

Alien Outcast Chapter 1

Between Ob's pain-filled squalls and blaring alarms, Piper couldn't hear herself think. Things were bad. She had a feeling they would get worse.

As if to prove her fears, a red light flashed on the stolen shuttle's console, diverting her attention from the star-pocked vid of the space ahead. She pointed and shouted over Ob's yells. "Something new. What's that?"

The Tragoon managed to come out of his hunched position in the seat next to her. He usually sat head and shoulders over Piper...he was a mass of rock-hard alien, despite being a runt among his kind. His pained breaths whistled past his tusks as he peered at the panel in front of Piper with tiny, streaming eyes.

The translators on their slave collars were as dispassionate as his voice was strained. "Chasing ship coming faster. Catching up."

A jolt of terror shot through Piper, though she'd suspected as much when Ob's collar had activated minutes before. Her shaking hands wavered over the control panel with its varied buttons and etched Bi'isil characters. "How do I force the shuttle to exceed safe limits on velocity? We have to go faster!"

Ob's thick finger, which was one of two that made his hand appear to be a cloven hoof, slammed on the console. "Hull buffers recalibrated. Now top speed."

He continued to batter the resilient surface, making up for her poorer piloting skills. Piper winced, expecting craters to appear where his fingers landed despite knowing better. The Bi'isils built their vessels to withstand the hard use of the Tragoons they often enslaved.

She'd learned a little about interplanetary travel during her enslavement and a lot about reading the Bi'isil language. She blinked at the star chart that depicted the route Ob had plugged in. "You're changing course to that heading? Won't that take us straight into the Kalquorian Empire? Ob, they'll kill you there as fast as the Bi'isils will!"

He didn't answer right away. Instead, he grabbed the collar delivering horrific punishment to his nervous system, twisting at it in an instinctive effort to stop the pain. It didn't matter that he knew it was impossible to avoid its effects now that their pursuers were within activation range.

Someone on the ship chasing them had Dr. Wari'det's punishment commands. Most likely, they were trying to activate her collar too, though Ob had damaged it so that it no longer worked.

Was Wari'det on the pursuing craft himself? Was it possible?

No, he can't be. He's dead. I'm sure of it.

Despite the torture, Ob wheezed and the translator spoke. "No choice but Kalquorian Empire. They kill me, but you can live. You can tell."

Damn it, Ob! She hadn't kept him from execution to spare her own worthless skin. Piper studied the star chart in desperation. "We should be going to Galactic Council territory."

"Too far. Never make it. Kalquorian space only chance."

The vid displaying the stars ahead suddenly rippled, as if it lay beneath water that had been disturbed. She stared harder, thinking stress was playing havoc with her senses, but the view rippled again.

Ob put his pig-snouted nose to the controls, as if he'd snort the buttons. He was trying to peer at the hull readouts through his tear-blurred vision. He straightened again. Despite shaking with agony, his hoof-fingers thudded over the controls once more. "Pursuer blasting. Hunter-killer."

She gasped. “They brought out the big guns? For a couple of house slaves?”

“They must know that we know. That you took records. They see where we go. Kalquor will save you for the information, if we reach their system before we die.”

A thud shook the whole ship. “Um, I doubt that’s happening. We’re hit.”

“Grazed. Hunter-killer not in lethal range. We get to border before they can destroy.”

But not before they could cripple us, leaving us dead in space and waiting for the final blast.

She didn’t believe for a single second that the shuttle they’d stolen from Prince Yel’ek, made for luxury rather than speed, would beat their pursuer to Kalquorian territory. She did her best to help the moaning Ob pilot anyway. At least death might come quickly, which was more than she deserved.

Poor Ob. He couldn’t have picked a worse ally.

Chapter 2

“Isn’t that precious?” Ulof smirked at the vidcast. The news report shimmered on the console of Nako’s semi-private cubbyhole where the pair sat. “Ancestors, what a production.”

Nako grunted and turned up the volume on the vidcaster’s tinny voice. “Shut up. I’m not losing what few minutes we have of a clear signal to listen to you.”

Ulof snorted and shoveled lunch in his handsome face. Nako did the same, marveling in the back of his mind how his Imdiko could concoct delicious meals on the most rudimentary of rations. He inhaled deeply, enjoying how the stew canceled out most of the musty scent of the raider. They’d been out of port for a long time.

His attention riveted on the news vid, on the latest seismic changes rolling out of the Kalquorian Empire’s capital. The vidcaster reported, “A longtime advocate for nontraditional clannings, Matara Candy Dixon was the first to celebrate the new law allowing such unions. She formalized her clanship to Nobek Stidmun yesterday. The pair have been involved in a relationship for over four years.”

Nako spoke around a mouthful of food, talking over the reporter. “Damn, that means I can dump you and Terig and have a woman all to myself.” He grinned, feigning an easygoing attitude.

Nonetheless, he watched Ulof carefully to ensure his clanmate realized he was joking. He never knew when teasing might be taken badly. When Ulof got upset, stuff broke. Bones, usually.

Ulof chortled as he offered a rude gesture to his Dramok. “It would be worth unloading you, just to see you dress up like that pretty Nobek.”

“Oh? Do you have a secret love for Nobeks with perfect features and fancy clothes? Don’t let Terig hear you say that.”

Ulof ignored him. “Better yet, you could wear that woman’s gown. You’d be gorgeous, layered in a cargo hold’s worth of lace.”

Nako joined him in laughter at the idea of his scarred carcass encased in an off-the-shoulder gown with a ten-foot train. “I’d do it to have such a lovely creature on my arm. Or under me.”

“Which one? The Matara or the Nobek?”

“That’s a good question. What’s the empire coming to, when a member of the warrior breed is as lovely as a Matara? I’m uncertain which of them I want to fuck more.”

Ulof laughed harder, then choked on his food, bending double as he clawed at his throat. Nako slammed his fist between the other man's shoulders until Ulof sat up, red-faced and gasping. "Ugh, thanks." He shoved another wad of food in his mouth and stared at the vid again. "If I have to put on anything beyond my dress uniform to clan a Matara, I'd as soon go without her."

"Do you even know where your dress uniform is?" Nako examined his own duty formsuit. The knees, shoulders and elbows were shiny from two years of constant use. The way things were shaping up, he'd soon have to wear his fancier duds on a daily basis.

"I have no idea where I stored it. Why? Are you counting on me to lure in a woman for you?"

"I can catch my own woman, I should hope."

"Of course you can, my Dramok. But it would be beneath you to take advantage of an unconscious female."

"Unconscious?"

"She'd have to be in a coma to stick around a jerk like you."

Nako chuckled, more at the impish smile his clanmate wore than the excellent jibe. When happy, Ulof had all the boyish charm of a full Imdiko, a man who would dote on those he loved. His expression was open, changing an almost forgettable attractiveness into heartbreaking sweetness. At a moment such as this, no one would suspect Ulof's Nobek side existed...a side that was violent and unmerciful when roused by anger.

Ulof's darker instincts were easily wakened, something often forgotten when he looked so appealing. A rush of warmth filled Nako at the too-seldom joy in his clanmate's wide-set eyes. He had an urge to comb his fingers through Ulof's perpetually tangled hair, to stroke his cheek.

Nako was in danger of not only that, but also of saying something unforgivably mushy when Ulof's expression turned furtive. "I don't suppose this change in the clanning laws would make it worth our while to return to home sweet home?"

Just that fast, the charming instant ended. A sharp response stung Nako's tongue, but it too was thwarted at the sound of a warning ping. Instantly on alert, he swiveled his hover chair to face the rest of the raider's bridge, where the crew's background mutter of conversation had halted.

His gaze went to the large vid at the forward section, displaying the raider's heading, power levels, and a blip on the sensor readings. He stood and headed toward the weapons officer on duty, who was staring at his computer podium. "Report, Subcommander."

Terig's brilliant purple eyes, set in a face as scarred as Nako's, riveted on him. "You'd better have a look at this, Captain. Putting visual on main screen."

Nako was aware of Ulof on his heels, the Imdiko's lumbering steps a loud counterpoint to his own silent tread. He ignored him, swiveling from Terig to the vid his Nobek clanmate had brought up.

A Bi'isil hunter-killer chasing a pleasure craft into empire space? Despite his current status with Kalquor, Nako's hackles rose at the sight of enemy craft venturing across the border.

Ulof sounded as affronted as Nako felt. "Enlighten your head cook, Captain. Those are both Bi'isil vessels, aren't they?"

Terig answered him, probably intuiting that Nako would want a few seconds to digest the situation. "Indeed, they are, my Imdiko. Weapons Commander, report to the bridge."

Nako's scowl deepened, drawing his skin tight. He preferred Terig to remain in charge of weapons for such strange circumstances, but protocol...along with other issues...meant that Nobek Sesin should be present.

Having granted his captain and Dramok those few precious seconds to absorb the state of affairs, Terig ventured to ask, "Should we let the hunter-killer destroy the other before we stomp ass?"

Nako shoved his frizzy hair away from where it fell over his eye. "As amusing as it would be to watch carnage in either case, I'm curious why a Bi'isil prince is coming under fire. Not to mention, why he's running into empire space to escape."

"A prince?" Ulof frowned at the lozenge-shaped shuttle darting in a desperate dance to avoid its chevron-contoured foe as the hunter-killer set off a barrage of blasts. As they watched, the shuttle suffered a hit. Its marker lights went dark, indicating the ship had lost power. The warship moved in, its bright white lights forcing Nako to squint as he watched.

"Those red markings are house sigils, indicating the Bi'isil ruling class. The number and size tell me the vessel belongs to a mid-level prince, of which Bi'is has many."

"From the looks of things, I guess the fight is over."

"Seems that way. Terig, de-cloak and remind the hunter-killer that this is Kalquorian territory."

Involved in their battle, the Bi'isil ships had apparently failed to scan for power signatures that would have told them a camouflaged vessel was near at hand. The helmsman, Nobek Girek, put Nako's raider nose-to-nose with the chevron before de-cloaking. Quick as well as lethal, the hunter-killer reversed at once, barely avoiding Terig's point-blank blast.

It took heavy damage, enough that it didn't bother to return fire. It shot straight toward Bi'is space, racing to escape.

Terig scowled, his teeth flashing in the darkness of his beard. "I missed their engines. Fuck."

"It was a nice surprise, nevertheless. The Bi'isils will be fumigating that ship for years due to the spontaneous shitting that just erupted." Nako grinned at Ulof's guffaw, enjoying that elusive smile. His Imdiko was having a good day.

He got back to business. "What's the reading on that prince's ship?"

"Dead. There should be enough air for whoever's on board to keep him alive for the next hour. A little less, if there are more than two on board."

Nako aimed his attention at his com officer. Nobek Atar reported, "No com signal. Their com emitter was disintegrated in that last blast. We have no way to question the little fuckers, unless it's done in person."

Weapons Commander Sesin strolled onto the bridge as the report was completed. He definitely strolled. Or maybe he sauntered. At any rate, his gait was as lazy as the eyes that blinked in his fleshy face.

Nako ground his teeth together. "So good of you to join us, Weapons Commander. Lead a team to that cruiser. Bring the ranking member to me. Kill the rest."

Sesin glanced at the shuttle on the vid. He did a double-take. The bastard hadn't even bothered to follow events once he was alerted to the bridge. He'd had no idea they were dealing with Kalquor's second-oldest enemy. "You want a live Bi'isil, Captain? Brought to this ship?"

If only the fool had elected to return home when Nako had abandoned the fleet. "That was my order. Do I need to repeat it?"

Ulof eased a step away. Girek and the navigator, Nobek Ruek, watched the unfolding drama with avid expressions. Nako hated repeating himself, and everyone knew it. When he had to give an order twice, it was usually accompanied by a severe beatdown.

Even Sesein realized the threat he was under. He bowed, his greasy black hair swinging forward to hide the scowl Nako was certain had erupted. When he straightened, he'd reverted to his usual expression...a lethargic malice, as if he hated everything in sight but couldn't be bothered to destroy any of it.

"Subcommander, you're with me. Have two security officers join us."

"Yes, Commander." With a half-grin for Nako, Terig followed Sesein off the bridge.

Ulof took his leave as well, his arms full of his and Nako's lunch trays. He gave a parting shot as he left. "I look forward to hearing how this plays out. Maybe you'll get lucky and Sesein will accidentally space himself."

Nako bit back a retort, though he shouldn't have accepted his head cook insulting a senior executive officer. But Ulof was right. It would do the raider so much good to lose its current weapons commander.

Terig had to step up, because the way things were going, that worthless piece of shit Sesein wasn't long for this life. Sooner or later, he'd screw up bad enough that there would no longer be any question of him being relieved of duty. Terig was next in line for the position, and there was no way Nako would skip over him to promote someone else. Not if he was to maintain order on the raider.

It's past due my Nobek put his past behind him and reclaimed his role as a leader.