toy?”

I couldn’t stop myself from grinning. “From what I was told, no. I asked Wyn to locate a tree that could be adorned for the holiday party.”

The officer’s jaw fell. “Do you mean a Christmas tree?”

I pointed a finger at the man in agreement. “A Christmas tree. Brooke was upset that there was not one to decorate, so I asked my crew mate to locate one and bring it here. Actually, since I don’t know where here is, I told him to attract the attention of a Valox ship and tell them about his delivery.”

The security chief sat back in his chair with a look of complete disdain. “You want me to believe that you sent a transmission about a Christmas tree? Do I look stupid?”

“Those are two separate questions, but yes.”

He growled at this before slamming a fist on the table and making it rattle loudly. “Do you have any evidence that you didn’t transmit our coordinates and sabotage our shields to

make us an easier target for when your ships attack? Your transmission was encrypted.”

“Force of habit.” I hadn’t sent an unencrypted message in so long that it hadn’t occurred to me how guilty it would seem.

As the Valox curled and uncurled his fists on the table, I swallowed hard and tried to think of any way I could prove my innocence. Part of me couldn’t blame them for suspecting me. The sabotage had happened almost as soon as I’d arrived, and I wasn’t exactly known for loyalty and honesty. I had my own code of honor, but I doubted that my loose rules of smuggler’s conduct would impress freedom fighters.

Not that I cared about what the Valox thought of me. Well, I did care what one Valox thought. I remembered Brooke’s face when they marched me away. I had to prove to her that I was innocent and that I would never hurt her. But, how?

A sharp rap on the door snapped me from my thoughts as a Valox officer stepped inside and pinned the interrogator with a pointed look. “Sir, you need to see this.” His gaze flicked to me. “And you should bring him.”

CHAPTER 20



Brooke

“*Y*ou’re sure you can’t tell me what Yool asked you to bring me?” I stood at the base of the smuggling ship’s rickety ramp as the squat alien wrestled loudly with something inside. “And you’re sure it’s not alive?”

“It’s not alive,” he yelled out to me. “Not anymore.”

Dani shot me a look that said that this was a bad idea, but I ignored her. Wyn had been insistent that I come with him, even after I’d told him that Yool was being questioned about his part in the sabotage of the base. Actually, that information had made him even more determined that I needed to see why he’d come.

A small group had gathered around the smuggling ship, including Gregor, who wore the same smug expression he’d had since Yool had been taken away for questioning. My gut told me that Gregor was involved with Yool being a suspect, but I couldn’t prove it. I also couldn’t prove that Yool was innocent, which was still eating away at me.

Wyn’s shiny, bald head appeared at the top of the ramp, and he lurched forward dragging something enormous behind him. “I need to see Yool so I can kill him for asking me to locate and transport this monstrosity.”

My mouth gaped as I recognized the brown trunk and leafy branches filling the opening in the ship.

“Is that a tree?” Dani asked before I could find my voice.

“It’s a Christmas tree.”

I whirled around at the sound of Yool’s deep voice as he strode across the floor of the hangar bay, flanked by a cadre of Valox officers.

When he reached me, he stole a brief glance at Wyn, struggling to heave the tree down the ramp then smiled at me. “You said it wouldn’t be Christmas without one.”

I was speechless as my throat tightened. Not only had he listened to me, but he’d also gotten me the one thing I truly wanted.

Dani nudged me. “I have to give the guy credit, this is quite the gesture.” She dropped her voice. “Especially for a fake boyfriend.”

The Valox security chief waved a hand at Wyn and the tree. “This is what your transmission was about?”

Yool nodded, slipping me an apologetic smile. “I didn’t want to spoil the surprise, and I didn’t know if Wyn would be successful.”

Wyn sucked in a breath and swiped a hand across his blue forehead. “When have I ever failed?”

I shook my head in disbelief. “You were willing to be suspected of sabotaging the station to keep a surprise?”

Yool’s gaze didn’t leave mine. “To see this expression on your face? Absolutely.”

“You’re a lunatic,” I said, even though I was choking back a watery laugh.

“That’s what I’ve been saying for years.” Wyn paused on the ramp and let the tree trunk fall. “A little help?”

A few of the Valox who’d gathered around to watch the drama unfold rushed up the ramp and picked up the tree. The thing was huge, with purple leaves that looked like they belonged on a bush instead of a tree. It didn’t look like any Christmas tree I’d ever seen, but I instantly loved it.

“Is this what you wanted?” Yool asked, his tone anxious.

I was pretty sure that tree would take up most of the rec, and I wasn't fully convinced that alien lifeforms weren't still inhabiting the dense branches. But none of that mattered. I threw my arms around Yool and kissed him hard. When I pulled back, I put my hands on his cheeks. “It's perfect.”

His body relaxed, and he curled his arms around my waist. “Then it was worth it.”

Wyn stomped up to us as the tree was walked toward the wide doors of the hangar bay, leaves dropping and making a trail behind it. “Of course, it was worth it for you.” He put his hands on his hips, as he peered up at Yool and rapped one foot on the floor in rapid fire. “You aren't the one who had to sneak into a protected forest and cut down a tree in the middle of the night. You also weren't the one who had to drag it back to the ship before the natives noticed.” He held out his small, blue palms. “Just look at all these cuts.”

Yool released his hold on me even as he kept one arm wrapped around my waist. He thumped his free hand on Wyn's shoulder. “Thank you, brother. I knew I could count on you. There is nothing you can't find.”

Wyn's cheeks darkened to a shade of deep purple, and he puffed out his chest. “That's true, although next time I'd prefer less of a rush.”

“You are amazing.” I bent down and planted a kiss on the alien's warm cheeks. “You found a tree and got it here in time for the Christmas party. You've made this the best Christmas ever, Wyn.”

He cleared his throat, as the corners of his mouth twitched into a smile. “I'm glad I could help.” Then he glanced uncertainly at me. “I've never attended a Christmas party before.”

“Then this will be your first.” I motioned for him to follow us, but we all stopped when the security chief stepped in our path.

He eyed Yool and then Wyn. “This might corroborate your alibi, but that doesn't mean I'm not keeping my eye on you, smuggler.”

Yool tipped his head at the Valox. “Understood.”

“I always imagined that rebels would be more rebellious,”
Wyn said in a low voice as we continued toward the doors.

Dani came up behind Wyn and fell in step with him. “Wait
until you see the party.”

CHAPTER 21



Yool

“So, that’s a Christmas tree.” Wyn stood beside me, his small head tipped up to peer at the towering tree that had been hacked off at the top so it could fit into the room. The top of the tree stood beside it, a dwarf version of the tree that was also decorated with paper chains and tiny string lights. “And this is an ancient Earth custom?”

I raised my voice so he could hear me over the overly cheery music. “From what Brooke says, every human who celebrated Christmas put one in their houses.”

Wyn tapped a stubby finger on his chin. “Humans are odd creatures.”

We both swiveled our gazes around the crowded room, which was brimming with people now that the party was officially underway. The space was dim with only the lights from the tree and those swagged around the walls for illumination, but it was still easy to see that the Valox had dressed for the occasion. Some wore red hats with white puffs at the ends, while others had donned some combination of red and green.

The air held the aroma of cookies, which were piled high on trays and being consumed rapidly. I took a sip of the sweet drink that I knew was spiked with alien gin, even though I couldn’t taste it.

The curious human rituals and fantastical legends surrounding Christmas made it impossible to challenge Wyn's assertion that the creatures were odd, although those were bold words considering all the unusual aliens we'd encountered. "Thanks again for finding the tree and bringing it."

Wyn grunted an acknowledgment of my thanks. "You're lucky those pilots found me and agreed to bring me in. And you're lucky I'd already delivered our client's cargo."

I gulped down more sweet punch. "No issues with the exchange?"

Wyn tossed back his own glass of the Christmas drink. "They were hesitant at first, since they expected to deal with you, but I convinced them that you'd been unexpectedly detained. They wanted their bootleg booze badly enough that they got over it."

I nodded, my gaze locking on Brooke across the room as she laughed with her copilot and some of her other female friends. Her hair was loose and wavy around her shoulders, and she'd traded in her dark uniform jacket for a colorful knit top she'd called her ugly Christmas sweater. Just looking at the chunky knit that contained every color in the spectrum made my skin itch, and I was grateful that she hadn't insisted I cover my chest.

"When you sent me that transmission about the tree, I was afraid you'd lost your mind."

I snatched my gaze from Brooke and glanced at my crew mate. "I probably should have given you more of an explanation, but I didn't have much time to send the message."

Wyn cocked his bald head at me. "Now that I see the way you look at her, it all makes sense."

"What?" I shook my head. "Brooke?"

Wyn's eyes narrowed until they were barely visible. "I believed you at first, you know. I thought you cared about honoring the game and your debt. You've always been strangely honorable for a smuggler."

“I did care about honoring my debt. I lost that game fair and square.” I took another swig of my drink as my face warmed under Wyn’s scrutiny.

“No doubt about that, but when did you fall for her?”

I almost sputtered my drink all over my friend, coughing loudly before I could speak again. “Who said I—?”

Wyn flapped a hand at me. “Don’t try to lie, Yool. I’ve watched you two together, and I’ve watched the way you look at her. You’ve chased skirts all over the galaxy, and you’ve never looked at a female the way you look at this one.”

My heart raced as I thought about Brooke, but I forced myself not to look her way and further incriminate myself.

“You’re a smuggler, Yool.” Wyn jabbed a finger at my chest but only managed to poke me in my stomach muscles. “We both are. It’s not the kind of life that lends itself well to families and mates.”

“I know that,” I snapped. Even as I’d felt myself becoming more and more attached to Brooke, I’d ignored the obvious—I couldn’t stay, and she wouldn’t want to leave. A smuggler and a freedom fighter did not mix. Our worlds were too different, even if we did have an undeniable connection.

Wyn’s expression softened, and he slapped a hand on my back. “Who am I to tell you what you already know? Enjoy it while it lasts.”

I made a rough noise in the back of my throat. Wyn was trying to be helpful, but that didn’t mean I didn’t want to throat punch him for reminding me that I would have to leave Brooke soon.

“I know I technically owe you double our wager,” my friend continued. “It’s clear you bedded the female, just like you said you would. I never should have doubted you or wagered on a female resisting your charms.” He frowned as he shook his head, but finally peered at me with a glint in his eyes. “How about we call it even, since I dragged that tree here for you?”

Before I could answer, Wyn’s face froze, and the blue drained from his cheeks. I turned to see Brooke behind me, her mouth

open in shock and her eyes welling with tears. I knew without a doubt that she'd just heard every word about the wager that I would get her into bed.

CHAPTER 22



Brooke

I'd made my way through the crowd to reach Yool, the music not as loud in the corner with the galaxy's largest Christmas tree. As much as I liked the vintage song "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer," I was grateful it wasn't blaring as I reached Yool and his crew mate Wyn.

Yool was the only bare chested one in the room, so it hadn't been tough to keep track of his pewter-hued skin as I'd talked to my friends and snatched a few cookies. I battled the urge to wrap my arms around his broad back as I stood behind him, but the sound of his friends high-pitched voice stopped me.

"I know I technically owe you double our wager. It's clear you bedded the female, just like you said you would. I never should have doubted you or wagered on a female resisting your charms."

My heart lurched in my chest. A wager? Yool had made a bet that he'd get me in bed?

The short alien grinned at his friend. "How about we call it even since I dragged that tree here for you?"

My cheeks flamed as I realized that I was nothing more to Yool than a bet.

Idiot. What did you expect from a smuggler known for seducing females?

I took a step back as Wyn spotted me and froze. Then Yool spun around, his own gaze containing as much shock as mine must have.

“Brooke—” He reached out a hand, but I sidestepped him as I shook my head and pressed my lips together to keep from hurling insults at him. That would only release the tears that I was barely containing.

Without a word, I whirled around and barreled from the room, pushing through the Valox who’d become faceless in the blur of tears marring my vision. I ignored Yool calling after me, and soon his voice was swallowed by the blaring holiday music near the door. I could see enough to stumble down the corridors as I swiped furiously at my eyes now that hot tears were falling.

How had I been so foolish? I’d known exactly who Yool was. It was part of the reason I’d picked him—no chance of getting attached.

“So much for that,” I mumbled to myself as I hurried down one hallway after another. Not only had I succumbed to his charms and fallen into bed with him—just like he’d wagered I would, the arrogant asshole—I’d fallen for him. I’d convinced myself that he had feelings for me, and that what we had was more than amazing sex.

Memories of him calling me a bad girl scorched my cheeks, and I tried to push them aside. Then I thought about him suggesting that he stay with me. Lies. All of his words had been lies.

I stopped and braced a hand on the cool steel of the wall, glancing around. I’d managed to stagger my way to the hall leading to the power hub, which meant I’d been moving fast.

I flinched when I heard laughter behind me. I didn’t want anyone to see me with tears streaking my face so I ducked into the open entrance to the power hub as I heard my name being called, flattening myself against the wall so the passing Valox wouldn’t follow me.

Not exactly the best place to hide considering the sabotage, I told myself. Then I swung my head to take in the dimly lit space filled with hulking machines. Where were the guards the commander had promised to post? Surely, they hadn't left their posts to sneak into the party.

I was about to turn on my heel and report the missing guards when I heard a rhythmic sound coming from deeper inside the room. My senses instantly went on high alert, and my tears were forgotten as I tiptoed toward the sound of tapping.

I crept around a massive machine that hummed softly, stopping when I saw a figure at the control panel. "Gregor?"

He jerked at the sound of my voice, jumping back as if his fingers had been burned.

I didn't need to hear his explanations. The guilty expression on his face told me everything. "You?"

He opened his mouth, no doubt to protest his innocence, then closed it and smiled.

"Did you do all this to set up Yool to take the fall?" I asked. "Is this all because I wouldn't go out with you?"

Gregor slicked a hand across the hair that had flopped across his eyes. "You think this is about jealousy? Your boyfriend being hauled in as a suspect was only a happy by-product. He does have all the appearance of a saboteur, doesn't he?"

I blinked at him, unable to reconcile what he was saying with my image of the man. "You sabotaged the base to weaken us? But you're a member of the rebellion."

"That's the problem with you rebels. You'll take anyone who claims to hate the empire."

I bristled at this, anger flaring hot inside me and replacing all the anger I'd felt for Yool. "You're a traitor. What? Did the Zagrath pay you to rat us out?"

He laughed before his eyes became hard and cold. "Pay me? My father was one of the imperial captains who was killed in the Vandar attack the Valox joined. They would have had to pay me not to come after you rebel scum."

My mind raced as I faced off against him. If I ran, I could probably make it to the corridor before he caught up. Someone would hear me screaming, right? Then I thought about all the Valox in the party and the loud Christmas songs. Still, I had to try.

Just as I was poised to make a dash for the exit, Gregor flipped out a blaster from behind his back and leveled it at me. “I know you’d love to play the hero, Brooke, but that’s not going to happen. You and I are going to leave the base while everyone is distracted by the party you so thoughtfully planned.”

I clenched my teeth and glared at him. “The Valox will come after you.”

He shrugged. “Maybe, but they won’t shoot down my ship with you in it, will they? By the time they scramble their fleet, the Zagrath will have used the coordinates I’ll send them to have the base surrounded.” He nodded toward the console he’d been tapping on. “And since I’ve disabled the shields, destroying your sad rebellion shouldn’t be hard.”

Panic choked me as I imagined my friends being sitting ducks for the imperial attack. Then I thought of Yool dying because of me, and an unexpected sob lodged in my throat.

CHAPTER 23



Yool

*W*here was she? I stopped running through the maze of underground corridors and cursed to myself. How could I have been such a fool?

When I'd seen Brooke's face contorted by hurt and shock, it had felt like a Kurvenian sledgehammer had landed on my chest. I'd been stunned by the realization that I'd hurt her, even though I'd made the ridiculous wager before I'd known her and before I'd fallen for her.

She'd run before I could explain that the wager meant nothing. I'd changed since then, even though it had only been a matter of astro-days. She'd changed me.

"Brooke, wait!"

My screams had been swallowed by the crowd and the music, which had also consumed her as she'd run from me. I snapped from my stupor and followed her, but by the time I'd forced my way through the dancing Valox, she'd vanished into the base's labyrinth of passageways.

I strode down one corridor after another, listening for footsteps but hearing nothing but the rushing of blood in my own ears. Finally, I heard someone say Brooke's name in the distance. I ran to the sound, finally reaching a couple who were giggling arm in arm.

“Brooke,” I said, grabbing one of their arms. “Have you seen her?”

The male looked surprised, but he nodded and jerked a thumb behind him. “She’s around the corner.”

I released his arm, mumbled my thanks, and hurried around the bend in the passageway. There was only one entrance along the long stretch, and it was a wide, arched entry that led to a shadowy interior.

I slowed my pace, the back of my neck tingling as muffled voices drifted to me from inside. One was clearly Brooke’s voice, but who was she talking to, and why was her tone so strained? I held my breath, darting my head around the frame to take a quick peek. I could see nothing.

Moving as stealthily as possible, I slipped inside and pressed myself against the wall and into the shadows. A scan of my surroundings and the huge machines told me that I was in a mechanical hub of some kind, and Brooke and whomever she was talking to were deeper inside the space.

I moved on silent feet until I was hidden behind a sizeable steel bulkhead. Here the voices were clearer.

“I know you’d love to play the hero, Brooke, but that’s not going to happen. You and I are going to leave the base while everyone is distracted by the party you so thoughtfully planned.”

I stiffened. I recognized the male voice as the one who’d been so interested in Brooke.

“The Valox will come after you.”

Brooke’s response was defiant, reminding me of one of the many reasons I’d fallen for the human and making my chest swell with both pride and affection.

“Maybe, but they won’t shoot down my ship with you in it, will they? By the time they scramble their fleet, the Zagrath will have used the coordinates I’ll send them to have the base surrounded. And since I’ve disabled the shields, destroying your sad rebellion shouldn’t be hard.”

Footsteps shuffled toward me, and I readied myself to pounce. There was no question in my mind that the man was armed, but that didn't matter. I couldn't allow him to take Brooke. For the first time in ages, I would rather risk my own life than lose someone.

Brooke appeared first, her hands held high in the air, but she didn't see me crouching in the darkness. Then the traitor appeared, his arm extended as he pointed a blaster at Brooke's back. Rage filled me as I tracked the man's steps until he'd passed me, then I leapt on him from behind, knocking the weapon from his unsuspecting grasp and locking my arm around his throat.

Brooke spun around with a yelp as the man flailed in my merciless grip. He beat his hands on my arm and his feet kicked the air beneath him as he hung like a struggling insect, but I didn't relent.

Brooke snatched the blaster from the floor and aimed it at him, her expression menacing. Then she frowned. "Don't kill him."

"Why not?" My breath was ragged as his movements slowed. "He threatened you and everyone on this base."

"We can't be like them. Besides, he should be interrogated in case there are more imperial spies in the rebellion."

I loosened my grip so that my choke hold would only put him to sleep. When he sagged motionless, I lowered him to the floor. "I hope he thanks you for your mercy."

She lowered the blaster and met my gaze. "Maybe I've reconsidered my policy on second chances."

My chest hitched as the adrenaline rush slowed. "You were never about a bet, Brooke."

She bit her bottom lip. "So Wyn was lying about you wagering you could fuck me?"

Her words made me flinch. "No, but the more I got to know you and genuinely care for you, the wager was forgotten. I despise myself for ever making it, but that was before I'd fallen for you."

She stilled. “You’ve fallen for me?”

I shook my head. “I know it’s hard to believe, and I know I have a reputation for being the last male who would ever fall in love, but it’s true. What started as a deal to fulfill a bet—and a stupid wager—changed my life.”

Brooke held up a palm. “Wait a second. Did you say love?”

I swallowed hard, all previous fears melting away as if they were nothing. “I love you, Brooke. I don’t expect you to love me back or even believe me, but I’m willing to spend as much time as it takes proving it to you—”

My words were cut short as Brooke launched herself at me, jumping into my arms, and planting a hard kiss on me. I staggered back as I caught her, and she wrapped her legs around my waist.

When she tore her mouth from mine, she gave me a wicked smile. “Sorry. You were talking way too much.”

I gaped at her, still too surprised to speak.

“If that wasn’t a big enough clue,” Brooke said, kissing me again and nipping at my lower lip. “I love you, too.”

My heart pounded, despite all the blood rushing south, and a low growl escaped my lips.

Brooke lifted an eyebrow, her mischievous smile widening as her gaze slid to the man in a heap on the floor. “Before I ask you to prove it, we should probably do something about him.”

CHAPTER 24



Brooke

After getting Gregor dragged off to the brig, confirming he hadn't transmitted any coordinates, restoring the base's shields, and briefing the commander, Yool and I walked wearily back into the holiday party. The crowd had thinned out, the cookies had been all but decimated, and even the music had slowed, the notes of "Last Christmas" filling the air.

Dani rushed up to us, glancing at our entwined fingers and grinning. "Is it true?"

"That Gregor was the one who sabotaged the base and Yool stopped him?" I asked, squeezing Yool's hand. "Yep."

Her eyes widened. "What? I was going to ask if you two had kissed and made up."

"That too," Yool said, tugging me closer and circling our clasped hand behind my back.

Dani shook her head and her dark hair swung around her face. "Gregor was the one who messed with the shields? Why?"

I didn't bother to lower my voice. The entire resistance would know soon enough, and the former infiltrator didn't deserve my discretion. "He was a traitor working for the empire."

"Shut up." Dani sat down hard on a nearby bench. "He was Zagrath? I can't believe that."

“I heard him confess everything,” Yool said, “right before he tried to abduct Brooke and leave the base.”

Dani’s shocked face went back and forth between us, as if waiting for one of us to tell her we were teasing. Her gaze landed on Yool. “And you stopped him and saved Brooke?”

My not-so-fake boyfriend held me close as he beamed at me. “What else would I do?”

Dani swung a finger back and forth. “You two are...?”

“Not pretending anymore,” I said, butterflies still fluttering in my stomach at the idea of being with the alien for real.

“I don’t know if I ever was.” Yool tipped me back and kissed my exposed neck.

I laughed as his lips tickled my skin. “Liar.”

He swung me back up and locked his gaze on mine. “Never again.” Then he leaned his head down so his lips feathered along the outside of my ear. “My naughty girl.”

Heat flooded my body as tingles ran down my spine. “You are definitely on Santa’s nice list after tonight.”

He pulled back, giving me a mock frown. “The nice list doesn’t sound as much fun as the naughty list.”

“If you’re on the nice list, you get presents.”

His pupils flashed hot with desire. “You’re all the present I need.”

“All right, all right.” Dani stood up waving her hands and squeezing her eyes shut. “I don’t want to see anyone unwrapping anything right here.”

We both laughed, but then Yool swept his gaze over my head. “Did you see where my crew mate...?” His question faded as his gaze paused on the Christmas tree. “Never mind.”

I twisted around to see the blue-skinned alien curled under the tree hugging a brightly wrapped box with a red Santa’s hat on his head. “I think he enjoyed his first Christmas party.”

“You should have heard him singing ‘Jingle Bells’.” Dani let loose a low whistle. “He’s a quick learner, and his voice isn’t half bad.” Dani gave us both a mock two-fingered salute as she backed away. “But I’m going to leave you two in charge of him.”

“I’m sorry you missed the party you planned. I know how important it was to you.”

I looked back at Yool, whose expression was pained. I hadn’t even thought about missing the party until he’d mentioned it. “Despite what I might have made you believe, Christmas isn’t actually about the cookies or the tree or even the funny sweaters.” I glanced down at my own absurd reindeer sweater. “It’s about being with those you love.”

He smiled. “Does that mean we won Christmas?”

A laugh burst from me. “Absolutely.”

Yool pulled me into a kiss, lifting my feet from the floor for a few moments. When he put me down, my head was spinning, but a thought popped into my head. “You know we’re down a member of the resistance.”

He cocked his head at me. “Are you suggesting that the Valox might accept a smuggler into their ranks?”

“We’re a bunch of rebels. Besides, you told me that you’re good at outsmarting the imperial patrols. That’s a skill that we could use.”

“If joining the Valox means I won’t have to leave you for even a moment, then count me in.” He cut a glance to his friend snoring under the tree. “And Wyn?”

“Anyone who can sneak into a protected forest on an alien world, remove a tree, and fly it to a hidden base has talents that we need.” I ran a hand through his long hair. “I can’t make promises, but I can put in a good word with the commander. After you just saved the base, I have a feeling the answer will be yes.”

Yool scooped me into his arms. “Then maybe we should go back to *our* quarters and celebrate.”

As he carried me from the room, I looked over his shoulder at the twinkling tree and thought about how much fun it would be to unwrap Yool. “Merry Christmas to me.”

* * *

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tana Stone is a USA Today bestselling sci-fi romance author who loves sexy aliens and independent heroines. Her favorite superhero is Thor (with Aquaman a close second because, well, Jason Momoa), her favorite dessert is key lime pie (okay, fine, *all* pie), and she loves Star Wars and Star Trek equally. She still laments the loss of *Firefly*.

She has one husband, two teenagers, two excitable dogs, and three neurotic cats. She sometimes wishes she could teleport to a holographic space station like the one in her tribute brides series (or maybe vacation at the oasis with the sand planet barbarians). :-)

She loves hearing from readers! Email her any questions or comments at tana@tanastone.com.

Want to hang out with Tana in her private Facebook group? Join on all the fun at: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/tanastonestributes/>



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