

Sister Katherine – Chapter 1

Screams, coming from far away. Many high-pitched voices, screaming in terror. Katherine's eyes flew open to only see more darkness, the same as the blackness of sleep that had been interrupted. The horrified sounds continued too. She knew almost immediately she wasn't dreaming. And on the heels of that—

The children.

She sat up in the hard, cold bed with a gasp. The wounds on her back pulled harshly. She didn't notice the pain in the onrush of fear, nor the coppery scent of the blood she'd shed in the otherwise stale-smelling room. Ignoring all those senses, Katherine held her breath and listened hard. It was difficult to hear past the quick thudding of her heart.

Shouting. It sounded like Mother Superior's voice. Then more screams flitted through Katherine's closed sleeping cell door. Thudding feet ran back and forth outside her tiny room. What in the world could be going on here on the remote convent colony of Europa?

Katherine stood and rushed to the door without commanding the lights to come on. She knew the layout of her sleeping cell perfectly well without the grainy, gray illumination. There was little to see in the room: a hook upon which her underdress, habit, and head scarf hung. A chair in the corner before which clunky black shoes waited. A shelf where her bible and lash sat side by side. Her bed was only two steps away from the door in her tiny, cramped cell. She had so few possessions that there was no fear of bumping into anything except the walls.

Katherine heard more screaming, the clarion calls of definite panic out there. Maybe the dorms were on fire. She caught her breath in stark terror at the thought.

The children.

She didn't waste another second. She ordered the door, "Open."

It did so obediently, and Katherine stuck her head out for a look down the corridor before venturing from her room.

She felt as if she'd shoved her face into a wall of strident sound. The cacophony of screams rebounding throughout the nun's wing of the dormitory threatened to burst Katherine's eardrums. She winced against the bright corridor lighting and forced herself to focus on the moving shapes before her.

White gowned nuns ran past. They stampeded towards the end of the hall where the infirmary and linking hallway to the aspirants' wing lay. Their faces stretched in expressions of horrified terror. Katherine detected no scent of smoke though. Her heart drumming wildly and brain swirling with confusion, Katherine turned to look the other direction. She stared at the end of the hall, where the doors opened to the outside of the dorm.

She stopped breathing at the sight of huge, dark figures flooding into the corridor from the wing's gaping entrance. Great giant men with brown skin and long blue-black hair spilled into the building. They wore black bodysuits, the armored padding of which did nothing to hide the muscled physiques the skin-tight uniforms contained. These were not men from Earth. They were aliens. Worse still, they were the enemy.

Kalquorians.

Katherine's mind tried to accept what her eyes told her. Even with those massive bodies striding down the halls, sending nuns dashing in wide-eyed fear, she couldn't quite recognize the convent had been invaded. It made no sense Kalquorians would attack a religious colony of barely 200 women. Yet the men could be of no other species. No other race looked that much like Earthers.

Katherine's heart pounded to see the enemy in the flesh for the first time. They were so big, so monumental. She wasn't the only one overwhelmed by the sight of the behemoths storming down the corridor. The grim and foreboding Sister Bernadette was only a few feet from the oncoming aliens, holding her ground and waving her crucifix at them as if to ward them off. When they kept coming until they reached her, the nun collapsed to her knees in terror. Two Kalquorians immediately stooped next to her. One had a medical injector and he pressed it to her neck as she screamed. Her cry cut off sharply, and she started to crumple. One of the aliens deftly caught her and laid her gently to one side.

The Kalquorians kept coming, the first of them only half a dozen doors away from where Katherine stood. She had to run. She had to get to the other wing of the dorm. That was where the youngest women and girls of the order, the aspiring nuns, slept.

Katherine turned away from the oncoming Kalquorians, taking her first step towards the connecting hall that would take her past the infirmary and into the aspirants' wing. She froze instantly.

A couple of the older aspirants, Brenda and Ashley, were rounding the corner at a flat out run, screaming as they came. More of the colossal Kalquorians stalked into the corridor behind them.

The aliens were already in the aspirants' wing. They had the little ones.

Katherine's breath caught in her chest. She hardly noticed as one of the aliens held the feebly struggling Mother Superior while a companion pressed an injector to her neck. It was on the very edge of Katherine's consciousness that the head of the convent drooped in the muscled arms of a Kalquorian, who laid her carefully down onto the floor.

What mattered more than anything was the little ones were under attack. Locked cells wouldn't be doing them any good either. The aliens were pointing what had to be frequency disruptors at the doors and opening them to the screams of those trapped inside.

More and more of the aliens spilled into the corridor from the aspirants' wing. Katherine knew there was no hope as she watched them come. She couldn't stop the Kalquorians, couldn't rush past them without them catching and sedating her. Worst of all, she couldn't get to the children.

Tears were already spilling down her cheeks as she backed into her cell. "Door, close and lock."

The door obediently slid shut. Its beep told her it was now locked, but she knew it was only a matter of minutes, perhaps seconds, before the Kalquorians forced their way in and captured her too. And then ... she knew the stories of what Kalquorians did with Earther women, stories she'd not quite believed as true. And yet, faced with imminent capture herself, Katherine entertained the worst case scenario with mind-crumbling terror.

She staggered to her bedside and sank to her knees on the hard floor. Tears coursed down her cheeks as she clasped her hands together, leaning her elbows on the slightly softer surface of her narrow iron-frame bed. She listened to the continuing cries outside her room, the pleading voices growing fewer by the second.

Katherine thought of the girls, all her little ones. She especially thought of the youngest of the aspirants, the ones who had not even entered their teens yet. Darci and Marci Soames, sisters sent to the convent by a devout grandmother no longer physically capable of caring for them, were only twelve and nine years old. They must have been frightened to see the Kalquorians coming at them and absolutely terrorized as the aliens sedated them.

Had Katherine actually wanted to meet these creatures, these gargantuan Kalquorians who made helpless women and girls scream? Were these the men she'd gotten herself in so much trouble for, the reason she'd been exiled to Europa?

You wanted to meet with them. Talk to them. Reason with them. Remember the adage 'be careful what you wish for'? Well, your wish has come true. You will now come face to face with the Kalquorians.

Sobs shook Katherine's slender frame as she began to pray. "Heavenly Father, I am so very sorry for whatever I may have done to offend you, especially if this punishment was brought on by me. Please let them take me, if that is your will. Give me to these Kalquorians, but let the children stay safe. Keep these young girls and women safe, give them strength, let them take me instead God, please."

In her terror for her children, Katherine forgot that God would never punish anyone with such horrors. That was imperfect man's purview, not the Almighty's. Her horror had eclipsed her beliefs as she imagined tiny Marci cowering in the shadow of giant aliens towering over her, menacing her in ways too awful to comprehend.

Katherine knew she jabbered in her rising panic. Hearing the sound of a barking-like voice outside her door only fed the terror. They'd enter any moment now and take her like the others...

The girls! What would they do to her girls?

"Please, God, please, don't let the innocent be harmed, I beg of you."

Katherine's tears poured as she pleaded with all her might, thinking only of the young girls in her care that she could not save from whatever was happening to them.

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Imdiko Vadef followed his Nobek down the corridor of the building they had invaded, along with dozens of other Kalquorians. Miv, his clanmate of three years, waded confidently through the few panicked women left in the long stretch of hallway. These women were caught between his team and the other group moving towards them at the end of the hall. Most of the Earther females had fled into small rooms on either side. Vadef accompanied Miv into several of those rooms to catch and sedate the screaming females.

Rooms. How could anyone call such tiny, cramped spaces rooms? Vadef was undersized for a Kalquorian, not even an inch over six feet. Even so, he almost had to duck to get through the narrow doorways. He'd thought his clan's shared quarters in the spyship had been cramped, but this made their home feel positively spacious. Vadef had had closets bigger than these sleeping spaces of the Earther women. If he had to stay for more than a minute in such a space, he'd be screaming to be let out. He could only imagine how claustrophobic Miv found the rooms, having a good seven inches of height and much more bulk than Vadef.

The Imdiko clutched his sedative injector in a sweating grip. He was no medic, but he'd received emergency trauma training. It wasn't the usual protocol on a spyship for all personnel to have such instruction, but the head doctor Imdiko Degorsk insisted on it for theirs. The knowledge qualified Vadef to sedate the little female Earthers Miv caught.

One of the tiny sleeping room doors on Vadef's left opened. A woman, obviously panicked into attempting flight, darted out right in front of Miv. The Nobek grabbed her and tucked her struggling figure to his body, back to front. His arms encircled her, pinning her arms to her sides. The hold both incapacitated her and kept her from inadvertently hurting herself.

Vadef had a moment to compare the differences between Earther female and his Kalquorian clanmate. The woman's skin was pale to the point of milkiness. Its flush of pink

was all that kept her skin from matching the billowing gown she wore. The arms of Miv were a rich, deep brown in contrast, making the woman seem to glow against them.

The female's long hair was wild and uncombed. The invasion had occurred at what was apparently the colony's sleeping time. Her tangled tresses were nearly as brown as Miv's skin, except with reddish glints. Earther hair fascinated Vadef. Most Kalquorians had black hair of such deep ebony that the highlights were blue. Age or mutation could make that hair silvery or white, but that was all. Yet Earthers had various ranges of browns, reds, and yellows, with no two people possessing the exact same coloration.

The alien species' eyes were intriguing too. Their pupils were round and surrounded by irises of color as distinct as the Earthers' hair. The browns seemed to predominate, such as this one with her light, tan-colored eyes. Vadef had seen blue eyes as well, and even two pairs of green and one of gray. Kalquorians slit-pupil eyes were a uniform blue-purple. Only shape and size differentiated his from Miv's.

Earthers were usually not as muscular as Kalquorians either. Even the few surviving females of Vadef's race were powerfully built. Vadef himself had nowhere near the brawn of the average Kalquorian; certainly he possessed none of the robust fighter's heft that Miv had. Yet he was still a powerhouse compared to the female struggling in his clanmate's arms. Her frame was spare with the hewn look of one who had worked hard in her life. She was too spare really, almost approaching scrawniness.

With her wide, staring eyes and tiny face twisted in a rictus of panic, this poor creature looked very much like prey caught in the clutches of a predator. To liken Miv to a hunting animal was neither inaccurate nor insult.

Miv was of Kalquor's Nobek breed, the warrior-protectors of the Empire. That he belonged to the most ferocious category of Vadef's people was obvious in the wary and almost feral expression he usually wore. Miv's demeanor was the first thing one noticed about him. You had to get past that evaluating hunter's stare to see the large eyes, the broad, crooked nose that had been broken too many times to count, and a voluptuous surprise of a mouth.

Vadef doubted the Earther was getting past his clanmate's brutish aura at the moment, not when Miv was holding her helpless and waiting.

The poor female unleashed one final scream as Vadef painlessly injected the sedative into her neck. She lost consciousness an instant later, and Miv handed her off to him. The Imdiko looked at the now insensible face, which looked far lovelier without terror overcoming it.

He grimaced. Vadef was not a Nobek. He'd never frightened anyone in his life, and he didn't like that he scared these poor women.

Miv's hand squeezed his shoulder. His voice had a delightful gravel quality; one that Vadef felt scratched an itch deep in his ear. "It's all right, my Imdiko. We're not hurting them."

"I wish we could make them understand that." Vadef thought he might hear the screams for the rest of his life.

"They wouldn't listen. They are poisoned against us. Not to mention terrified at this moment."

Vadef nodded. Even the most benign invasion would be far from pleasant for those it was happening to. With a sigh he carried the woman to the wall of the corridor and laid her on the floor. Her white gown, while voluminous, still seemed inadequate protection for such a small creature. It wasn't cold in the corridor, but Vadef still had the urge to cover her in a blanket or slip a pillow under her head ... something that demonstrated care. However, he

needed to keep up with Miv, to finish this unpalatable work. The sooner this invasion of the tiny Earther colony was over, the sooner Vadeb could sit in front of a computer where he belonged.

Reluctantly leaving the woman in the growing line of sedated females, he followed Miv to a closed door. Either someone was inside or it hadn't been checked yet. The tiny sleeping rooms that were confirmed empty had the doors locked in the open setting. Miv pointed his frequency disruptor at the locking mechanism of the one in question. It beeped and slid open, and Miv put out a hand to warn Vadeb back.

The Imdiko obeyed and stepped aside, though he really couldn't imagine one of the miniscule Earthers being able to harm him. Vadeb didn't get to feel big often. Being near the small women gave him a sense of how his powerhouse of a clanmate must feel.

He was content to let his Nobek be a Nobek – protective, in other words. Miv stepped into the tiny rectangle of darkness beyond the door to restrain whoever might be inside. Vadeb thought the room must be empty since no screams issued from it.

Miv paused just inside and turned back to Vadeb with a confused look on his face. Curious, Vadeb stepped close to peer in past his clanmate's large body.

One of the women was in the room after all, kneeling next to the small excuse of a bed. Vadeb could make out little about her; all he could see was a large cascading mass of blond ringlets atop a hill of white fabric. Her head bowed over her fisted hands, and there was a breath of sound coming from her.

Vadeb approached quietly, moving so that he could see the peach-pale face between the curtains of hair. Miv stayed at his side, ready to snatch him from any danger that might suddenly appear. They both crouched low to look at the woman. Her delicate features, almost too fine to be solid, gave Vadeb the feeling of having become a giant brute. He'd never seen any living sentient that looked so fragile.

Her heart-shaped face was streaked with tears despite how tightly she squeezed her eyes shut. Plump petals of lips moved, creating a bare whisper of sound.

Even with a crease between her tightly drawn brows and the look of terrified misery on her face, she didn't look quite real to Vadeb. She was too lovely, too ethereal to be anything but a dream.

Miv whispered close to Vadeb's ear, though the Nobek seemed incapable of taking his eyes off the female as well. "Meditation? In the middle of an invasion?"

Vadeb shook his head. His voice was equally low, though he doubted the woman could speak Kalquorian. His caution, and most likely Miv's, came from not wanting to frighten her any more than she already had been. "I think she must be praying. She's probably appealing to her god to save her from us."

Research and information were Vadeb's specialties. On board a spyship that delved deep into Earther territory, he'd devoted himself to the alien enemy's culture these last few years.

"It smells like blood in here. I wonder if someone harmed her at some point." Miv's lips drew into a tight line. "And now we're frightening her. Who knows what she expects to happen at our hands?"

Vadeb knew his clanmate disliked making these women fearful as much as he did. As brutal as the Nobek was to enemies and his opponents in the fighting circle, he was conscientious to females. No one harmed women when Miv was around. He couldn't stand it.

The big man gave his clanmate a weary look. "Come on, my Imdiko. Let's get this over with."

Vadef edged closer to the woman's side. Unlike his silent Nobek, Vadef's boots made soft clicking sounds on the hard floor when he moved. As if in response to his footsteps, the woman's voice, pitched high in terror, rose loud enough to be heard for an instant.

"...the innocents, please dear Lord, keep them..."

Her voice lowered again, but her lips continued to move. She did not flinch as they closed on her, crouching on either side. Vadef put his lips close to her ear to murmur in her language.

"Matara? It is all right. We are not going to hurt you."

She didn't respond other than to have more tears creep out from beneath her tightly shut eyes. To Vadef she looked like a rendering of one of her religion's angelic beings. She was entirely too lovely to be mortal. The Imdiko felt worse about making this one cry than any of the others.

He tried to comfort her again. "Matara, I swear you won't be harmed. I am going to sedate you. That is all I am going to do, so please do not be afraid."

Miv said, "Go ahead, my Imdiko. The sooner you tranquilize her, the sooner she won't suffer any more fear."

Vadef sighed heavily. Seeing this one weep made his chest hurt. He definitely wanted to be in front of his computer back on the spyship. He was too damned softhearted to be on the front lines of this invasion shit.

He stood and squeezed her thin shoulder, still trying to offer some reassurance to the woman despite knowing he really couldn't. Miv swept her long curls aside, baring the side of her neck. Vadef pressed the cylinder of the sedating instrument against the slender column.

Her voice rose again with fear. "...and give me strength, O Lord, as you gave Moses as he wandered the desert..."

Unable to listen to that desperate tone any longer Vadef depressed the plunger, sending the tranquilizer into the female's body. She lost consciousness in the middle of a word, crumpling where she knelt.

Miv moved quickly to catch her before she could slide to the floor. In one smooth motion, he lifted her. She draped across his arms like a broken doll. For a moment he and Vadef didn't move. They simply stood there and looked at her pretty face framed by that froth of glorious golden hair.

Vadef wondered if he'd ever seen anyone so lovely. He was quite sure he hadn't. When Miv came out of his momentary daze and moved to take her out into the hall, Vadef kept close. He couldn't bear to lose sight of those ephemeral features. He watched her face almost breathlessly as they emerged from her dark sleeping room, to see if she was just as beautiful in the full light.

She was not. She was even more stunning under the brighter corridor lights, stealing his breath away for an instant. The only unflattering characteristic that he could assign to her was how painfully thin she seemed, though some of that could perhaps be attributed to the billowing swath of a gown she wore. Her face was too gaunt however, making her appear underfed.

Miv laid her on the floor alongside the wall like the rest of the sedated Earthers. He straightened next to Vadef and they stared down at her.

The Nobek's voice was surprisingly soft with wonder. "Did you know they were this lovely, my Imdiko?"

"I've seen vids, mostly of our empress, but – no. Seeing them up close is something much different."

Miv was taking a long time to move on. He was usually gung-ho to carry out orders. Being a convict under a sentence of military service left the Nobek feeling he had more to prove than most, making him one of the most loyal members of the spyship's complement of security. Yet he seemed as loathe as Vadeb to leave this wisp of female beauty behind.

Miv said, "I find most of them exquisite. This is the prettiest of them all, I think." He drew a deep breath and shook himself. "We'd better get going. It seems like most have been caught, but we need to finish the sweep."

Vadeb nodded, but he was again looking at how helpless and frail the tiny Matara looked. Damn it, he didn't just want to walk off and leave her lying on the floor like this.

He said, "Just one moment, my Nobek?"

Before Miv could answer, Vadeb went back into the little sleeping room they'd found her in. He grabbed the thin, rumpled blanket on her bed and pulled it off. Under Miv's questioning gaze, Vadeb went back out into the corridor and covered the golden-haired female from her chin to her toes, carefully tucking it all around her motionless body.

As he rose, he saw that others had taken note of what he'd done. Imdikos, mostly medics, hurried in and out of the other sleeping rooms, finding more blankets and covering the unconscious women. Even some of the Nobeks got into the act, and Vadeb had to suppress a smile. No doubt the protective warriors saw this as an opportunity to redeem their acts of taking such helpless creatures prisoners. It made Vadeb feel a little better about carrying out his own duty.

Miv nodded his approval, even letting a smile drift over his usually savage countenance. Vadeb noted all the screams had stopped, replaced by quiet mutterings from the Kalquorian crew. Perhaps they were done with the unpleasantness.

He smiled back at his clanmate. "All right, Miv. Let's see what's next."

Miv started to turn to lead the way, but then he looked at something over Vadeb's shoulder and he froze. His spine stiffened. "Weapons Commander Lidon and Captain Tranis are here."