

Alien Caged Chapter 1

Elisa Mackenzie pushed her food cart through the detention halls of the battlecruiser *Final Judgment*. She moved the rattling wheeled piece carefully, determined not to spill a crumb of the overflowing dishes. The last hover cart had lost all power three weeks ago, which left Elisa and the rest of the kitchen staff with seven battered and dented denizens on casters. They didn't move smoothly as the hover carts had. It was a reminder of the deprivations on board the renegade starship.

Elisa wheeled the almost empty cart from the general population brig to the other half of the cruiser's prisoner containment. She was on her way to the maximum security brig. It was time to feed the Kalquorians.

Her heart drummed in anticipation as it always did when she neared maximum security. It was ridiculous to get so excited. It was stupid, in fact, if Elisa were honest with herself. Her secret fascination with the aliens was reckless to the point of being dangerous. If her fellow shipmates knew the thoughts she had, especially about the clan she was about to see...

Elisa set her expression to boredom as she entered maximum security's guard office. She suppressed a groan when she saw the men in the room: Ensigns Chris Coombs and Don Remington.

Of the pair, Coombs was the least offensive, though he smelled as if he might have last showered around Armageddon. He did the minimum of work to avoid getting into trouble with everyone else. The man took laziness to an art form. Despite the strict rations due to the ship's dwindling food stores, he managed to appear flabby and indulgent.

Better looking and sweeter smelling, Don Remington was nevertheless an asshole. He made rude comments and insinuations in Elisa's presence when no one was around to report him for it.

She did her best to hide her fear of being alone with him. Letting Remington know how vulnerable Elisa felt would be a huge mistake. He was belligerent and bullying when he realized he could get away with it. It wasn't farfetched to imagine him taking his *flirtations* to the extreme in the right situation. Thus far, Elisa had managed to keep that situation from happening.

She wasn't surprised to find both in the room despite only a single guard being assigned per shift. Coombs and Remington often played cards for an hour or so as they traded guard duty. They were presently in the thick of a poker game. Coombs' shock of dingy blond hair hung to the tip of his nose as he squinted at his hand. They were supposed to keep their hair regulation short. No one seemed to have reminded the lackadaisical Coombs of that fact in the last several months. For that matter, no one had apparently bothered to order him to keep up appearances at all. Wearing his uniform jacket open to display a stained tee-shirt wasn't in keeping with military protocol in the slightest.

In contrast, Remington was as official as an ensign in worn clothing and shoes could be. Low in rank, he strutted the ship as if he ruled it. His hair was always short and clean; his clothes pressed, if a bit threadbare. His shoes shone despite one's heel flapping loose when he walked. He was ambitious enough to look the part of up-and-coming fleet officer. Though Earth's official military was long gone, he still ached to advance. It had escaped his notice that being in his thirties and having gotten no farther than the rank of ensign boded poorly for future promotions.

There was also that little matter of Earth's fleet no longer existing. As far as Elisa knew, a few scattered remnants of ships like the *Last Judgment* were all that was left of a force that had been millions of vessels strong.

As Elisa entered the guard office behind her clanking food cart, Remington did his usual perusal. His eyes traveled from the top of her hair-netted brown tresses to the crotch of her white food service uniform.

Elisa wouldn't have described herself as a ravishing beauty. No more than attractive, on her best days. She was no longer young. Seated firmly at middle age, Elisa had left youth and its innocent dreams behind. There was nothing in her appearance to excite any real interest.

At least there wouldn't have been before Earth's and most of its population's destruction. Women were a rarity, and Elisa was the only female on board the battlecruiser. Men naturally had less than saintly thoughts when they saw her, ignoring she neared fifty.

Remington's leer managed to make her feel filthier than most, however. He'd told her more than once, "Girl, if I ever get you to myself, you'll make me a very happy man." He'd grabbed her a few times. A week ago, he'd caught hold of her hand and pressed it to his semi-hard crotch before she could snatch loose.

Elisa hated the man.

Coombs wasn't as bad by a longshot, just lazier than most. As Elisa trundled her rattling cart through the room, he never looked up at her. He peered at his cards through slitted eyes. Most of the ship was kept at half-illumination to conserve precious power. Headaches from eyestrain were a common complaint.

Elisa looked over Coombs' shoulder to see what he was holding. Three of a kind, deuces. He'd been winning to judge from his stack of chips. Too bad he wasn't winning real money. There was no actual income anymore. For those Earthers who hadn't surrendered following Armageddon, there was only running, surviving, and evading the Kalquorian Empire.

Beyond the small table they sat at, the guard office held little. There was a dusty vid that was supposed to be used only in emergencies. The crew was constantly reminded to conserve power when possible. Despite the energy rationing, the guards often played concerts and movies saved in the system. Elisa couldn't blame them. Besides work, there was damned little to do on the ship.

On the far wall hung a couple of frequency disruptors, five percussion blasters, cuffs, and an old black uniform coat turning gray with dust. The recycling unit had quit working some time ago, and the bin used for refuse was overflowing. The com system sat silent.

Elisa looked to the door at the other side of the room. Only three men occupied maximum security, crowded in a single cell at the opposite end of the block. Despite the knowledge that Kalquorians were usually bisexual, an abhorrence to Earth's former government and state religion, a clan had been placed in containment together. The senior tactical officer, Alec Robards, was a brutal pig of a man. It hadn't been kindness in mind when he'd dictated the Kalquorian captain and his clanmates be sequestered in a single cell. He'd done it to make their lives as uncomfortable as possible. Robards might have thought it would turn them against one another in claustrophobic fury. So far, he'd been disappointed.

Elisa couldn't spot the Kalquorians from her position behind Coombs. That didn't stop her gaze from going to the door, eager for that first glimpse. She was impatient to get in the cell block and enjoy the too-few minutes she'd have in the prisoners' company.

Remington's voice, pitched high for a man, interrupted her nervous thinking. "Time to feed the animals, huh? Go on in. I'll be in there in a second."

Elisa schooled her expression against revealing her delight. She'd have a few precious seconds alone with Clan Zemos. It took all she had to avoid dashing with her cart towards the door.

Remington gave her a grin that set her teeth on edge. “You could wait for me to finish this hand, if you’ll miss having me next to you, darlin’.”

Elisa stiffened, but she walked steadily through the office without a word. In almost four years since Armageddon, it amazed her she hadn’t been raped yet. Only the captain’s protection and the constant threat of execution from the first officer and the ship’s head of security had kept her safe so far. Much like the brute Robards, First Officer Chase was a devout follower of Earth’s one true religion. Lewd behavior was grounds for immediate execution where those two were concerned.

Still, Elisa had no illusions that if she remained on the ship much longer, she’d find herself in trouble. Sooner or later, her luck would run out.

Where could she go? She had no funds to start a new life anywhere. Worse still, she was part of a renegade crew that had committed crimes against the Kalquorian Empire. If caught, she could be put on trial and sent to a Kalquorian prison. No matter what Dramok Zemos and the others said, Elisa feared what would happen if she left the battlecruiser.

However much Clan Zemos might lie to her, her heart lifted at the prospect of seeing them. She filled with warmth and joy, as she did every day, twice a day. Her life revolving around those few moments was pathetic. She’d come to terms with that. The coming seconds were her reason for rising in the morning and going through the motions of living. When her time with the Kalquorians was up, she’d exist on the anticipation of tomorrow.

She entered maximum security and trundled her cart towards the far cell.

The three aliens left Elisa nervous in more than one way. They were treacherous to be sure, though they’d never threatened her. Quite the opposite, in fact. The Kalquorians, including the walking menace that was Nobek Oret, had been unfailingly kind to her. They acted as if they liked her. Sometimes Elisa entertained the notion they flirted. It was fun to think she could evoke such a response.

The captives had to be nice. They were stuck in a cell with armed guards steps away. Elisa was in no danger from them or the rest of the captured Kalquorian destroyer crew held in the general population brig. There hadn’t been a single instance of any prisoners breaking through the containment fields in the three months they’d been held. They were secure, and she was safe, at least from them. The real peril was what made her life bearable, though she’d be executed if anyone knew.

She’d fallen in love with the clan.

What would happen if her feelings for the Kalquorians became known tightened Elisa’s stomach. As she usually did when she became nervous, she hummed a tune. She calmed as the first notes flowed from her throat.

She approached the last cell, and the Kalquorians came into view. Knowing she had arrived, they stayed well back from the field that imprisoned them in their small, two-bunk cell. The quarters would have been tight for a pair of Earther men, all it was meant to house. For three big Kalquorians, the shortest of whom stood about six-and-a-half-feet tall, it was miniscule.

Contact with the containment didn’t do any harm; it simply allowed no escape. The Kalquorians wouldn’t approach until they were sure Elisa was comfortable in their presence. They seemed determined to offer no threat. That underscored how dangerous they were, but she was pleased they treated her with such compassion.

The trio bowed to her, as they always did. Ever respectful, their faces lit with smiles when they saw she came alone. Elisa returned the smiles.

Captain Zemos, who stood in the middle of his clan, said in a warm tone, “What a lovely voice you have, Matara Elisa. Someday, I hope to hear you sing.”

Elisa couldn't help but take in the sight of the handsome Zemos. Over the middle age of the Kalquorian lifespan of two hundred-fifty years, his long black hair had the slightest dusting of gray. His years showed not so much in the few lines of his face, but in the experience that shone in his purple cat-pupiled eyes. Maturity lay in Zemos' attitude more than in his appearance. That aura, combining with a strong jaw and an underlying ferocity, made his features unabashedly masculine. Yet the rest of his face was soft enough that he was almost endearing. Zemos couldn't be called cute, but Elisa had come close to regarding him as such.

He was well-muscled, a behemoth at what Elisa guessed to be around six-feet-eight. The uniform he wore, what the aliens called a formsuit, was black and clung to every curve of his carved body. Elisa suspected he and his clanmates washed their clothing in the cell's small basin, because they always managed to appear clean. Even their boots stayed shined.

Elisa stole a quick glance at the doorway of the guard's station to make sure Remington hadn't entered the block yet. Rattling the cart for cover, she told Zemos, “I can't imagine the guards' comments if I serenaded your meal.”

He rewarded her joke with a grin. The sight stabbed her heart, and Elisa glanced away. She fussed with her limited field disruptor, as if she couldn't operate the small device's controls in the dark. It was hardwired with a single setting and an ON/OFF button.

Elisa activated it. A window in the containment field opened just enough for her to slide the covered plates of food into the cell, one at a time. She clipped the disruptor onto her belt and pushed the first tray through the opening.

Nobek Oret stepped forward to take the food from her. “Good evening, Matara Elisa.” His low, growly voice might have come from the mouth of a wolf rendered capable of speech.

He must have known how intimidating he was. The Nobek came just close enough to the containment barrier to stretch his arm out and accept the plate she offered. Oret was younger than Zemos by a year, and his long, curly hair retained all of its blue-black color without any gray. Yet he looked harder and more careworn than his Dramok. Elisa couldn't call such a feral creature cute. She didn't think him precisely handsome either. However, with his stark features and intense demeanor, he was riveting. To those who appreciated the perfection of creatures such as sharks or tigers, Oret might be deemed a beautiful predator.

If Zemos' body was chiseled, then Oret's had been carved, sculpted, and polished within an inch of its life. Veins stood out on his arms, exposed by his sleeveless formsuit. He appeared capable of breaking steel beams in half with brute force. His skintight uniform left nothing to the imagination.

Oret was fearsomeness personified. Like a mouse hypnotized by a deadly cobra's stare, Elisa found him entrancing as well. She was drawn to the walking, talking icon of destruction.

His deep gaze never wavering from her, he smelled the food before handing it to the third man of their clan. A slight smile curling his lips, Oret said, “Perhaps hearing you sing would sweeten the guards' tempers.”

Imdiko Miragin snorted as he sat with his tray on the lower bunk. “Tossing a handful of sugar at such men would only result in the sugar falling to the ground. For some, offering sweetness is a waste.”

Miragin was forever saying something noteworthy. He was a renowned writer, referred to as the ‘Conscience of Kalquor.’ When Zemos had mentioned that bit of the Imdiko's biography,

Miragin's handsome face had taken on an uncharacteristic scowl. He wasn't enamored with the nickname.

Threads of gray wove themselves in Miragin's messy curls. Wide, intelligent eyes sparkled with humor and mischief. The Imdiko's pleasant nature failed to be eclipsed by his imprisonment. Elisa's favorite feature on Miragin was his plump lips, sumptuous to the point of decadence. She wondered how it would feel to kiss that delicious mouth. He was the least intimidating of the trio, inches shorter than the others and built more along the lines of a distance runner than a muscled powerhouse. The youngest at a century and a quarter, Miragin had a dreamier aspect. Elisa imagined him taking long walks as he contemplated the concerns of his world.

Oret came forward again to accept another dish from Elisa and passed it to Zemos. "You prepared these meals yourself?"

"Yes, Nobek Oret. I've taken on the responsibility of cooking all your meals. I already prepared the breakfast Mr. Thomas will deliver to you in the morning."

He took the final tray from her. Oret's demeanor was often suspicious. He didn't trust anyone else to cook his clan's food. In those cases, he ate first and insisted Zemos and Miragin not touch their meals until an hour after he'd finished his. His distrust of their captors hadn't been shaken in three months, though no one had attempted to poison them.

Even at the beginning of their imprisonment, Oret had been more relaxed with Elisa than any other Earther. After the first two days of her bringing their meals, he'd eased his dictates to the others that they wait to eat until he felt confident of the food's safety. Elisa thought it was because she was a woman that Oret trusted her to the extent he did. She'd debated telling him he should know better. Women were imminently capable of evil acts, as the Church had continually pointed out. She'd held her tongue because she liked that the fierce Nobek felt confident of her motives.

Miragin had already started eating the chicken stir-fry. He practically inhaled it. Between mouthfuls he said, "Delicious as always, Matara Elisa. Thank you for preparing our food."

Elisa closed the window in the containment field. She beamed at his praise and obvious enjoyment. A glance down the corridor towards the guard's station showed no sign of anyone joining her, and she knew she should leave. Yet her life revolved around stolen minutes such as these.

Zemos smiled at her as she returned her attention to the clan. "You're without a guard tonight. I enjoy it when we get to talk."

"They're playing poker. Remington said he'd follow in a moment."

"Remington." Miragin uttered an ugly sound.

Oret said, "A fool with ambitions can be dangerous, but in the end he's still a fool." The Nobek considered Elisa, and she barely controlled a shiver at that appraising stare.

He told her in a gentle tone, "Never underestimate an enemy, Matara. Not even with a seemingly impenetrable containment field."

"Do you plan to attack me?" Elisa fought to keep her tone light. As Oret's gaze turned calculating, she wished she hadn't spoken.

She had nothing to worry about. The containment field was fully powered. Even a Kalquorian of Oret's obvious threat level couldn't hope to break through it.

The Nobek's sudden grin was a mixture of humor and pretended threat. "Attack you? I've had time to consider that option. I decided that if given the chance, I'd take you hostage. Harming you would be off the table, little one, though making you squirm might be fun."

Zemos gave Oret a warning look, despite appearing as if he might grin too. “Don’t frighten her, Oret. Matara Elisa is as kind to us as she’s able.”

Oret chuckled. It was a harsh chuffing sound that made Elisa wonder how often the man actually laughed. “I meant *squirm* in an enjoyable sense. Of course, this naive Earther female has no idea what I am inferring, do you?” His expression turned paternal, as if she were no more than a child.

Elisa might have been a virgin at the grand old age of forty-eight, but she wasn’t clueless. Oret’s condescension irritated her, and she couldn’t help but respond in a manner that she’d never dare in Earther company. “If it were your weight on me, Nobek Oret, I doubt I’d have the breath or strength to squirm.”

It was an outrageous statement for an Earther woman to say to anyone, much less a Kalquorian. Zemos froze and stared as if he couldn’t believe his ears. Miragin made choking sounds as he laughed around his mouthful of food.

Oret’s eyes widened at Elisa’s boldness. His lips curled in a slow, knowing smile that set her heart hammering. “Oh, my pretty one. To have the chance to take your breath away—”

Before he could finish his comment, the telltale thud of booted feet warned them Remington was coming. Elisa hurriedly arranged her cart and began walking from the cell as he came into the corridor.

His hand rested on the blaster holstered on his hip. He pulled the weapon out. Elisa’s mouth went dry. She was certain none of their conversation had reached his ears. Remington was simply being an asshole again. He enjoyed threatening the prisoners. She kept her gaze averted as he came level to her clattering cart and kept going past her.

His nasally voice rang out as he greeted the Kalquorians. “Good evening, slimeballs! Did you have another excellent day filled with fun and games?”

The clan offered no response. Elisa worried that someday Remington would push the three into a reaction that would give him the justification to kill them. She glanced at him and the men in the cell. Remington aimed at the Kalquorians in turn, pretending he was about to shoot them. Miragin had risen from the bunk, and Oret and Zemos stood in front of him to shield the Imdiko.

Remington giggled. “What do you think, homo aliens? You get off on seeing a female? Does it make you wish you were me, someone who can have a woman’s pussy? You want to hear how nice Mackenzie feels when we fuck?”

Elisa’s face flamed with heat. She hoped Zemos and his clan knew she’d die before sleeping with a disgusting pig like Remington. She’d never known a man at all except to kiss...if a teenage buss with a sixteen-year-old boy could be called knowing a man.

It might as well have been. That innocent moment had landed her in all sorts of trouble over thirty years ago. It had torn away every dream she’d possessed. An instant of curiosity and infatuation hadn’t been worth the hell it had caused.

Elisa hated Remington in that second. The most innocent instances could land her in hot water. What Remington was saying could do a lot more than put her in the brig.

The danger paled in comparison to the fact the bastard was telling Zemos, Oret, and Miragin he’d been intimate with her. It sickened her to think they might believe him.

Her cart clattered as she rushed out of the cell block. Elisa’s chest was tight as she escaped the hateful sound of Remington’s laugh.