

Clans of Europa
Bernadette

Chapter One

Nobek Halmiko stared at the Earther female who'd walked into the raucous bar. The Dantovonian space station Nove was a rowdy locale, worse than its parent planet's never-ending party atmosphere. It was certainly no place for the notoriously repressed Earther species. Especially one of their women.

Despite the reputation of the alien race's females, there was something about this Earther that shouted "don't fuck with me" as she paused a few feet inside the doorway. It had nothing to do with the scarred Nobek who walked in with her, nor their party of assorted species that included a couple of Isetacians, an Adraf, and a Yeknap clattering at their ankles, of all things. All the newcomers but the Nobek and human wandered into the bar, taking one of the few rickety, stained tables available.

The woman held the bar's patrons' attention. Conversation had quieted at her appearance, and Halmiko could understand why. Beyond the self-possessed attitude was a spare, athletic figure and a posture of regal assurance. At first glance, the dozen sex workers draped over would-be clients would have appeared more attractive, especially the three Plasians. A longer look at the Earther, however, paled them in comparison. In her dark blue uniform and her attitude that of a hunter queen, the human was all presence.

Talk ensued again among the gathered, as if in defense against such a noteworthy individual. People returned to their conversations, pretending not to keep her in their peripheral vision. Halmiko's attention remained openly fixed on the woman. He drank her in, from top to toe.

Her hair was the softest and loveliest attribute she possessed. Sable curls tumbled to her slender waist. They almost overwhelmed the planes of her face, which was made up of sharp cheekbones, a pointed nose, and dark eyes made darker by the rim of long lashes. She wasn't plain, but she wasn't precisely pretty either. Nonetheless, he appreciated her look. She possessed the avid intensity of a bird of prey.

He wondered anew as her assessing scan of the bar halted when it found him. She stared, as if she didn't have a riveting Nobek at her back already. She started toward Halmiko where he sat at the bar, her gaze steady. The other man followed, but he hung back a few feet.

All the surprises were nothing compared to the shock of her announcement, "Nobek Halmiko, it's about damned time I found you. You've been hard to track down."

He was too much of a Nobek to gape, but he blinked. "I'm to be found anywhere my cargo transport is. Who sent you?"

"I sent me. I'm looking for Imdiko Doljen. Your clanmate?"

He couldn't have been left more breathless if her Nobek companion had punched him in the gut. Doljen. After all these years, *Doljen* was a name with the power to curdle his guts.

"Who are you?" Growled between clenched teeth.

The Nobek behind her narrowed his eyes, ruining the illusion of a private conversation.

"Captain Bernadette Miller of the cargo transport *Rogue*." She crooked a brow at him. "I take it your clan hasn't managed to make up?"

Halmiko skipped the unlikelihood of an Earther female captaining a ship. She apparently had some inkling of his clan's disposition and history. His ears were still ringing from the name she'd spoken. "How do you know Doljen?"

“I met him during the Earth-Kalquorian war.” Though her severe aspect failed to ease, she bit her lips together for an instant, as if to stop herself from laughing. “We grew well acquainted. I owe him a debt of gratitude. Do you know where I can find him?”

At last, his astonishment eased enough for him respond with more sense than he’d shown thus far. “I have no idea.”

“Have you seen him since Kalquor’s civil war?”

An image of Doljen flashed in his mind’s eye. The handsome Imdiko, silent and refusing to look at Halmiko despite his attempts to draw him out. Turning from him. Walking away for the final time.

Anger, brought on a wave of hurt and guilt, blazed for a second before the old hopelessness tamped it down.

“I saw him once, between wars. He wouldn’t speak to me. Since I can take a hint, I haven’t bothered him since.” He grabbed his half-filled glass of bohut and downed it in a single gulp. He signaled for another from the Tratsod bartender.

“Where was this?”

Her interrogation was getting on his nerves. “Darkori Station. It’s a military installation. Part of the Imperial Fleet.”

The woman...Bernadette...scowled. “He’s no longer a member of the fleet. He left it after the civil war.”

More likely, he’d been discharged. Depending on how Doljen had conducted himself, it might have been dishonorably. “Well, you’re more up to date on his whereabouts than I am then. I guess I can’t help you where he’s concerned. Anything else I can do for you?”

He wasn’t feeling amorous, due to her digging up a past he didn’t want to think. Halmiko gave her a leer anyway to suggest what he could help her with.

She couldn’t be bothered to respond to his invitation. “Would your Dramok know where Doljen is?”

If Doljen was painful to think about, Tumsa was downright agonizing. Halmiko gulped the bohut he’d been brought and briefly contemplated throwing it at the Nobek bodyguard, or whatever he was. A fight might shut the woman up and make Halmiko feel better. Though Captain Miller’s muscle had kept a discreet distance and the bar had resumed its earlier cacophony of loud conversations, he’d no doubt heard every word of their conversation.

Too many people hearing his business made Halmiko grumpy.

“Last I heard, Tumsa was on Haven. Why don’t you try your luck there?” He turned his back on her and debated the wisdom of another drink. In his mood, it was a bad idea. Having to think about his clanmates wasn’t giving him warm fuzzies either.

“You Kalquorians love your grudges, don’t you? I thought my people were bad.” Her voice was at his shoulder.

He turned his head. Damn, she had pretty eyes. Dark and fathomless. She was close enough to grab and kiss. If he did that, at least she wouldn’t keep throwing words sharp as blades at him.

A low growl sounded behind him, just loud enough for him to catch the warning from the other Nobek.

Halmiko kept the urge to fight at bay by the skin of his teeth. He ignored the bodyguard. “Matara. Excuse me, Captain. I have nothing to say about my clanmates. Take that however you wish. If you want to keep hanging around me, do something useful like jerk me off or suck my cocks. Otherwise, leave me alone.”

Her arm moved toward him. For an electric moment, Halmiko thought she was taking him up on the option of jerking him off.

Instead, she tapped the com she held against his similar device, half-exposed in its pouch on his belt. “You now have my contact information in case you decide to be helpful instead of a bitter asshole. I’ll be in dock for another three days.”

She stepped back, and Halmiko had the irrational urge to grab her and pull her close again. “Hey, hold on.”

“Yes?” Her brow lifted again. She wore a patient but remote expression that irritated him for some reason.

“Let me give you my information too.” He pulled his com free and clicked it to share.

“Why?”

Because you’re the most interesting woman I’ve come across. Because you’ve seen more of Doljen in eight years than I have. Because he talked to you.

Halmiko said none of that. He tapped his com to hers despite her holding it close to herself, not offering it. Her distant expression never changed.

Annoyed by her lack of reaction, he told her, “Maybe you’ll be up for someone new and exciting to fuck. Your present company looks a bit worn out. Used up. My cocks are at your service.”

He thought he heard a snort from the other Nobek. The bodyguard was scarred and older, but more of the warrior type than Halmiko. A long way from used up, but Halmiko was still half-hoping for a fight. Win or lose, it would be good to punch out the burst of angst the woman had woken.

As for Bernadette, she looked him up and down, assessing. She shrugged. “You and your cocks couldn’t handle me for a single second.”

With that, she turned and walked out. The chuckling bodyguard followed her.

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“That was a useless encounter after all the years of hunting him down.” Bernadette sighed as she stomped along Station Nove’s corridor, heading to the dock where the *Rogue* was berthed. She passed several alcoves where the homeless denizens of several different worlds curled to snatch minutes of sleep before station security roused them out. It was always the same on Nove: a palpable line between the haves and have-nots. A large number of the have-nots were Earther.

Nobek Kom kept pace at her side with an almost lazy saunter, courtesy of his much longer legs. “He looked stunned when you asked about his Imdiko.”

“Did he? I couldn’t tell.”

“Nobeks are trained to cover up their weaknesses. If I weren’t one myself, I might have missed it too.” The *Rogue*’s security head licked his lips. “He had a shitload of weapons on him. Mostly blades.”

“Stop drooling. You have plenty of knives and such of your own. Doljen’s name got a reaction, huh?” She wondered if she could use that to gain Halmiko’s help in tracking the missing Imdiko down.

It had been seven years since she’d said goodbye to Doljen, six of which had been spent on a succession of cargo ships. Always on the move, always with an eye out for any hint of his whereabouts. A couple years prior, when she’d learned and earned enough to captain her own

vessel, she'd been sure she'd run across him or his estranged clanmates quickly. Halmiko's name had shown up in conversations and crew manifests she'd gotten her hands on, but the succession of vessels he worked security for failed to cross paths with the *Rogue*. Of Dramok Tumsa, there'd been no word after Kalquor's civil war. He'd ducked into the private sector, and his trail disappeared.

Haven. Halmiko said he was on *Haven*. She'd have to follow up on that.

Then, there was Doljen himself. Her former warden and lover had evaporated into thin air. As a spyship operative, his work had been necessarily secretive, but for there to be no sign of his existence beyond his dismissal from the fleet in seven years? It smacked of foul play or, as much as she hated to admit it, a man determined to remain unfound.

"It's so frustrating," she growled to Kom as they entered the quiet bay where the *Rogue* was berthed. It wasn't scheduled for offload until the next day. Only station maintenance personnel were to be seen. "I finally luck into the same station as Halmiko, and he turns out to be worthless, except for bad come-ons."

"Who knows? Maybe he's an exciting fuck. He was a hell of a kurble player in his day. Halmiko's someone you can brag about having taken to bed."

"Seriously, Kom? What about me suggests I'd consider it?"

"You might as well get something out of this so-far pointless search, Captain." His head swiveled on wide shoulders, taking in their surroundings. Nobeks were always on the lookout for trouble. Usually, the warrior breed of Kalquor hoped they'd find it.

"You can take him up on his offer."

"I might. He's my favorite player of all time." As if he hadn't told her that over and over. "He's a living legend. And a handsome guy."

"I suppose." Halmiko *was* handsome in a rough sort of way. He wore the aura of a tough customer, but the almost-decent sort. He had the look of a man who'd beat a guy to bloody bits for disrespecting his mother.

Handsome Nobeks faded to the recesses of her brain. Bernadette's gaze was all for her ship as they approached it. The *Rogue* was an older craft, Earther salvage from after her former home's war with Kalquor. Big and clumsy compared to most ships of the member planets of the Galactic Council, it had been a bargain when she'd discovered it being auctioned off. She'd been shocked it was in such good repair considering the price she'd paid, but most were unimpressed by vessels that relied so heavily on hybrid mechanical-computerized engines. Unlike Bernadette, who'd grown up in garages that serviced older vehicles, techno-geeks were turned off by moving parts.

The *Rogue* wielded impressive firepower too. Bernadette was certain that was what had lured Kom into joining her crew of fifteen between the Earth-Kalquor war and his empire's civil war. The *Rogue* could dare shipping routes known for Tragoom and pirate activity and emerge relatively unscathed. Thanks to the *Rogue's* weapons and Kom's expertise, Bernadette had successfully run blockades during the Kalquorian civil war, shipping supplies to siege-weary colonies that had remained loyal to the Imperial government. Haven, where Dramok Tumsa supposedly lived, had been among such colonies.

Her ship was big, it was awkward, but it was hers. She loved every inch of it.

"Am I right in guessing you'll be researching Haven's population in hopes of locating the Dramok?" Kom asked as they neared the ship.

“Of course. I swear, if I find out I’ve passed more than two words with Dramok Tumsa and never knew it when we dropped supplies on Haven during the war, I’ll lose my mind. What about you? You’re not touring the station tonight?”

Kom sighed. He had a fruitless search of his own, with less hope of success than Bernadette. “Is there any point? It’s too big, unless you decide to take a month’s layover.”

“Can’t do it, big guy. I have bills to pay, including your salary. I also see a large number of refugees who need a ride off this hellhole of a station.”

“Yeah, yeah. I might head out again in an hour or so and drink myself stupid rather than face the disappointment.”

Bernadette slapped his acre-wide back in sympathy. Kom might hit the bars, all right, but even certain failure wouldn’t keep him from looking for the Earther man who’d won his heart.

Two men. Two disappearances. Two lovelorn people trying to track them down.

“We’re crazy, aren’t we, Kom? I knew Doljen a little more than a couple of weeks. You exchanged barely more than a few meaningful stares with that Larsen guy. Yet here we are years later, tearing up the known galaxy, looking for them.”

His silence was no surprise. She hadn’t expected him to answer. Despite his dogged search, he wasn’t given to sentimentality.

He shocked her a few seconds later. “We’ll regret never finding out if what we felt then was real. It feels like it was. It damned near chokes me, it’s so real. Even if I find Matt and figure out I’ve been an idiot all along, it’s better than wondering. It has to be. Right?”

She thought about Doljen, and a familiar ache woke in her chest. It was the pain of emptiness, of a piece of her heart that had been torn away.

“Right.”