



A Mate for Vasek (Tallean Mercenaries #11)

Author: *Lynnea Lee*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Stranded at the edge of the galaxy, I'll do anything to return to Earth! But first, I'm stolen right before my escape plan and dragged through the alien wilderness. Now, I'm payment for a medic... who doesn't even want me!

Vasek can't wait to drop me off at his next destination, if we even make it there alive. The ruthless thugs after us seem to think I'm the key to untold fortunes. But I'm not! I'm just a girl who wants to go home.

The hyper-protective medic isn't just my best bet for survival; his chiseled form sets my body ablaze, and his kindness fills my soul with hope. And the more time I spend with Vasek, the more I wonder if Earth is really where I want to be.

This action-packed and steamy romance can be read as a standalone or as part of a series. HEA guaranteed.

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Vasek

“About time,” Vasek grumbled as the pounding at the door echoed through the room he’d rented.

It wasn’t the male, pale and with a badly bound wound on his leg, that surprised him.

No, that was normal and expected; people didn’t come to him unless they were injured or dying.

It was the enticingly sweet fragrance that blew in with the iron tang of blood that had him taking a step back, even as his newest patient stumbled in, pulling a tiny human female behind him.

This must be the source of the wonderful scent.

She had tanned skin, much like their females, but that was where the similarities ended.

Sunny streaks of yellow brightened her hair.

She was short, and one might mistake her for a youngster if it weren’t for her developed hips and breasts, which rose and fell with each breath she took.

Vasek frowned at the large rash that covered the female’s legs and the feverish look on her face. This female was very sick.

Vasek had met Bakum only once before when he'd sewn several fingers, stored on ice of course, back onto Bakum's business partner's hand. This was a common way Vasek found new clients working as an independent medic in the outer planets.

Bakum shoved the female to the floor beside the makeshift examination table, a converted inn bed Vasek had lined with protecti-plas so he wouldn't get blood on the mattress.

Vasek had set up the room in his usual fashion, moving the double beds provided by the inn to opposite sides of the room, and creating a makeshift clinical setting.

This wasn't his usual office. However, "usual" would be a misnomer. He rarely stayed in one place for any length of time, preferring to cycle through his safe houses. It was just better that way.

Vasek didn't like how rough Bakum was with the female. "It's easier for me to work on you if she isn't underfoot. I'll take a look at your human after I finish with you."

"No, not her. She does not need a medic," Bakum said, even as the female fell from her sitting position to lie curled up on the floor. He glared at her like he thought she'd done it on purpose.

But Vasek knew better; the female was too weak to even sit upright. "She does not look well."

"I will not pay for it."

Vasek shrugged, hiding his disgust. "Your choice. She is not my investment. Either way, she can't sit here."

He never understood the need to control or own another intelligent being, but the type

who refused to care for their possessions were the worst of the lot. Bakum did not deserve this female.

Ignoring the other male's glare, Vasek helped the human up before leading her to a soft armchair next to the bed Vasek had been using as his own the past few nights.

Despite her round bosom and hips, the female was so slight that he worried she'd fall apart right then and there.

She was also freezing, so he grabbed the blanket and tucked it around her.

Her eyes, which had been downcast until now, looked up at him, and Vasek's breath hitched in his chest at her bright green eyes. This luminous green, while ordinary in Talleans, was less commonplace in humans. She was only missing the reflective membrane that helped Talleans see better in the dark.

He blinked hard at the vulnerability that shone through the glassiness. Brushing a finger surreptitiously over her cheek, he found it hot, despite how cold her body was. She was feverish.

A sense of protectiveness rushed over him.

Fuck Bakum. This female needed help and she would get it, whether the asshole liked it or not.

He'd much prefer to treat her first, but made his way back to the male stinking up his temporary clinic.

"Now let's see this wound. And tell me how you got it without telling me any details."

Vasek never wanted the details. Details were what got people in his profession into trouble. The fact that everyone knew he refused to listen to details meant people rarely came after him for information, and those who did only did so once.

The strict rules, including an ironclad confidentiality clause, kept him neutral in any and all conflicts, and that was good for his health.

Those smart enough to survive in a place like Vosthea, his home base, respected his wishes and knew not to force him to pick sides, lest they ended up bleeding out on his doorstep.

In fact, just last year he'd patched one guy up, only to turn around and work on the very male who'd caused the injury. They'd both come to him not knowing the other was there, but had the courtesy to call a truce while he worked on them.

It was also expected that his clients would not knowingly bring trouble to Vasek's door.

And if the patient's pursuers were one of Vasek's clients, not uncommon in these parts, they were to wait at least half a day after the patient left Vasek's care to make their attack if they found their mark.

Breaking any of these rules meant they found themselves ignored the next time they called with a grievous injury.

No sane male wanted to search for a new medic when they were at death's door.

Too bad there were plenty of insane characters here in the outer planets.

Luckily, those types often brought about their own demise rather quickly and weren't a nuisance for long.

Which was to say that very few people crossed him, but it did happen.

In fact, that was why he was in New Rhea right now.

Things in Vosthea had gotten dicey after the Dominion came knocking, demanding information on a male he'd treated.

The Dominion assholes had given up after Vasek called in a favor from a ruthless but honorable male he'd saved a few years back, but Vasek preferred to skip the planet for a little while until everything died down.

He'd been here for almost a month now, hopping from safehouse to safehouse between calls for his services, and had just finished packing up and was ready to make the trip back to Vosthea when he'd gotten the call from Bakum.

Bakum was a fussy patient, twitching and flinching constantly, making it difficult to work, and Vasek had had to give him a sedative to clean out the knife wound and patch him up.

The sedative also meant that Bakum was knocked out cold, meaning Vasek had a chance to check up on the little human female.

Okay, so he might have done that on purpose.

Just because Bakum wouldn't pay for a treatment didn't mean Vasek would let her die. And by the looks of it, if he didn't treat her, she would die. He was cutthroat when it came to business, but he had a heart.

The female's small frame shook as he approached, and a scent of fear stung his nose.

Dawn

Dawn looked around the unfamiliar room. She'd been going in and out of consciousness and had no idea how she'd ended up here. The last time she was fully aware of her situation, Bakum had been dragging her through the New Rhean wilderness.

Bakum had been adamant that New Rhea didn't have many dangerous beasts, and he'd been right. The only close call she'd had was when that ancient-looking crocodile-meets-sturgeon monster thing had tried to eat her while they were crossing the river.

But what Bakum hadn't accounted for were the sheer number of dangerous plants they'd have to go through.

One of these plants had given her that painful rash on her leg that felt like it was going to burn her up from the inside.

She'd screamed when she'd touched it, and Bakum had gotten angry.

He'd picked her up to shake her like he usually did when he was unhappy with her, and had brushed up against the nettle-like leaves.

The big brute of a Tallean had wailed like a baby.

Bakum's rash had healed up the next day, but hers had stayed. The worst part started when the pain of the rash subsided. Her whole body ached, and even breathing hurt from how tired her muscles were. She felt feverish and chilled all at the same time. And she kept passing out.

Bakum hated that, since they were technically on the run, but no amount of shaking woke her. So he'd dragged her along.

Dawn was surprised he hadn't just taken the valuable dress she was wearing and left her to die in the wilderness.

But that was most likely because he'd spent so much trying to evade their pursuers already and needed to sell her to recoup costs.

He knew Dawn had been important to her previous owner, and he knew that their pursuers were after her as well as him, but he didn't know why, and she wasn't stupid enough to tell him.

So now he had to drag her around while running for his life.

Ha! Served him right for killing Kotch and ruining her only chance at getting back to Earth.

When the idiot had gotten stabbed on his way back into the port, Dawn had hoped that he'd find a medic, and fed up with her illness, get both of them fixed up. But nope. That asshat was stupid and cheap. She should've known he wouldn't spare any credits for her.

The only thing she had to be thankful for was that Bakum was better than the guys who were after them. Those thugs, her previous owner's newest hires, were total monsters. They'd been literal pirates before taking this job. Really bad pirates, since they struggled to make decent credits.

With Kotch gone, Dawn thought the pirates would go right back to plundering and murdering, but instead, Kotch's friend Morad had rallied the motley crew, and they were coming after Bakum and her.

She guessed it wouldn't matter much now.

She'd heard the medic's words, and they'd confirmed what she already knew: she was really sick.

She was freezing all the time, and everything hurt.

And just staying awake was difficult. Her life over the past few days was just a series of memories, a chunk here, a sliver there.

She was surprised she was even still alive.

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What she hated the most wasn't even dying. It was that she was going to die here. In New fucking Rhea. And right before her chance to get back to Earth.

A few weeks ago, Dawn had caught news of a group of human slaves planning a ship heist. Unlike many in these parts who tried to escape to Reka 5, these future runaways planned on flying the ship to Earth. They had a route and everything. Even figured out ways to refuel on the way.

Dawn had heard from plenty of other survivors that Earth wasn't a good place to return to anymore.

And everyone knew the best place for displaced humans to go was Reka 5.

The colony, where humans and Talleans had equal standing and ownership of intelligent beings was completely outlawed, was just a hop and a skip from New Rhea. But she wasn't interested.

There was also Kean's compound. According to a few people she'd spoken to, if you made it to his compound, the drug lord-cum-ruler of Vosthea would offer you a job, an actual credit-paying job, and protect you from whomever you escaped from.

But Dawn wasn't interested in that either. She just wanted to see home one last time before she croaked. And this outlandish escape plan had been her chance.

Too bad Bakum had shown up and fucked it all to hell by murdering her owner and dragging her all over this backwater hellscape over some stupid disagreement.

Now she was going to die without ever making it home. She didn't even know what day it was. There was a big chance she'd already missed the proverbial boat, and her friends were already up in the great unknown, making the big trek home.

Dawn forced herself to be grateful for all the little things, like the fact that she was sitting on a comfortable chair instead of the hard floor, and the fact that the blanket around her smelled really nice. Was that the medic's scent? It was so much better than dirt and sweat.

The medic knelt in front of her. Unlike Bakum, this Tallean male had kind eyes. His face was another matter. Several scars interrupted his right cheek crease, giving his otherwise handsome face a dangerous look. The creases were the most inhuman part of Tallean faces.

"What's your name?" he asked, looking directly at her.

All Talleans had green eyes, though they varied in shade.

Bakum had yellow-green eyes, and her now-dead owner had bright, emerald-green ones.

But Dawn had never seen this particular shade before.

The medic's eyes were so dark she would've thought they were black if it weren't for the glint of green that shone through when he tilted his head.

Then, realizing she was staring, Dawn cast her eyes down.

They landed on the large claws that stuck out of the front of his thick-soled boots.

That was one part of the aliens she'd never gotten used to.

It was hard not to be afraid of those claws when she'd witnessed them tearing someone apart more than once. She looked down at her hands instead.

"What's your name?" he asked again in his rich baritone.

"Dawn."

"Dawn. I'm Vasek. When did this illness start?"

Did Vasek plan on treating her anyway? Or was he just curious?

Dawn hesitated, unsure how to answer. The days had been a blur, and she hadn't been keeping track. She looked over at Bakum, who was lying quietly on the bed across the room. He wasn't awake, but she didn't know how close he was with the medic.

Was it safe to let the medic know she'd been stolen? Would he tell Bakum she squealed?

"Shortly after Bakum ... acquired me. About ten days ago."

His brows raised at her hesitation before the word "acquired," but he didn't push as he pulled the blanket away, then frowned at the state of her clothes.

The simple long-sleeved shift dress was shaped like the ones for slaves, but the edges of the sleeves and hem had been decorated with gems and jewels.

But right now, the whole affair was dirty and ripped; there was mud caked on the gems at the wrists, and Bakum had sold several of the large jewels on the bottom hem to pay their way as they ran from their pursuers.

Ever since being taken from Earth, Dawn had been paraded around like a prize but

treated like shit by every Tallean male she'd met. Except for Bakum. He just treated her like shit. But then again, all they'd done so far was run.

Dawn's first job after getting abducted from Earth was as a prize to a Dominion captain for a job well done.

That hadn't lasted long. He'd lost her in a bet during a night out drinking and partying during shore leave—or was that planet leave since they were in space?

This new guy had taken her to the outer planets, then promptly gotten murdered by a rival.

She'd stayed with the rival for a while, until he was murdered as well. Notice a pattern yet?

Then, she'd been picked up by the barkeep, who'd sold her to a small-time arms dealer who supplied some very unsavory types. She stayed with Kotch, the arms dealer, the longest. She didn't mind him too much.

For one thing, Kotch already had two Fiete girls keeping his home clean and his bed warm. He'd only picked up Dawn because human females were all the rage, and he'd wanted to show her off at the warehouse office. The fact that she helped him organize his work and keep his records was just a bonus.

During this time, Kotch had several strokes of phenomenal luck and made a shit-ton of credits.

And since he'd bought her right before the first instance, he'd been convinced that she was good luck, at least for his business.

But she wasn't, because he was now dead, and his crew was after her and Bakum, the

newest in her long line of asshole Tallean males.

The medic lifted her from the chair effortlessly and deposited her at the edge of the bed before picking up something that looked like a scanner.

After warming the metal part of the device quickly with his hands, the medic carefully lifted her dress and held the device to her chest, moving it around to cover the whole area, before doing the same on her back.

Then he read the report on his screen, frowning, before continuing to examine her with gentle hands and finally scanning the rash on her leg.

“You’ve been in the wilds.”

Dawn looked down at her dirt-caked dress. Yeah, no shit, Sherlock.

“I have detected multiple issues. The first is from the toxin of a common noxious weed that grows nearby. It doesn’t usually affect Talleans long term, unless their immune system is depressed.

And even then, it usually only shows as skin rashes.

It seems to affect humans more strongly.

But there is something else. Did you drink from any puddles in the wilds? ”

She thought of the river crossing where she’d almost gotten eaten.

She’d almost drowned, too. It was the only part of the river without a strong current, but it had been murky and stank horribly.

She'd gotten several vile mouthfuls of that water.

The storm that rolled in shortly after that had washed her clean, but that had meant she'd been cold and miserable.

"I accidentally swallowed some disgusting water when we crossed the river," she admitted. "But no puddles."

"You were in the water. That explains it. The bacterium is easy to deal with. You'll be feeling yourself again soon."

He turned to prepare the medication, and Dawn reached for the gem barely hanging on near the rip at the hem, removing it and rubbing it as clean as she could with her palm.

This one was a dark red. She'd learned in the years since leaving Earth that diamonds were plentiful and easy to create, and the Talleans usually favored gems that were more colorful.

Not every gem on this dress was real; Kotch didn't have enough credits and so had the tailor use a few fakes to fill in the pattern at the back.

Dawn knew which ones were fake, but Bakum didn't.

One of the gems he'd used to barter with the last guy had been fake, but the fool hadn't known either.

This one in her hand was real, and it was a decent-sized stone too.

Putting jewels on a favored female was a common way for Talleans to show their wealth, and yes, that included slaves like her. It was like saying, "Hey look, I'm so

rich that even my slaves are dripping in gems.” Dawn had always thought this custom stupid, until now.

Kotch had owned one and only one such dress, and he’d had her wear it only when he had meetings.

She’d sit there looking pretty when she wasn’t pouring drinks or wheeling out the delivery.

He’d called it a business expense. It was during one such meeting where things soured and Bakum pulled a blaster on Kotch, killing him.

Her life had been full of thugs, thieves, and murderers ever since she left Earth. But this medic was opting to treat her, even though Bakum had been clear he wouldn’t pay him, so that was new. Sadly, it was the nicest thing anyone had done for her in a very long time. He deserved this gem.

The medic was back, holding a device that looked more like a gun than a syringe. Dawn narrowed her eyes at it, and Vasek reacted with a throaty chuckle. “It looks worse than it is. I promise.”

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Vasek

Vasek couldn't help but notice as Dawn's eyes darted over his shoulder at the male still passed out on the other bed, as if checking to make sure Bakum was still asleep before holding her palm out.

It was a small gem from her dress. Unlike the ones still caked in mud on her outfit, this one sparkled like the light reflecting off her golden hair.

"Thank you," she said, her voice so hoarse it was barely more than a whisper. She cleared her throat, then continued. "The gems on this dress aren't really his. He doesn't even know which ones are real. This one's real."

Interesting. Vasek was already suspecting that this female hadn't been acquired legitimately.

The first hint was the fact that she was so badly cared for.

If Bakum had paid for her with his hard-earned credits, he wouldn't be so sloppy in her care.

He'd want Vasek to heal her to maintain his investment.

Then there was the way she'd hesitated when she'd said that he'd "acquired" her.

Dawn hadn't said it outright, but she hadn't needed to. Everything added up: he'd stolen her.

“Who is your rightful owner?”

She hesitated. “Kotch. He’s dead.”

“Kotch. I know ... knew,” he corrected in light of the new developments, “him. Arms dealer. Works with pirates and thieves.”

She nodded.

Vasek had heard rumors that he’d come into a large sum of credits recently.

The dress and the presence of Dawn meant the rumors were most likely true.

Even if some of the gems weren’t real, the dress had probably cost him a small fortune.

He’d be screaming from his grave if he could see the state of it now.

Bakum had taken the female out into the wilds with it and hadn’t even bought her new clothes to change into. What an idiot!

Out here, however, possession often trumped ownership. With Kotch dead, Bakum essentially owned her—and the dress—by default, even though she’d come into his possession through illegitimate means.

Take her! Keep her for yourself.

Vasek pushed away the silly thoughts. He wasn’t looking for a female. Never would be. And he hoped the Stars never cursed him with a mate.

“Why did you hesitate before telling me it was Kotch?”

“Kotch wasn’t official either, but I was with him for the longest and most recently.

And he actually paid for me. I’ve passed through many hands.

My last official owner was a drunk who won me off a Dominion captain.

” She held the red gem to him again. “Please take it. You didn’t need to treat me, but you did.

Bakum will just think we lost it along the way.

” She gestured to her hem where a smaller gem dangled by a thread.

He sent her a single nod of thanks, then took it from her. What Bakum wouldn’t miss wouldn’t hurt him.

A sudden chime from the room’s comm system had Vasek frowning.

He was not expecting anyone. He ignored it and went to check on Bakum instead.

He wanted the male out of his room so he could leave New Rhea.

He’d already stayed longer than he wanted.

But at the same time, Bakum's leaving would mean he’d be taking the female with him.

And that, for some reason, did not sit well with Vasek.

He told himself it was because the healer in him wanted to be sure the female was well before leaving his care.

The chime rang again repeatedly, and this time he did answer. It was the reception, which was odd, because he usually chose temporary clinic locations that were quite hands-off when it came to service. It was best, considering the type of people he often treated.

“An angry group is demanding to know your room number,” the young male whispered. In the background, there were several angry voices. “They say you’re hiding someone they need. We told them you’re not here. But they won’t listen, and security can’t hold them for long.”

Fuck! What rotten luck. If what Dawn said was true, then this was the arms dealer’s crew. And while Vasek could’ve counted on Kotch to abide by his rules, he wasn’t so sure about this group of former pirates.

And this was why he always gave those working at the front, as well as the heads of security and the guard, extra credits during his stay. Advance warnings like these came in handy.

Vasek glanced over at Bakum. If he’d lied and brought trouble here knowingly, that meant their agreement was forfeit. But maybe he should give the male the benefit of the doubt; Bakum could have truly believed that he’d shaken his tail before coming.

He concentrated, trying to remember who in Kotch’s crew he might know.

Perhaps he hadn’t switched out his whole crew before he croaked.

There was a male named Morad. He and Kotch had been friends from before he started his arms business.

Vasek had put in a robotic eye for him several years ago.

With any luck, Morad would be the leader now. That would work in Vasek's favor.

It was worth the risk. And even if Morad wasn't here, their disagreement was with Bakum and not him; Vasek could turn this into a future opportunity.

"Hold them off for a few more minutes. I will be right down."

Vasek hung up, then turned to Dawn, who had a worried look on her face. He noticed a small pile of dried mud on the bed next to her. She'd been picking at the hem nervously. "Did Bakum know they were after him when he came here? Tell me truthfully, and I will ensure no harm comes to you."

Dawn

It wasn't difficult to choose a side. Dawn had absolutely no loyalties either way, and Bakum had been nothing but a prick to her, while this medic had shown her kindness.

She wasn't saying he was a good guy; not by a long shot.

No male Talleans she'd met since leaving Earth had been "good," and Dawn doubted this Vasek was any different.

But it was survival of the fittest out here, and Dawn knew that her chances would be higher with the medic rather than with Bakum.

She hadn't noticed it at first, but now that she had a chance to look around, she realized that most of his equipment was already packed up and he'd only taken out what he needed to treat Bakum and herself.

This was a temporary location, which meant that he was planning on leaving soon.

If she played it right, he might take her with him.

Somewhere along the way, they'd removed her identification chip, so technically, she could run and no one would be able to track her.

But Dawn had been on New Rhea long enough to know that she'd never stand a chance if she did.

She needed protection, at least until she figured out a way back to Earth.

"He knew," she said quietly. "They've been after us since he killed Kotch."

"Did he believe they were off his back?"

"No. He knew they were following us. He thought he'd be gone by the time they showed up." Leaving the medic to deal with the mess. "You said you'll make sure no harm comes to me, but if they get their hands on me, I'll be harmed."

He grunted. "I cannot keep you. But I will drop you off somewhere safe." He must've seen the look of doubt on her face, because he chuckled and said, "We will discuss where such a location is later. Stay here." Vasek eyed Bakum. "Do not let him leave if he wakes. He has not paid."

Then the medic stepped outside, probably to deal with Kotch's crew. Dawn didn't know if that was stupidity or a calculated risk. Whatever it was, the medic was awfully calm for someone faced with this complication.

Kotch's ex-pirate crew would not honor any deal that didn't immediately benefit them, and right now, the two keys required to open Kotch's safe were their prime objective.

The first key was with Bakum. The idiot thought it was the only key and had no idea that he'd also need a code.

And the only person alive right now who knew the code was Kotch's favorite slave.

Morad was sure that was Dawn. But he was wrong.

Dawn had no clue what the code was. And Bakum had no idea about the code at all.

But it didn't matter if Dawn knew the code or not; her life would be basically over if those monsters got their hands on her.

But this medic hadn't hurt her yet. And his hands were so gentle when he touched her, so unlike any other Tallean she'd met.

And of course he'd offered to heal her without promise of payment.

Of all the rocks and hard places she had to choose from, he was her best bet if she wanted to survive and see Earth again one day.

Earth. That was her ultimate goal. All she wanted to do was go home. And sticking with Vasek might get her closer to that goal. That was, if Vasek didn't get himself killed right the fuck now.

If she were in better shape, she might have run, but currently, it was difficult to even stand.

And while whatever medicine Vasek had given her was already working, making her feel less feverish and reducing the full-body ache that had made it so hard to even breathe, she knew she was far from strong.

Still, maybe it was best if she weighed her options, just in case it was one of the thugs who opened the door instead of Vasek.

She heaved herself up and made her way to the door to the balcony.

Yup, walking still took way more effort than it should.

They were on the second floor, and technically, she might make it if she tried to climb. Dying from a fall was better than ending up in those pirates' hands.

“What are you doing, female?”

The angry-sounding words had Dawn whipping around to see Bakum already behind her. He grabbed her by the hair and pulled her away from the door.

“Trying to escape?” Bakum surveyed the room. “Where is the medic?”

Just then, the door opened and Vasek stomped in. Seeing Bakum with his hands still in Dawn's hair, his face turned red. He wasn't just angry, he was furious. The tender medic who'd carefully treated her was gone, and in his place was something altogether much more terrifying.

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Vasek

It wasn't the knowledge that Bakum had lied, but rather the sight of the other male holding the human female by the hair that sent Vasek half into bloodlust. His cheek creases had already unfolded, and his fangs started to elongate before he stopped himself.

This was not his usual calm self, and he didn't understand the sudden protectiveness that surged through him at the sight of her in danger. But now was not the time to worry about that, not when he still had Bakum to deal with.

The male cowered back, and Dawn scrambled aside the moment Bakum released her. The sharp tang of fear emanated from her.

"You lied," Vasek gritted, the words distorted since his fangs were still long. "I asked if you were being followed, and you said you were not."

"I wasn't." Bakum had recovered and was now standing his ground.

"Then why is there a band of pirates waiting to get their hands on you?"

Bakum's eyes went wide. "They're here already!"

"You knew they were coming."

"I thought I lost them. I swear."

“Lies. They followed you to this port, and you knew. You are lucky I am a patient male, and that I have a history with Morad. Or else you would have died in your sleep. Morad will not attack me, but you are another matter. You are fair game one galactic hour after you leave this establishment.”

“What? The rule is half a day!”

“My clients follow my rules out of respect and fear of being left to bleed out in the future. I do not guarantee safety. And you lied, so the rules are forfeit. You’re lucky I am not handing you over for some extra credits. You still owe me for my services.”

The male reached for his bag, but instead of taking out his credit chip, he simply tossed the bag over his back.

Then he grabbed Dawn roughly and turned her before ripping off one of the large gems from the back of her dress.

He tossed it to Vasek, then grabbed Dawn by the arm and started toward the door.

Vasek moved to block him. “Credits, Bakum. The agreement was in credits.”

Instead of replying, Bakum grabbed a chair and threw it at Vasek, then upended the table over him.

Vasek had expected deceit and ducked to avoid it, even as the table crashed to the ground next to him, the brittle wood shattering. Morad had warned him that Bakum would backstab him like he had Kotch.

There was a feminine gasp followed by the sounds of many tiny gems that had been clinging onto the dress by sheer determination scattering across the floor.

“Fuck!” Bakum swore.

By the time Vasek made his way out from under the broken table, the male had already flung the door to the balcony wide open. Seeing Vasek, he shoved a very naked Dawn at him as hard as he could.

Vasek had two choices: go for Bakum and let Dawn smash into the sharp and splintered remains of the table, or catch Dawn and let Bakum get away.

The choice was easy. Bakum would be hunted down by Morad and his pirates before the day was up.

He was no longer Vasek’s concern. He caught Dawn’s slight form in his arms.

He couldn’t help but think how well she fit there, a perfect armful. She was shaking from adrenaline and shock, but her temperature was much better than the last time he’d felt her. The medication was working. Good.

He placed her protectively behind him and turned to Bakum.

“Take the gems and the female. They are more than worth your work.” Then with an angry growl, Bakum leaped down into the street below, the bejeweled dress tucked under his arm.

Vasek turned to Dawn, who stood there with her arms wrapped around her body, eyes wide. This had not turned out the way he’d wanted. Gems required buyers, or else they were simply useless rocks. It was one more thing added to his never-ending list of things to do.

And what the hell was he going to do with a human female? As someone who would never buy or sell an intelligent being, he had no use for her as a slave. And he wasn’t

looking for female companionship either.

He sighed. “What am I going to do with a female?”

“I can be useful. Please don’t give me to Morad.

I helped Kotch balance his books and organize his business.

I’m good with stuff like that. You can keep me, and I can help you.

I’ll be really good, I promise.” She was tripping over her words now.

“I don’t eat much. And I’ll stay quiet. Please just give me a chance.

I’ll never survive Morad and those pirates. ”

A sharp pain stabbed at Vasek’s chest. She was probably right. And the thought of those pirates abusing her was enough to make red streak across Vasek’s vision.

But he couldn’t keep her. And it wasn’t just because his job was too dangerous, though he often used that as an excuse whenever other males spoke of finding females.

Sometimes he claimed he wasn’t interested in a mate, but that was a lie.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want one, but rather that he couldn’t have one.

His family was cursed. Well, at least the males in his family were.

Not a single male on his father's side had experienced a successful mating since his great-grandfather. And it wasn’t for lack of trying.

He was the only sane surviving male of his line and Vasek wasn't cocky enough to believe it could be any different for him.

But he couldn't leave her to the pirates either.

"I will keep you for a while," he decided.

Vasek removed his top, handing it over to her.

"Get yourself cleaned up," he said, gesturing to the facilities.

"And put this on when you're done. I need to settle my payments with the inn.

" And give the guards and workers some extra credits for the hassle.

He was generous with his credits where it counted, especially in locations where he operated out of often. "We are leaving after."

"Yes, sir ... er ... what do you wish to be called?"

"Just Vasek." He'd need to explain to her that he was against the owning of intelligent life.

Then Vasek stepped out of the room to face Morad and his pirates.

Dawn

Dawn closed her eyes and sighed at the feel of the water sluicing down her body. And this place even had a water-based cleansing unit! The shower was already helping her feel better. Much better. Or was that the medication starting to work?

Yeah, that must be it.

Everything had worked out after all. At least for now.

Eventually, Dawn would have to tell Vasek that Morad was after her too, and not just Bakum, and why. And she'd need to tell him before Morad came knocking.

The cleansing cycle changed to rinse. With it no longer scented and soapy, she took some into her mouth to gargle and rinse.

She knew better than to do that when the water still had the cleansers, especially at a place like this that probably used the cheap stuff.

She couldn't believe it, but she was actually missing Kotch's deluxe cleansing unit with its massage jets and customizable settings.

She tried to remember how her shower had felt back home on Earth and the shower gel she used to use, but couldn't. All that came to mind were Talleen scents, which over the years had become too familiar.

She sighed. She really had to make it back to Earth soon before she forgot everything.

Then who would she be? No one. She was nothing without her memories.

She'd seen it happen with her grandfather as dementia took everything from him.

Sure, she was young now, but she wouldn't stay that way forever.

The cleansing unit beeped, signaling the end of the rinse cycle and her last chance to select a longer duration. Not knowing the next time she'd have the opportunity, she selected the option to extend her rinse. The water was marvelous, soothing all her

aching muscles.

By the time she stepped out of the cleansing unit, Vasek was back and already dressed in another top that hid his deceptively muscled shoulders and arms. Dawn had caught a glimpse of them when he'd passed her his top.

She had to admit that he was easy on the eyes, and his face had a kind look to it when he wasn't angry.

There was that moment when he'd come back from his talk with Morad, where he'd been furious.

Dawn had seen Talleans in bloodlust before when Kotch had taken her as a companion to a party.

There'd been a fight arranged as part of the entertainment, and the two Tallean fighters had gone into bloodlust. One of them had torn out the other's throat, winning his freedom.

Then there was Morad, who would let his cheek creases and fangs out whenever he was drunk.

It had terrified her, and Kotch had threatened to give her to Morad if she ever misbehaved.

Morad was notoriously rough with his toys.

Kotch, more the businessman than the fighter, had never gone into bloodlust, not even when fighting for his life at the end.

Vasek was meticulously picking all the gems off the floor.

Dawn saw that he'd packed everything he'd taken out to use with her and Bakum, and had it all stacked onto a wheeled luggage cart for easy travel. She quickly threw the top over her still slightly damp hair; the air from the cleansing unit's vent was never enough to dry it thoroughly.

The top fit her like a loose dress. It also smelled like Vasek, masculine and musky, with a hint of spice.

Then she started helping him, crawling under the table and beds to reach for the valuable gems. It seemed Vasek had come out the winner in this transaction, though she wouldn't have known from the scowl on his face when she handed him the jewels.

"Come, let's get out of here."

But despite his scowl, his voice was soft, and the hand that landed on her arm was firm but tender as he guided her out the door. She'd expected them to go out the front, but instead they continued through the back into a transport lot.

Dawn was soon inside a comfortable and spacious transport and on her way.

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Dawn

Dawn held her arms out to her sides as Vasek ran the device over her body. They'd made it to the port with no complications, but he'd insisted on giving her a thorough examination before they left the planet.

Vasek didn't just own a nice transport; he also had his own space-faring shuttle.

Like the transport, which Vasek had driven right into the back of the shuttle, the shuttle was understated.

It looked very plain on the outside. Dark gray, well cared for, but plain and unassuming ... until she stepped inside.

He had not spared any expenses on the finishing of the inside of the shuttle.

The thing about Tallean design was that it was often excessive and gaudy, with more sumptuous fabrics, gilded trim, and marble and gold than was tasteful.

It was all about showing off what one had.

Kotch had started with the outside of his home before moving to the drawing room, where he conducted most of his meetings, since those were the places people saw most.

Vasek had done the opposite, keeping the outside of his transport basic and going all out on the inside, where few people would see. Was it because he didn't want people

to know he had the credits? Or was it because he was a private person? He did have a bunch of rules about privacy and all that.

It wasn't the kind of shuttle to traverse long distances in space, but the type for hopping from planet to planet in the same sector.

This was great news. It meant that Morad would have a much harder time finding her once he figured out that Dawn wasn't with Bakum. And if Bakum was half as wily as he'd been in the short time she'd known him, he'd probably evade the pirate crew for a while yet, giving them extra time.

"When was your chip removed?" Vasek asked, after running the device over her arms and legs again and stopping at the scar on her thigh.

He meant the chip that was supposed to track who owned her. The way Vasek spoke to her and looked at her was very casual, like the way Kotch had been, and she took that to mean he didn't expect the proper slave etiquette that her first owner, the Dominion captain, had required.

Come to think of it, very few out here wanted that. They just wanted someone who was obedient and quiet.

"A while ago. My owner at the time couldn't reprogram it with his name, so he cut it out." She showed him the scar on her thigh.

"Not Kotch?"

"No." She knew what was coming. Vasek would want to know how many owners she'd had.

The older female barkeeper who'd swooped Dawn up and sold her to Kotch had lied

about her origins, claiming to have stolen her off the original Dominion captain and removed her chip herself.

Kotch had believed her. Should she continue the lie and make it seem like she had a few owners, or tell the truth?

Would Vasek be disappointed? She hated being treated like a vehicle; the fewer owners she'd had, the more she was worth.

But the question never came. Instead, Vasek said, "Very little scarring. It's good work. One less thing for me to do. Any other trackers or chips I should know about?"

She shook her head.

Dawn wondered where they were going. Were they going to stay here in New Rhea's Port Number Two—these Talleans had such original naming conventions—or did Vasek live somewhere else?

Maybe on one of the smaller outposts? Or Vosthea?

Vosthea was an even worse place for someone like her to be than New Rhea, except for Kean's compound. But she doubted they were going there.

"Aside from the infection and some minor nutritional deficiencies, you are in good health." He got up and returned the scanner to one of the cabinets lining the wall. Dawn gawked at all the devices and equipment piled inside. Who needed so many robotic hands and legs?

Then the cabinet was closed again, and Vasek went to sit in the pilot's seat in front of the navigational panels.

The inside of the shuttle was arranged in such a way that told her he often traveled alone.

There was a partition separating the living area and the navigational panels, but he kept the space open.

There was one bed for when the shuttle was on autopilot between destinations, and a desk that doubled as a table.

She was currently sitting on the only other chair other than the pilot's seat.

It looked like the one Kotch had in his office, except the leather on this was buttery soft, and there was a botanical pattern embossed onto the armrest. Used to sitting on the floor on a cushion, it felt awkward to continue sitting on such a fancy chair, so Dawn looked around for the best place.

Not seeing any mats for her to sit on, Dawn decided that the floor by the corner next to the ornately carved desk would be the most out of the way.

She made her way there and sat down cross-legged, glad that she'd had the chance to shower before coming here.

She'd hate to track dirt and mud onto the shiny wood floor and plush rugs.

She traced the exotic grain of the wood under her with a finger.

It was gorgeous, the innate beauty outshining the colorful and gilded tiles Kotch had preferred.

She wondered how much a space-faring shuttle would cost in comparison to a planet-side home.

He may not look it at first glance, but she'd bet Vasek was rich. He was a doctor after all.

Also, Bakum had mentioned, quite unhappily, that Vasek charged a premium for his work. Maybe he'd like to keep her. She wrinkled her nose and stopped herself from continuing the thought. This was temporary. Everything out here was. Owners and acquaintances came and went.

"What are you doing in the corner?"

"I apologize. I couldn't find a mat."

Vasek approached and motioned for her to get up. "You need to be strapped in for takeoff."

He guided her over to the pilot's seat—another luxurious masterpiece of buttery soft leather—sat down, pulled her into his lap, then pulled the harness down over them both. As he did, his breath brushed the shell of her ear, sending a shiver down her spine.

Maybe it was because he'd been nothing but nice to her, but there, backed by a solid wall of muscle and surrounded by his masculine scent, Dawn's body reacted.

The sudden desire shocked her, and she squeezed her legs together to stop it.

But it was too late. Talleans had an impeccable sense of smell, and she knew Vasek could scent her arousal.

She froze, and sure enough, something thick grew against her ass. The sexy, rumbling growl only made matters worse as lust flooded her senses.

Vasek

Stars! A male would need the will of tungsten to resist the heady fragrance that perfumed the air. Every part of his being told him to drop everything and take care of her needs. Now.

But they needed to leave this port; there was no time for this. So he held his breath and forced himself to concentrate on the launch sequence instead.

Gravity pulled Dawn's delectable body against his, and for a short moment, her lust was overshadowed by the acrid scent of fear as they sped toward the planet's stratosphere. Her hand was on his thigh, her fingers with their dull little nails digging in like she thought they were going to explode.

"Be calm. You are safe. This shuttle is in good repair, and I am a good pilot."

He focused on making their ascent as smooth as possible. When the shuttle finally stopped rattling and they were safely airborne, she finally relaxed.

Vasek wondered when she was going to realize that he was still hard against her. The launch had not dulled his need, and her closeness only made it worse.

She released her death grip on his thigh and shifted her weight ... then froze. Slowly, that wonderful fragrance returned.

Oh yes, she realized it now. And she still wanted him.

Vasek bent his head to nuzzle at her neck, inhaling her delicious scent. She seemed to melt into him, until his hands joined his explorations. His hands slipped under the oversized top she was wearing through the generous armholes to touch the soft skin of her breast.

Vasek froze. What in Stars' name was he doing anyway? He shouldn't be nuzzling her! Did he really want to tempt fate?

He released them from the harness and stood quickly, nearly dumping her onto the shuttle floor. She looked confused as she scrambled to her feet. Then, with her head bowed, she scurried to the corner where he'd seen her before.

He wanted to tell her that she didn't need to be in the corner, but the shuttle was small, and he was glad for the distance between them.

From what he knew, Dawn had been through many hands, and Vasek was sure they hadn't treated her well. He thought back to her reaction to Morad. If Vasek wasn't in this particular profession and Morad hadn't been paying an exorbitant amount of credits for his treatment, Vasek would avoid him too.

Vasek set the shuttle on a path to a hideout in the wilderness outside of the port. He knew better than to take off from here and head straight to Vosthea. Not while he still didn't know the outcome of the feud between Morad and Bakum.

When he turned to look back at Dawn, she was sleeping, leaning against the side of his desk and sitting cross-legged on the floor.

Vasek hadn't understood what she meant earlier when she'd mentioned not finding a mat, but now he realized that she'd meant one for slaves to sit or sleep on the floor. It hadn't even occurred to him.

He couldn't have her sleep on the floor, but they only had one bed. He'd let her sleep in it. Vasek considered lifting and carrying her to the bed, but didn't want to startle her, so he tapped her on the shoulder instead.

"Sleep on the bed," he said firmly. "You don't need to sleep on the floor when you're

here.”

Or ever, if he had his say. But this was temporary. He couldn't keep her.

A male like him couldn't keep a female. Not only was it uncomfortable and stressful to move around so much, but his life was also dangerous. A human female would be a target. She'd be his weakness, and he couldn't afford that.

Dawn looked unsure, so he said it again, this time more as an order. “Sleep on the bed.”

She got up and made her way over to the bed, lying down on it awkwardly until he shook out the fluffy blanket filled with tepin down and tucked it around her.

“You are tired. Sleep. When you wake, I will update your translator,” he said, his voice softer.

“Thank you,” she said, yawning.

Vasek sat at the adjacent desk, digging the gems he'd picked up back at the inn out of his pocket. He had an auto loupe somewhere in this desk. He hadn't used it since he'd added the rule about paying with credits only, but had kept it around just in case.

Now to see which ones of these gems were real.

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Vasek

Vasek paced the small space of his personal shuttle.

He'd thought that concentrating on the jewels would help him clear his head, but it hadn't. He'd found himself looking over at the tiny form on his bed again and again. Yes, his bed, because of all the places he stayed, he thought of his shuttle most as home. It was why he'd invested so much in it.

His shuttle might not look like much on the outside, but that was how he liked it.

Flaunting his wealth was a recipe for disaster.

He'd seen it time and again in his clients.

But that didn't mean he didn't splurge where it counted.

He'd worked very hard for his credits and wanted to enjoy them while he was alive.

He, of all people, knew how mortal he was. Flesh and bone expired readily, and metal and alloys were susceptible to corrosion. He helped his clients cheat death often, but in the end, death always won.

There'd been more than enough in that pile of gems to cover his entire excursion to New Rhea.

He'd come out on top in this transaction despite Bakum's deception.

But he'd rather have a long-term, repeat customer than a dead one who was very profitable once.

And Bakum was as good as dead. Unless the male got extremely lucky, or had friends in high places. He'd pissed off the wrong people.

Vasek wasn't certain, but he had a feeling that it wouldn't be the last time he'd come face to face with Morad.

The male had asked about Dawn, and Vasek had reminded him of his confidentiality policy.

Technically, Vasek hadn't confirmed that Bakum was with him either.

He'd simply let them know that he had a client and that if any of them wanted help in the future, they better wait until he was done.

They'd agreed to the full half-day, but Vasek had told Bakum he only had two hours, so the male would hurry. He didn't want to give him any reason to stay around. The farther he got, the better, since it would keep Morad busy for longer.

The big question now was what to do with the little human snoring on his bed.

Vasek couldn't keep her. Risking a mate bond was not an option, not with the horrible luck his family had when it came to mates. It was so bad that some who knew about it had started calling it a curse.

It had started with his grandsire, who'd been a Dominion captain.

Vasek had never met him, but he'd heard the story numerous times as a young male.

His grandsire spent time in many different ports and sired children with females in a number of them.

Six, to be precise, all males. He'd sworn to never settle down and instead chose to simply pay for the females to care for his numerous offspring.

One of those offspring had been Vasek's sire, who grew up on a moon in the inner planets.

It was also where his grandsire had chosen to stay after an injury had forced him from service.

It was only then that the mate bond had hit him ...

for the very female who had birthed his son.

But Vasek's grandmother had already spent over a decade raising her boy on her own, while watching a male she'd cared for boast of female conquests at every port.

And even though he had not been her mate, it had still hurt.

So her first reaction was to laugh in his face.

But, realizing his presence and credits would benefit her son, his grandmother had allowed him to stay around.

His grandsire had tried for the next decade to win her love, slowly going crazy as the unrequited mate bond stole his sanity.

Her side of the bond never formed, and when her children were old enough, she left.

Vasek's grandsire had hunted her down, ending both their lives by flying his ship into an asteroid.

Vasek's sire reacted to the tragedy of losing both parents by focusing on his career and refusing to feel.

Slowly, the stories began to come in about Vasek's uncles.

One had met his mate, only to lose her almost immediately to disease.

Another bonded to a female who was already mated.

The other two found mates who did not want them. All of them ended badly.

Wishing to avoid this fate, Vasek's sire had contracted a female for two offspring instead, choosing never to meet the female face-to-face. As a result, Vasek had never met his mother.

At first, Vasek had considered the idea of a curse ludicrous. They must all just be coincidences. But then his brother, Ranek, had run afoul of the curse himself. That event had completely destroyed their relationship. It had also taken Ranek's sanity and Vasek's good arm.

It was right after this that Vasek had made the trip to the outer planets and never returned. It had taken years for him to build a new life.

If Vasek didn't want all of his hard work obliterated, he'd need to drop Dawn off somewhere and fast. Somewhere safe. Reka 5 maybe? They were always open to new colonists, and she could live a good life there. She'd have freedom. Start a new life.

There was also Kean's compound. Vasek knew Kean from his Dominion days.

It was another lifetime ago, but they'd kept in touch.

They were from the same cohort. Kean had an aptitude for biochemistry, and Vasek for medicine.

At the time, the Dominion had a trial program altering their soldiers with mods.

It merged medicine and robotics, and Vasek had mentored under the head of the program.

He'd been so young at the time, naïve too, about the ways of the universe. He'd thought he'd be helping soldiers regain what they'd lost. But instead, the Dominion had treated the wounded soldiers as test subjects.

To the best of the Dominion's knowledge, the old Vasek was dead. Had been for a very long time. And none of the soldiers they'd sent his way since had realized who he was.

Certain people knew, like Kean and Zharor. And their personal medic, Ulkin, knew as well. Then there was Ulrek and those who'd left with him when he switched sides.

Vasek remembered their surprise when they realized Vasek, a male they'd thought was long dead, was still alive and working out here. Most people had no idea he was ex-Dominion, and he liked to keep it that way. He preferred they didn't know anything about him at all.

Vasek spared another glance at Dawn. Yes, Kean's compound was probably the best place for her. Morad would think twice before looking for her there if his interest really was in her and not the bejeweled dress.

He'd contact Kean once he was on his way to Vosthea.

For now, he checked his monitoring networks for signs it would be safe to return to Vosthea.

The Dominion team that had the gall to corner Vasek and demand he rat out a male he'd recently treated had left after losing a few members to some friends of Vasek.

But there was talk of a secondary team that had landed on Vosthea, asking similar questions.

This one was a little smarter; they came in an unmarked ship and did not wear their uniforms. In fact, they didn't even look or act Dominion, according to his intel.

But their goal on the planet was too similar, and Vasek didn't trust it.

They were causing enough shit at the port that some of the locals were gathering to drive them away.

It would be best to stay here a little while longer.

Anyone bleeding out in Vosthea would just have to find another doctor.

The males who used his services understood that he wasn't always available.

The shuttle was already alerting him that they'd arrived at his hideout, which was just in the wilds outside of the port. The shallow cave was more of a large overhang, just big enough to hide his shuttle from detection. Anyone trying to scan the area would only see a whole lot of rock.

Vasek carefully maneuvered his shuttle into the makeshift hangar, back end first. Being able to fly out at a moment's notice in case of an emergency was key. Unlike the takeoff, the landing was quick, nimble, and barely noticeable.

Dawn still lay asleep on his bed.

He sighed. What was he going to do with a human!

That was a problem for later. He looked down at his arm. He hadn't gotten away completely unscathed from his little tussle with Bakum. The artificial skin over his bio-mechanical arm was torn, showing the metal underneath, and he hadn't noticed it until he was sorting through the gems.

One would think that being his own medic was convenient, but it really wasn't, especially since it was his good arm he always had to work on.

Still, years of caring for the robotic enhancement that replaced his arm from the elbow down meant he had a few tricks up his sleeve.

Besides, changing out the skin was easy.

As Vasek gathered his equipment, he noticed a canister tipped onto its side with the words *olfactinull* in bold lettering. He picked it up, an idea forming.

Olfactinull was a compound that deadened the olfactory nerves.

Years ago, it had been a novel chemical, used by those who wanted to hide their nefarious dealings.

But it was such a simple chemical to replicate that it was now available readily at most ports, and advertised for multiple uses.

Sometimes, it was the only way to make living on a ship full of unwashed males for weeks at a time bearable.

The trick to avoid temporary loss of smelling capabilities altogether was to use it sparingly and spray it into the room, and not to inhale it directly.

Holding his breath, he sprayed it everywhere in the shuttle except where Dawn was sleeping. He'd get the bed later; it would probably need it since it would smell like her the most after her nap. After letting the olfactinull disperse and settle, he took an experimental breath. Nothing.

No, not nothing. He picked up an unused robotic hand from the stash and sniffed it. It still smelled like metal and composite, but only very faintly. Good. This he could work with.

Things like mate bonds required time together and the right scent to form. No sense of smell, no mate bond, that much at least had been tested ad nauseum. This meant he could now enjoy Dawn's company, and maybe even other offerings, he thought, remembering her lust back on the pilot's chair.

Too bad this canister was already half-empty. He'd have to pick up some more back at the port before they left the planet. Putting the canister back on the shelf, upright this time and near the front for easy access, he sat down with his equipment to work on his arm.

His work goggles not only magnified his work when needed, providing just the right light at the right angle for the task at hand, but they also had an in-ear extension that played music. Vasek had a special playlist for different surgical tasks, and he found they helped him concentrate better.

He'd gotten the old, torn synthetic skin removed and was struggling to get the replacement in its place—the initial placement was always the trickiest—when he realized he had an audience.

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Dawn

Dawn woke to soft cursing and was instantly on alert. An ornately decorated ceiling greeted her. Was she back in Kotch's room? The design was different though; there was a lot less gold paint. And the sheets and blanket were so much softer!

Sheets? Oh no! She'd fallen asleep on the bed! She wasn't supposed to do that. Maybe she'd be able to sneak back down to her mat before he woke.

That was when Dawn realized she wasn't in Kotch's room at all. She wasn't even in the same port.

Kotch was dead, and had been for days. She wasn't even with Bakum anymore. She was on Vasek's shuttle. She'd been living off of sheer will and adrenaline for so long that she'd crashed hard the second her head had hit the pillow.

The shuttle no longer hummed, which meant they'd landed. They must still be on New Rhea. Perhaps the other port? How long had she slept? She felt a lot better. Whatever medication Vasek had given her earlier was working like a charm.

Another softly muttered curse drew her attention to Vasek. He was sitting at the table, head bent, concentrating on something. He had something on his face that reminded her of those glasses jewelers use to look at gems, but not quite. This one wrapped around his face at the sides.

And he wasn't looking at the gems; those were in two neat little piles in the corner of the table. So what was he doing?

Curious, Dawn got up for a better look, almost expecting the Talleen to turn around and catch her snooping, but he was completely engrossed in his work. He didn't even notice her taking the few steps to the table.

Dawn's jaw dropped at what she saw. Instead of skin and flesh, there was metal and composite where Vasek's forearm should be.

She recalled the robotic arms in his cabinet and was suddenly reminded of Morad and his bionically enhanced eye.

Vasek must be the doctor who'd installed that for him!

It made sense now that he'd agree to follow some rule about not attacking someone while they were in Vasek's care.

Morad rarely followed rules unless they were beneficial to him.

There was a crumpled mess of artificial skin in a tray next to him.

He was struggling to get a new sheet in place because one corner kept popping up.

He swore again. And it was only now that Dawn realized the word was muffled because he was holding a tool in his mouth.

It must be difficult to operate with only one hand.

Vasek suddenly froze, still as a statue. When he finally moved, it was to look at Dawn. Did he look embarrassed? Awkward?

He released the artificial skin and tapped something on the side of the goggles before saying, "I lost it years ago."

“Would you like me to help you?” she asked. Then, not wanting him to think that she thought him incapable, she added, “I’m sure you can do it yourself, but—”

“It’s easier with another hand,” he finished for her.

He tilted his chin to the bottle of sanitizing liquid.

Dawn recognized it because she’d had to use that before and hated the stuff, but it was probably a mainstay when it came to his profession.

“Clean your hands,” he said. “You can hold it in place while I make the first few attachments.”

Dawn wasn’t sure how she’d feel if this was a flesh-and-bone arm, but the way it was now, mostly robotic with just the slight hint of flesh showing, she found she didn’t feel queasy at all.

She was also surprised when she realized how warm the arm was.

But she guessed it made sense since it was still attached to his upper arm and would be warmed by his body heat.

Not to mention, when he touched her earlier, it had felt extremely alive.

She would never have guessed it was robotic at all.

Following his instructions, she held the skin-like sheet over the exposed hardware.

It was already cut to shape, and one side was slightly thicker than the other.

No wonder he had to get it to just the right position.

The tool he had been holding in his mouth was some sort of tiny, tiny stapler.

Instead of staples, it used something skin-toned and flexible.

Dawn watched as he attached a single point of the new skin to his arm, making several stitches in one place before moving to the next area.

The process was laborious and intimate. She was acutely aware of how close they were.

Eventually, he'd stitched the entire sheet in place at regular intervals, but there were still gaps in between the stitches, and the adhesions at the stitches themselves weren't particularly smooth. He brought out a handheld device and ran it over the area.

Dawn gasped as the artificial skin seemed to soften up, molding itself to his arm.

Vasek then used his other hand to smooth it down, using so much pressure that Dawn worried he'd break the whole thing.

He repeated the procedure several more times until he was satisfied.

Then he held his arm up and wiggled all his fingers.

Still in awe, Dawn reached for his arm. It looked nearly identical to the other arm, and moved very realistically too.

If she hadn't just seen what was behind the skin, she'd never have guessed Vasek had a robotic arm.

Did that make him a cyborg alien? How many bioenhancements were required for that classification? How many more did Vasek have?

As if he read her mind, the big Tallean cleared his throat, the action so human-like it was uncanny. “It’s the only part of me that is... uh, enhanced. Everything else is real. All the parts that matter anyway.”

Dawn’s brain immediately went where it shouldn’t, remembering how hard he’d felt under her ass when they’d been trapped together on takeoff.

She’d reacted to their nearness, and he’d reacted to her.

But then when he’d nuzzled her neck, it had confused her.

Nuzzling was strictly forbidden. It was the Tallean version of kissing, and it wasn’t done with someone like her.

Of course, that didn’t mean it was never done with slaves.

But none of the long line of owners had done it to her, not even Kotch, who had her for much longer than any of the others.

It was rumored that nuzzling could trigger mate bonds between Talleans and humans, and no one wanted to be mate-bonded to a slave, much less a human one.

Dawn had known some women who actively tried to get a Tallean to bond with them. It usually led to a much better life. A mate was like a wife, and some Tallean males almost acted like they loved the females they bonded to.

But that wasn’t something Dawn was interested in. She didn’t want a pampered life out here. She wanted to go home to Earth.

So when Vasek had nuzzled her, it had thrown her for a loop. And she couldn’t forget the confusing way her body had reacted to him either. That was totally unacceptable.

And then he'd practically dumped her on the shuttle floor. You'd think she was poison from how fast he'd gotten them out of that harness. She didn't understand why she was so disappointed. She shouldn't be lusting after him anyway. He was a Tallean.

Maybe for a moment Vasek forgot that she was human, just like she'd forgotten that he was the enemy.

Enemy or not, most Tallean bodies were easy on the eyes, the men and women alike.

Tall, thin, and lithe, Tallean women would be right at home on the runway.

The men tended to put on muscle easily, and just a little work was enough to give them bodybuilder physiques.

Still, Dawn had seen several less-than-ideal Talleans, and she'd wondered whether it had been cases of unfortunate genetics or extreme neglect.

Vasek wasn't super built like Morad, who was the poster boy for 'roids gone wrong.

Nor was he a little overweight like Kotch.

Instead, the medic was lean and toned, with the perfect amount of muscle definition.

Considering his less physically demanding profession, Dawn wondered if he took time to work out to maintain his physique.

That had the image of Vasek, muscles flexed and sweating at the gym, skating unbidden across her mind. And she already knew he was big everywhere.

She squeezed her legs together surreptitiously, hoping Vasek couldn't smell her

arousal this time, but she was standing so close and she knew better. But if he did notice her interest, he hid it well this time.

Did he not detect her scent? Maybe he had a stuffy nose.

“Thank you,” he said in his warm, deep baritone. “That made it easier.”

“It is my pleasure to serve.” And for once, the well-rehearsed words spilling from her lips weren’t completely bollocks.

Vasek frowned. “You don’t need to follow any protocols with me.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I do not keep intelligent lives.” Then, as if the topic made him uncomfortable, he got up from the table and went to the navigational panel.

So did that mean Dawn was the first “intelligent life” thrust into his care?

That was good, right? It could mean he was against slavery and would free her.

Or did it mean he didn’t want to spend the credits and would drop her off at the first auction house they came across?

She hoped it was the first option and that he’d treat her like a companion instead. She wouldn’t mind that.

This was the first good news since Bakum had kidnapped her into the wilds and dashed any hope of her participating in the big escape that several of the humans she knew had been plotting for months.

She just had to convince Vasek that she was worth keeping around. That way, she’d have plenty of freedom and be ready if there was another big escape back to Earth.

The interior of the shuttle was suddenly flooded with natural light as the front view screen turned transparent.

They must still be somewhere on New Rhea, because outside was the most beautiful sunset.

New Rhea had two suns, with one traveling just ahead of the other throughout the day.

During the summers, the two suns were relatively close together and stayed in the sky for longer, making it blisteringly hot when both were high in the sky.

In the winter, they traveled farther from each other, with the first and second sunrises being almost two hours apart.

But winter wasn't particularly cold on this part of the planet.

The rainy season had just passed, which Dawn always thought of as spring, since the weather often grew hot after the rains, and the suns were starting to come together again.

Currently, one of the suns was just above the horizon, and the other was a bit above it.

The pinks, purples, and oranges that filled the screen were so beautiful she couldn't help but just stand and watch.

Vasek turned and glanced outside as well. "We are at one of my hideouts outside Port Number Two."

No wonder they'd arrived so quickly. He'd said this was one of his hideouts; did that

mean he had more than one?

And hideout meant this was not his home.

Was he hiding out because of what had happened with Bakum and Morad?

It was probably a good idea, especially since they'd be coming after her once Morad realized she wasn't with Kotch's killer anymore.

Would they find their ship here? The side of the view screen showed jagged rock walls, and it looked like they were backed into a cave with a giant opening.

It didn't hide the gorgeous orange and pink sunset from streaming into the shuttle, but the rocks above would hopefully hide them from any scanning devices.

Except Kotch's old crew wouldn't be using any scanning devices from the air. They'd come on foot and on personal hover vehicles to search the forest the old-fashioned way, and the shuttle was a sitting duck against that. The only thing she could do was hope they wouldn't find her.

Her eyes went to the mess left at the table, and out of habit, she started cleaning up.

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Vasek

Vasek returned to his desk to find that Dawn had already separated everything into little piles.

There was a pile for anything that needed to be sanitized, a pile of tools, and the unused pieces of artificial skin were back in their packages.

Everything else she didn't recognize was lined up in a neat little row.

"Thank you. This is very helpful."

Perhaps having an assistant wouldn't be so bad after all.

He immediately shoved the thought away. He couldn't keep her as an assistant because he couldn't be spraying down his environment with olfactinull for the rest of his life.

Or could he? He wondered if there was any research done on the long-term effects.

Was this perhaps the way to thwart the mating curse?

He could never lose his mate if he never developed a mate bond.

And since a mate bond required him to recognize his mate by scent, removing his ability to smell would solve the problem.

He'd never considered that option before since smell and sight were a Talleen's best tools.

But giving up such a vital component of his senses wouldn't be so bad if it was reversible.

He quickly disinfected his tools and opened his cabinets to put his supplies back.

He almost felt bad shoving the neatly corralled items back into the jumble of mess.

He often took only what he needed to meet his clients.

And while his field setup was relatively organized, his shuttle's cabinets had become a dumping ground for all the equipment, supplies, and tools he'd ever collected.

It had never really bothered him before, but now he was a bit embarrassed that another living soul had to witness it.

"Hungry?" he asked.

Dawn nodded, then said, "Yes, sir."

Which had him frowning. He didn't like honorifics, but he understood that she probably did it out of habit.

"It's just Vasek." He opened another cabinet.

This one was much better organized. He kept pouches of water and other drinks lined up on one side and food bars on the other.

He also had a fruit replicator and preferred to eat from that, but the food replicator

reused the serving containers and utensils.

He only had a few sets and he hadn't gotten around to collecting and returning those to the unit for cleaning yet.

"Which one do you want?"

Dawn eyed the rows of boxes of bars. "I don't know. I usually don't get the normal bars."

Vasek grabbed the one most favored by youngsters. It was still his favorite despite all these years. "You'll like this one."

They shared a dinner of meal bars and water. Vasek felt bad that this was all he could offer her this first evening, but Dawn seemed to enjoy her food. The setting sun and the parade of colors it provided must have helped. She couldn't finish the whole bar, and Vasek was happy to eat the leftovers.

But it was clear that just helping him and sharing a meal was already tiring her out again.

Dawn yawned. "I'm sorry, I don't know why I'm so tired again."

"This is normal," Vasek explained. "Your body, in conjunction with a medication, is busy clearing out the toxin and fighting the bacteria in your system. You should sleep again."

"But it's late." She looked out at the night sky.

The sun had set during their meal, and the inky black now twinkled with the first stars of the night.

“What do you mean?” he asked, not understanding her statement.

“You need to sleep too. I shouldn’t sleep on your bed.”

Was she afraid he’d force himself on her in the night? He frowned. “You’re safe from me, I will not ask for anything you do not want to give.”

“Thank you. I believe you.” She hesitated a moment, then added, “But usually my owners do not let me stay on the bed because it could trigger a mate bond. It’s why Kotch always preferred his Fiete females.”

Technically, the Fietes were also capable of forming mate bonds with Talleans, but it was very rare.

So rare that some people thought the reports of matings were either just a rumor, or a desperate mind tricking the body, or even just plain lies.

With humans however, it was as if their bodies couldn’t tell they were a different species at all.

And they were so close biologically, in fact, that it was possible for them to procreate with just a teeny, tiny nudge from a doctor in the form of fertility enhancements.

Vasek found it entertaining that they’d both been worried about the same thing. But with the olfactinull in the air, they were safe.

“We don’t need to worry about that. Sleep. I will join you when I’m finished scanning my networks.”

Dawn wrinkled her nose but nodded, before disappearing into the facilities to prepare for bed.

Vasek settled down with his portable personal computer to scan the broadcasts for anything he might need to know.

Despite not enjoying interaction with others unless he had to for work, he liked being up to date with the happenings in and around both New Rhea and Vosthea.

At first, he'd thought it was because it was necessary to his survival, but he'd since come to terms with the fact that he simply enjoyed it.

It was a hobby. He liked being in the know.

Recently, he'd also added Reka 5 to his radar.

That colony had gotten bigger over the years and was now impossible to ignore.

According to his sources, Reka 5 had recently added one new colonist, a human named Cami, to their roster, then promptly lost her when she joined the New Horizon as an official crew member.

Vasek had worked on Cami just recently, reprogramming a chip to say that she belonged to a male named Berus, and for anyone finding her to return her to the New Horizon for a reward.

News like that seemed trivial at first, until one realized who captained the ship.

Captain Uzzar might seem unassuming, a little older and past his prime, but Vasek knew that he was actually Ulrek, one of the Dominion's most wanted in disguise.

It might as well be a public secret at this point, considering many of the port officials already knew but kept the secret since Ulrek made them more credits in the long run alive and free than otherwise.

Not to mention, the former Dominion captain had enough allies out here that anyone who gave him up would find themselves rather dead in a very short time.

There wasn't any news of what happened to Bakum yet. But then, it was probably too early.

Satisfied for now, he got ready for bed.

He found Dawn curled up against the wall, barely taking up any space.

There was plenty of space for him. She'd left the single pillow for him, probably afraid to take it.

Perhaps he could stop by the depot on the way back to pick up another for her for their trip to Vosthea.

He climbed into bed, careful not to wake her, and ordered his shuttle to turn off the lights and turn off the view screen so the morning sun would not wake them. Then, with Dawn's tiny form curled up next to him. Vasek closed his eyes and slept next to a female for the very first time.

Vasek woke to Dawn plastered against him, a leg thrown haphazardly over his body.

She was using him as a body pillow, and he was holding her back.

She was snoring softly, and despite his initial reaction to shove her away, he couldn't.

He inhaled, trying to see if he needed to spray the olfactinull again, but he still couldn't smell anything. That meant he was safe.

This was actually quite nice.

Was this how it felt to have someone special in his life?

He'd never been curious about it because he'd known it wasn't something he could have, but he was glad he had the opportunity to experience some form of it, no matter how mild.

He knew that lying with a female was nothing like lying with his mate, but he could imagine and pretend.

He wasn't a stranger to the pleasures of the flesh, but he always kept his distance, preferring to leave immediately after his conquests. He also never slept with the same female twice. Of course, he'd been extremely forthright with the females he'd spent time with.

Tallean culture was very lax when it came to sex. And since mate bonds usually did not form unless there was physical intimacy, often in the form of sex, many young Talleans hopped from bed to bed in a bid to find their mates. But a decent percentage of them were like Vasek: just there to have fun.

So Vasek wasn't lacking bed partners. But if he had to admit, only to himself, he was lonely. But then, he'd known all his life that he would be. His sire had warned him repeatedly, and every story that had come in about his uncles hammered it home. And of course, there was Ranek.

Was what Vasek was feeling now with Dawn a tiny taste of what his brother had felt before the rejection from his mate had driven him crazy?

Vasek thought of the last time he'd seen his brother. What a disaster!

He'd become so dangerous that the Dominion had to lock him up. The only reason they'd spared his life was because he'd been their sire's son, and their sire had been highly decorated in the Dominion military.

Was Ranek still rotting in a cell somewhere in an inner planet prison?

Vasek felt a twinge of guilt for leaving him there until he remembered the brother he knew growing up was gone, replaced by rage and nothing else. If he ever forgot, all he had to do was look at his missing hand.

Dawn made a soft moaning sound in her sleep that had him wondering exactly just what type of dream she was having. Just because he could not smell her did not mean that his body didn't react to her, especially when her leg moved, brushing up against his crotch.

Then she was nuzzling his chest. But humans didn't nuzzle. Not the same way Talleans did.

Starved of intimacy for so long, Vasek couldn't help but bend his head to nuzzle the top of her head, the side of her head, her ear.

He knew the moment she woke. But instead of shying away, she tilted her head and caught his lips with hers. His eyes went wide at the sudden thrill that shot through him. This was the human kiss he'd heard about. It was like a mouth mating, and his cock was immediately hard.

He "kissed" her back, swiping his tongue over her lips. Even without his sense of smell, she was delicious, and the swipe turned into a thrust as he plunged into her mouth. She moaned, the sound making his cock throb and twitch under her leg, which was still thrown around his hips.

They were both breathless when their lips finally parted.

Yes, Vasek quite enjoyed this kissing mouth-to-mouth. Too bad he'd never be able to experience it safely with all his senses intact.

As if only now aware of what was happening, Dawn gasped.

"I'm sorry. I was dreaming, and—" She gasped. "My leg!" She pulled her leg back. "I didn't realize."

"It's... I enjoyed the kiss." Wow, that sounded more awkward than it had in his head. "We sleep now." That was even worse.

What was happening to him? Vasek had never enjoyed dealing with social situations, but he'd never been bad at them either. This was not like him, and he didn't trust it. Was it possible for bonds to form without his sense of smell despite all the research?

Then, suddenly deciding that sleeping with Dawn in his arms was too much of a risk, even with the olfactinull in the air, he turned to face away from her. She did the same and curled up into herself again.

Maybe it would be a good idea to pick up an extra mat for her after all.

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Dawn

Dawn stared at the date on the screen, then rubbed her eyes, because surely she was seeing things. The date on the screen didn't change.

No way! She couldn't believe her luck!

If that date was correct, then the big escape was tomorrow. She hadn't missed her chance to get back to Earth after all.

She must've miscounted her days when out in the wilderness with Bakum. She'd drifted in and out of consciousness for a good chunk of it, and it had felt much longer than it really was.

It wasn't too late to get back to the port and get to the rendezvous point. She could still make it!

Except she didn't have her buy-in anymore.

That dress had been what she'd promised to bring; the gems on it could be used to buy their way through refueling ports and other tough situations.

But she'd known the ones planning the big escape for a long time—years.

Maybe they'd make an exception for her. In fact, she'd been one of the first people Jason had told about the plan, and she'd helped with planning parts of it.

Like Dawn, Jason refused to believe that Earth was the mess people claimed it was now.

She'd met him at the delivery office shortly after Kotch started letting her out on her own to pick up supplies for the office, and send small, non-weapons deliveries.

She'd always had to wear a heavy collar to signal who she belonged to when she was on her own, but while she hated that stupid hunk of metal, she'd enjoyed the tiny bit of freedom it gave her more.

She'd often worried that someone would ignore the collar and steal her away.

She glanced over at Vasek, who was kneeling in front of one of the cabinets on his shuttle, trying to tame the mess inside.

From what she understood, Vasek planned on staying here for a day or two before leaving the planet completely and heading to Vosthea, where he usually worked out of.

He was in New Rhea to get out of a spot of trouble.

Which had Dawn wondering if trouble found this unconventional medic often.

Then there was what happened last night. Her cheeks heated up at the memory. She'd been having the sexiest dream, and the medic had been the hero. Somehow, she'd known she was dreaming and had decided to throw caution to the wind.

Except it hadn't been just a dream, because she woke to find herself practically mauling the guy.

She'd kissed him. And she must've been the one to start it because he'd kissed her

back awkwardly, like it was something he'd never done before.

And he probably never had, because Talleans didn't kiss mouth-to-mouth.

A thrill rushed to her center at the memory of his lips and tongue exploring her. He might have been awkward for the first few seconds, but that had changed quickly. He'd taken over, expertly playing her until she was wild with need and practically begging for more with her moans.

But the icing on the cake was the fact that she'd rubbed her leg all over his erection too. She hadn't meant to tease him.

But he hadn't done anything about it. He'd said something, she didn't remember what because she'd been too busy being positively mortified, then turned away from her.

It had Dawn wondering if perhaps Vasek preferred men, or maybe he had a mate waiting for him back at home. The second option made the most sense. However, he could be like Kotch and simply not prefer human females, which was completely possible.

All of those scenarios would also explain his shocked reaction at nuzzling her in the pilot's chair, and the fact that he didn't seem worried about forming a mate bond with her.

If she had to guess, it was probably because he already had a mate.

Was that why he said he couldn't keep her?

Because his mate would be jealous even if she only helped them with his business?

Shit. She didn't want to be a home-wrecker.

Perhaps it was a good thing for everyone involved that she'd be on her way back to Earth.

She felt a bit guilty as she accessed the escape map on the PPC, the portable personal computer, he'd given her as entertainment.

Vasek was trusting her with so much, and he was treating her without asking for payment, and here she was planning to run.

But this was her life, damn it! She needed to be on that ship when it left New Rhea.

According to the map, they weren't too far from port, and with her improved health and new knowledge of which plants to avoid, she might just make it in time. She knew that she'd never forgive herself if she didn't try.

She wouldn't be able to bring the map with her, so she would have to memorize the way back to civilization.

It wasn't too difficult. She just needed to head through the forest, angling herself downhill whenever she could, until she reached the river.

It was the same river she'd struggled in just days ago, except on the other side of the port city.

The river ran through Port Number Two, which meant she could follow it straight to the fence.

As long as she had some water with her and she stayed out of the river and away from any dangerous plants, she'd make it. There were rumors that the wilderness had many dangerous beasts, but she hadn't seen many the last time she was out here. Just a shit-ton of deadly flora.

The hard part would start once she reached the port. A lone human with no collar denoting ownership was ripe for the picking. There were few humans who could walk around freely at the port, and those who could were usually heavily armed and wearing uniforms from their ships.

There was the notorious crew of the Second Chance , a band of human mercenaries led by the infamous Trenton Walker.

The entire crew was rumored to be ex-convicts and held their own against even the worst of the Tallean pirates.

Their ship had been stolen from the Dominion itself, and they flaunted it every chance they got.

Dawn had first bumped into them once when running errands for Kotch.

They looked terrifying. She wasn't sure freedom with them would be any better than a life of servitude under someone like Kotch.

Not to mention, the crew of the Second Chance had no interest in returning to Earth.

That she knew for certain. And Earth was where Dawn needed to go.

Dawn surveyed the mess of tools and equipment that Vasek had pulled out onto the floor.

She wasn't sure what any of it was, but she knew they were not weapons or weapon parts.

Kotch had her help assemble those. But she wasn't looking for a weapon.

Her eyes landed on a flexible cord, about half an inch thick in diameter.

It was shiny, and from far away looked like metal.

She could wrap that around her neck, and if no one looked too carefully, it could serve as a collar.

When she got into the port proper, some of the shopkeepers might recognize her and just think she was on another errand for Kotch...

unless news of his murder had gotten out.

Curious, she checked the reports and bulletins, but there was no mention of it.

She wasn't surprised. Kotch wasn't big enough to warrant a port-wide announcement, and shit like this happened all the time here.

Those living on the Dominion inner planets didn't call the outer planets lawless for no reason.

Using Kotch's credit chip code, Dawn placed an order at the depot consisting of basic supplies, hoping that the payment would go through.

It did. Good. She committed the order code to memory; the doors wouldn't let her in without it.

And her order would alert Jason that she was on her way.

Once she was inside the depot and hidden in the massive warehouse, she'd be safe.

Yes. This was a good plan. She could do it. Now she just had to get her hands on that

cord and make her escape.

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Vasek

Vasek moved through the woods, careful not to brush up against any of the myriad vegetation around him.

He recognized some of the plants, but not all of them, and the rule about surviving the New Rhean wilds was to not touch anything you didn't know.

The area around his hideout was familiar enough that he wasn't too worried, especially since he'd cleared out anything dangerous the last time he'd been here and transplanted a fast-growing and resilient weed in its place.

He realized what had triggered his alarm before he even got to it.

The culprits were nearby, feasting on a fresh kill.

He'd seen the tiny creatures hunt before and knew that they could take down prey much larger than themselves because they hunted in large packs.

Each of the predators was barely the size of his closed fist, but the herbivore they'd brought down was almost the size of a dragus pup.

Looking at each one alone, one would never think it possible; that was the advantage of teamwork.

He also knew that the creatures did not attack Talleans, or anything bipedal, for that matter. Mainly because their main predator was a scaled bipedal creature.

They were able to move quickly in the trees, and they must've chased the creature right through the perimeter sensor he'd set up in the branches.

He'd already figured something similar had happened from the single flash of fur before the camera had fallen.

The cameras were triggered by movement and set so that small creatures didn't set them off, so it hadn't turned on until the creature being chased was right in front.

Vasek set the sensor back up, securing it more thoroughly this time. Too preoccupied with their meal, the tiny creatures ignored him, squabbling amongst themselves for the choice pieces.

He'd just finished and was heading back to his shuttle when the farthest of the proximity sensors on the other side of his hideout started going off.

This one alarmed him much more, because unlike the one he'd just fixed, this one was on the side closest to the port.

He quickened his stride, hurrying back to his shuttle where he'd left Dawn.

He checked the video feed as he traveled and cursed. It was Morad and his males. He recognized the gaudy cropped jacket he'd been wearing. The thing must've been Kotch's once because it didn't fit Morad's more muscular frame.

That surprised Vasek since he hadn't gotten any news of Bakum's demise, at least not before he'd left his shuttle.

He'd spent most of the morning researching whether it was possible to form a mate bond even without a scent trigger.

His research had confirmed what he'd already known.

It couldn't. He did find several very insistent people who believed it could.

But there just wasn't enough evidence to support it, and Vasek was a man of science.

Then, Vasek had attempted to find another canister of olfactinull; he swore he had more in that mess he called his supply cabinet. He'd failed miserably. He'd just managed to shove everything back in when he got the first alert from the proximity alarm.

Morad being here before taking care of Bakum was noteworthy.

Vasek had learned in his career that things weren't always as they appeared.

Morad had focused on Bakum back at the inn, claiming that the male had something he needed.

He hadn't verified what, so anything Bakum had on him was suspect.

Including Dawn. Morad had also asked about her, though the question had been casual and in passing.

Vasek hadn't been able to shake the feeling that everyone involved was hiding something from him. Now, his suspicions were confirmed.

But what could Morad want with Dawn? His initial thought that it was her valuable dress couldn't be it, because she didn't have it anymore. But did Morad know that? If he'd met with Bakum he would, unless Bakum had lost or ditched the dress before he was caught.

A stab of something akin to anger had him gritting his teeth at the thought that Morad could be coveting Dawn for himself. From what he'd gathered, Dawn had been with Kotch for a while. Could Morad have wanted her the whole time?

Vasek wondered if it would be a better idea to just take off and fly over to the planet's other main port instead of risking an encounter with these guys.

He tried to count how many of them were here, but the foliage had filled in since the last time he'd been here, and half the screen was blocked by a wall of green.

Vasek knew something was wrong even as he approached the shuttle.

He sniffed and cursed his reduced ability to smell.

The olfactinull claimed to only work in the area that it was sprayed in, but anyone who'd used it before knew that it dulled the olfactory nerves for some time after.

He made his decision. They weren't going to wait around and confront Morad, even if Vasek was curious why he wanted Dawn. Perhaps Dawn would tell him.

He opened the door to an empty shuttle.

Fuck! Dawn!

Vasek had left the shuttle to check on the alarm, not even thinking she would run. They were in the wilderness, and when he'd left her, she'd been on one of his spare PPCs. She'd looked so bored, and feeling bad, he'd given it to her so she could pass the time playing some games.

Video games were a new idea among the Talleans.

Before companies like Hullean Vision, the human- and Tallean-owned “virtual reality” sim and game company out of Reka 5 came along, the only thing close were training simulators.

The “games” Hullean Vision came out with were similar to the training scenarios they already had, except with fantastical scenarios that one would never encounter in real life.

The locales were especially imaginative and beautiful.

They were a huge hit, and since then, other games, including ones just on a screen and with the sole purpose of entertainment and wasting... er, passing... time, had come out.

Dawn had been playing one of those when he’d left.

Locking up his shuttle, Vasek searched the environs, looking for clues on which way she’d gone. He could smell a bit, and when he found no broken branches or tracks, concluded that she’d gone on the path of least resistance—and least dangerous foliage—and taken the only path which led to the river.

This part of the river was too fast-moving for her to cross. She’d be swept away easily, so he could only hope she hadn’t tried. There weren’t any signs she had. His nose, while impaired, was still able to determine that she’d followed the river toward the port, rather than away.

Was it on purpose? Did Dawn know where she was going? She seemed to be moving with purpose, so Vasek assumed she did. The problem was that her path would take her straight to Morad.

He heard male voices before he found her. They had her surrounded. Vasek used their

distraction to sneak in close.

Morad had found Dawn, and was questioning her. Curious, Vasek hid behind the tree and listened as he looked for the best angle to attack.

Dawn

“Look what we found, boss.”

Dawn backed away from the asshole who approached her with his blaster drawn. It was one of the thugs Kotch had hired recently. By “boss” he’d probably meant Morad.

And just at that moment she almost backed into the asshole himself.

“I can’t believe that medic lost you already,” Morad said. “If he hadn’t been the one who’d installed my eye, I would’ve never agreed to his terms. I knew the moment I caught news that Bakum was alone that the medic would have you. Saved us some time by splitting up the squad. ”

No wonder the group looked smaller than before. The other thugs must have gone after Bakum and the physical key.

“You know what I’m looking for. Tell me the code and I might let you live.”

Dawn knew he meant the code to the safe where Kotch kept his most valuable possessions.

One such thing was the artifact he’d come across a few months ago.

The artifact was rumored to be very valuable, and he’d been sure it meant he’d be

able to retire immediately in luxury.

He'd never have to sell another bloody shipment of weapons again...

as soon as he found someone reputable enough to buy it from him without straight-up murdering him for it.

Bakum was supposed to have been that person. He'd murdered him for it.

Except that Bakum hadn't known, and probably still didn't know if he was still alive, that the safe required more than one key. Morad did, though. And for some reason, he thought she had the code.

"I already told you. I don't know it." She really didn't, and she had no idea why Morad was so dead-ass sure she did. Was it something Kotch had said? "I don't know what Kotch told you, but I don't know the code. Don't you think I'd tell you if I did? What use do I have with it?"

"He said that only he and his favorite slave knew the code. That must be you."

His favorite? There was no flipping way that was her. Sure, he might have warmed to her at the end, believing that she'd brought him and his business good luck, but she wasn't his favorite.

"I'm not his favorite."

"You have to be!" exclaimed the guy with the scab over his cheek crease. "He brings you to work often and dresses you in the finest clothes."

Morad narrowed his eyes at Dawn, and for a moment, she considered bolting and running back to the shuttle even though she knew she wouldn't get far.

Disappointed that she couldn't get her hands on the cable, she'd waited some time after Vasek had left to check on the alert before leaving.

She'd worried that she might bump into him, but she hadn't, so he must've gone the other way.

Would he be back at the shuttle yet? Did he know she was missing? Would he even come after her?

"We asked one of the Fietes he owned," he said, his voice low, steady, and menacing. "She says you are his favored one because he does not make you do any of the housework."

"Because I am in the office running his business. I keep his records and run his errands, and I clean the office. A human is more prestigious for business than a Fiete. When he's home, he spends most of his time with the Fietes. He only calls on me occasionally."

Kotch had spent some time with her in the beginning, curious about what humans were all about, but after the novelty wore off, he'd gone back to spending most nights with the two Fiete women.

In the inner planets the Fietes were common, but out here they were rare and usually kept inside the homes, so they were very seldom seen.

Dawn had only met one other who had not been owned by Kotch, and she'd been very nice, but also kind of slow.

Kotch had also preferred the Fietes because there was no risk of forming a mate bond with them. Also, a much smaller chance of getting murdered in his sleep.

“Lies!” The one with the scab reached for her, and she scrambled away, trying to put a tree between them.

Morad got to her before he did, grabbing her by the hair.

“She might be telling the truth. Kotch always did prefer the obedience of a Fiete over the fire of a human. He never quite appreciated the challenge.” He pointed to one of the thugs.

“Contact the auction house and halt the sale of the two Fietes,” he demanded.

The other guy didn’t look too happy to be ordered around but did as he was told, muttering something unintelligible under his breath.

Morad turned to her, first looking pensive, then sly. “If that’s the case, he must not have played with you much. Good. You’ll be all mine.”

Panic set in at his words. Morad always had an interest in her, but Kotch didn’t like to share, not even toys he wasn’t using.

“Fuck that!” said one of the thugs. “You said we were going to sell her after we got the code and split the profits.”

“I say we sell her only after we’re all sick of her. She’s pretty. Kind of like our women, but rounder and with lighter hair,” suggested another.

Dawn glanced around wildly, looking for escape, and despite not finding one and knowing that it was futile, she still tried to make a run for it.

She hit Morad on the elbow as hard as she could with the heel of her hand and wrenched herself from his grasp.

She didn't even make it a few yards before she was hauled back by one of the brutes.

Suddenly there was a loud roar, and the male holding her released her as they all turned to the sound. Vasek was charging at them. His cheek creases were extended, and his fangs were so long they jutted out past his lips. There was rage in his eyes, a ferocity that sent horror through her.

He was everything that Dawn was scared of in these Talleans. The very reason she needed to get back to Earth.

He landed on the closest of her assailants before he'd had time to react, and there was a flash of red as blood spurted from the guy's throat, splashing them all. Holy shit! Vasek had just torn out his throat!

Dawn stood there frozen, her heart pumping furiously in her chest as Vasek threw the limp body to the ground.

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Vasek

By the time he tossed the first worthless male aside, the rest had already realized what was happening and were ready to fight. There were only a few of them, plus Morad, but Vasek was outnumbered, so he hadn't had any qualms about attacking first to even out the numbers.

The one with the cut across his cheek who had tried to touch Dawn threw a punch at him.

But in bloodlust, Vasek's reaction time was unrivaled, and he was nimble too.

He evaded and kicked out his clawed and heavily booted feet, catching the male in the stomach.

The angle was wrong, and the slash of his talons wasn't quite large enough to eviscerate him like the first male, but the guy crumbled to the ground, holding his belly.

Although two of them had been taken out of the equation, it was still three versus one. Vasek needed to remove one more opponent if he wanted a chance to win.

The group had stopped right in the path of a tentacle tree, called that because its long hanging vines were coated with a thick sticky substance that caught their prey before they dissolved them with their digestive juices.

They were related to carnivorous grass, except their tentacles were a lot stronger.

He moved to stand in front of the tree, staying just out of its reach.

One of the idiots fell for it, charging at him.

A slight miscalculation meant the male managed to grab hold of Vasek, pulling him along within reach of the carnivorous tree.

Before Vasek could wrench himself away, the until-now immobile and seemingly lifeless tentacles started to move.

Grabbing him, the sticky goo latching onto his shirt.

He thought fast, ripping the shirt off and letting the tree have the top.

A part of the tentacle had touched his skin, however, and Vasek braced as he threw himself away from the tree as hard as he could.

There was a feeling of skin tearing and Vasek gritted his teeth. Losing some skin was a much better fate than being slowly digested alive.

Morad and the other remaining male rounded on him now that he was outside of the tree's reach. Two on one was a much better deal.

Morad, realizing that he no longer had the upper hand, fled. And so did the other male. Vasek followed him for a few steps before he remembered why he was really here.

Dawn!

He looked around for her, but she was gone.

He heard her, though. She was running back toward their shuttle.

Suddenly overwhelmed by the need to hunt her down, throw her on the ground, and claim her, he followed.

These irrational thoughts were why Vasek had spent so much of his life trying not to go into bloodlust. But like his father and his brother, he was prone to it.

This rampaging, illogical beast wasn't what he wanted to be.

This was a part of him he'd tried very hard to tamp down. He was supposed to save lives, not end them. But he'd always struggled with the innate desire for violence that all Talleans had. Bloodlust made it harder.

Vasek caught up to Dawn easily. The look she sent behind her back at him told him all he needed to know: she was running from him, but he would catch her, and once he did, she'd be his.

He plucked her from the trail, her arms and legs still flailing.

She wore his top, but it had been ripped during her escape.

He finished the job, tearing it from her to expose her to him.

She was utter perfection, and he couldn't believe his luck that he'd have such beauty to celebrate his victory with.

Her body wiggled deliciously against his and his cock hardened almost painfully. He rolled his hips, rubbing his burgeoning length against her, which only made her squirm in his arms even more.

Something at the back of his brain screamed for him to stop, that something was wrong.

He couldn't smell any danger, so he listened instead.

There was the sound of creatures moving in the woods around them, big ones.

Bright feathers flashed in between the trees.

Carrion birds, scary-looking but mostly harmless, were more interested in the mess he'd left behind than in him and his delectable prize.

This was when he realized Dawn was still shaking like a leaf in his arms. Didn't she know that the danger was over? He had her now, and he'd protect her. He put her on the ground and she scrambled away from him, and he realized it was him she was afraid of.

In fact, Dawn was absolutely terrified of him.

He recalled the first time he'd seen that look on her face. Bakum had been holding her by the hair, and the sight had Vasek's fangs descending. Was that what she was scared of?

On the outer planets, unaffected by the Goddess's teachings, some females found males who went into bloodlust sexy.

But some Tallean females found going into bloodlust impolite and uncouth, especially those from the more religious parts of the inner planets.

The Goddess's favored were a sub-species of Talleans who were smaller, more delicately built, and had lost the ability to go into the altered state meant to enhance

their senses when fighting.

The Favored were the Talleans' ruling class and didn't need to fight when they had common, lower-caste Talleans to fight for them.

But Dawn was human, and humans didn't have an altered state that helped them fight or hunt. Also, it wasn't disgust that radiated from her, like it would from a Favored witnessing bloodlust, but fear.

Vasek wanted to tell her that he would not harm her, but the only words that came from his distorted cheeks were unintelligible. Dawn took another step back from him, almost stepping right into the very plants that had given her that rash on her thigh.

Vasek swooped her up onto his arms again and strode toward their shuttle, which was a bit difficult since his cock was still hard and in the way.

He was glad he'd managed to stop himself. Not only had Dawn been completely terrified of him when he was in bloodlust, but he also didn't want to trigger a mate bond. Though satisfying his lust for her once might not cause that to happen.

But also, the wilderness was no place to celebrate his victory. The rash that was healing on her leg was a reminder of just how delicate she was. Not weak, though. No weak-minded soul would ever find the courage to brave the wilds alone, even in New Rhea.

And what was she doing out here on her own anyway?

She surely wasn't attempting to rendezvous with these thugs.

Where was she planning to go? Logically, her best bet was to stay with Vasek.

Until now, he'd demanded nothing from her, and even his actions now were only because he'd been acting on instincts alone, something he swore to himself would not happen again. He had better control than this.

The more Vasek thought about it, the more upset he got at the fact that she'd tried to run off when he'd shown her nothing but kindness. From what he'd heard, she'd known the group was after her. And she also knew there were dangers in the wild, yet she'd still chanced it. But for what?

Humans were known for their intelligence.

It was what made them different from the Fietes.

The Fietes were the most common subjugated species in the Dominion because they were obedient and none too smart.

Humans, on the other hand, were wily, intelligent, and hard to control.

And while their brains were wired for logic, sometimes emotions overrode their more logical side, like his own species.

Hate, love, and hope were the eternal enemies of reason.

Was that what was happening here? Was there someone Dawn was trying to get back to? A male, perhaps. Another slave? Maybe someone else? A friend or acquaintance of Kotch? The thought of her with another male had Vasek tamping down a growl.

Dawn

They were back at the shuttle, and the big Tallean male was wiping her down from head to toe with a thick wet wipe.

He wasn't being gentle about it either, and something about the way he was doing it made her feel like a bad kid who'd been caught stealing from the corner store and was about to get an ass-whooping.

His top had been slashed open, and she was staring at his big, muscular chest. It was better than seeing the scary, stern look on his face.

"What in Stars' name were you trying to do?" he demanded. The words were a bit distorted by his cheeks and fangs, but she understood them. But even if she couldn't, she could read the anger on his face.

He jerked her chin up to look at him.

Vasek's fangs were mostly retracted now, but his cheek creases were still partially extended, and there was blood on his face. Dawn squeezed her eyes shut again at the memory of him tearing one of his enemies' throats out.

"Were you trying to get yourself killed?" He'd grabbed a new wipe to clean her face.

Dawn flinched at the sting, and when he went over the scrapes on her cheekbone from the bark, he softened his touch. She wondered if Vasek would be upset that the scrapes would scar and lower her value. Kotch would've been.

She couldn't believe she'd actually hoped Vasek would come and rescue her from Morad. How silly she'd been! She'd jumped out of the frying pan and into the flames. He caught her trying to escape. He was rightfully angry.

She had just witnessed what an angry Vasek was capable of. He'd ripped those guys apart with nothing but his fangs and claws. Even with their blasters drawn, they hadn't stood a chance. Morad had run like a coward.

If you'd asked her which one she'd prefer this morning, she would've said Vasek, hands down. But now she wasn't sure. He'd come after her, tearing the clothes from her body when he was still in bloodlust.

She knew that after the enhanced state some Talleans called bloodlust, they often craved sexual release. The wires between violence and sex were slightly crossed in Talleans, and the first often led to the second. Dawn had known some females who were turned on by it, but she wasn't one of them.

It scared her. A lot. And now Vasek scared her.

“What is so important that you'd brave the wilds and those thugs on your own?”

He sounded more normal now, and Dawn dared another peek. The fangs were normal again, which meant they were barely peeking out, and his cheek creases were folded. Done with cleaning her, he was now wiping himself off with another one of those disposable wipes.

Dawn couldn't tell him the truth. What if she did and Vasek alerted the depot or the authorities of their escape plan? She'd never give up her fellow humans. If they failed because of her, she'd never ever forgive herself.

She clamped her mouth shut, knowing that it was going to earn her some horrible punishment.

“Is it for a male? A lover?” The question ended on a low growl.

Vasek thought she was trying to get back to a lover? That was unexpected.

“Answer me.”

Dawn just stared at him, open-mouthed, and at a complete loss for words. She was flabbergasted that he thought she was escaping because she had a lover back at the port. Eventually, she found her voice. “No, no lover.”

He leaned in close and sniffed her. “You are not lying.”

So Vasek had a nose sensitive enough to detect lies.

That was good to know. Some Talleans could, some couldn’t, but all of them could outsmell a human any day of the week.

Kotch couldn’t really, but he claimed he could.

Dawn had known the truth. Kotch relied on other clues in conjunction with his nose, and half the time he was guessing.

Morad, on the other hand, was pretty darn good at it, which was probably why he’d believed her back at the clearing. Was Vasek as good as him?

“Then where were you going? I don’t believe you are stupid enough to try to survive in the wilds with no food, water, or weapon.”

Should she pretend that was what she’d been about to do? She was a decent liar, but somehow, she doubted it would work. So she kept quiet. The more she talked, the bigger a hole she’d be digging. She was fucked enough already.

“Tell me. I promise I will not be angry.” Vasek held her firmly by the shoulder and gave her a light shake. Not the violent way Bakum had done, but softer, like he really needed to get through to her.

But promise or not, Dawn knew she couldn’t say a word. This hadn’t been just her

chance to go home, but for others as well. Others like her. She would not jeopardize their mission.

Vasek moved and she braced herself, expecting a blow that never came.

Instead, Vasek just let out a low growl and stomped away.

“Don’t bother trying to escape or stealing my shuttle. It won’t work. Once I return, we are leaving New Rhea.” The door to the shuttle closed behind him, and Dawn was left alone, still completely naked.

Shit! Leaving New Rhea? That meant she wouldn’t have a chance to try again, though she highly doubted Vasek would give her such a chance in the future.

She was going to miss her one and only chance to get back to Earth for a very, very long time.

What if she never found anyone else willing to take the chance?

What if she never saw home again? Had she seen the sun and moon of her childhood for the last time already?

Ever since learning of this plan to steal the depot’s ship and make the big trek home, it had been all she lived for.

Every time she wanted to give up she thought of that, and it kept her going.

She didn’t even have anyone left to go back to, but just the thought of returning to see the places she once knew was enough.

“I just want to sit on a bench in Central Park and watch the fucking squirrels. It’s not

that big an ask!” she screamed into the empty shuttle.

But now she’d never make it back on time. She would miss her chance.

Refusing to give up the thin, barely-there thread of hope that had been nourishing her soul, she went to the shuttle’s door and tried to open it. It did not budge. Next, she tried the navigational screen, but it too refused to react to her. It was like she didn’t exist.

Angry, she slammed her hand down on it.

Oww! That freaking hurt!

The screen stared back at her, unchanged and undamaged, and it only made her even angrier.

She wanted to hit something, break something.

But there was nothing. Try as she might, she couldn’t open any of the cabinets, and the chairs were magnetized to the floor.

In the end, the only thing she could find to take her anger out on was the singular pillow.

Dawn hadn’t allowed herself to cry for years, refusing to show any weakness. But here, faced with the loss of hope and completely alone, the tears streamed down her face.

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Vasek

Vasek trudged through the woods, stomping his booted feet on the forest floor on the path back from the perimeter alarm Morad and his males had barged through. He'd finished setting it back up and was on his way back to the shuttle.

When he'd left, he'd been certain that there was no way for Dawn to escape or hurt herself, but now he wasn't so sure.

He'd been monitoring her through his comm unit, pulling up the video feed from his shuttle.

She'd done everything he'd predicted she'd do.

She'd tried the door, then moved to the navigational panel before trying to get into his cabinets, which were all locked.

And finally, she'd screamed something about fornicating rodents—that he'd not expected—and sank down to the floor of the shuttle and started crying.

He had not been ready for that. Especially when he'd turned on the sound and heard her pitiful sobs. It had made his chest feel so tight that he'd looked around to see if a patch of gasweed had sprung up in the area. It hadn't.

Then she'd gotten up, wiping the tears from her eyes, and marched over to the transport parked at the back of the shuttle.

She opened the door and climbed inside. Vasek had left the access chip inside the transport, but it also required a code to start, so he wasn't worried that she'd try to drive away.

Even if she could get the transport running, it was magnetized to the floor of the shuttle.

Not to mention, the back door of the shuttle would not open to let the transport out.

But when she failed to come out after a prolonged period, he started to worry. What the hell was she doing in there? Now he regretted not installing cameras in his transport too.

He had quickly finished resetting the alarm and was now heading back to the shuttle. Morad was nowhere in sight, and he hadn't caught any scent of him except for the old lingering one from when he'd been here last.

Speaking of scenting, he was now extremely curious about why Dawn had made the decision to brave the wilds alone.

He was pretty sure that it wasn't to get back to a secret lover.

It would've been difficult to hide any sexual liaison from Kotch or Morad anyway.

She would either return smelling of sex or of cleansers, both of which would be highly suspicious.

And that would be true for both male and female paramours. What else could it be? He suddenly remembered the spare PPC he'd let her use to pass the time. He'd check that when he returned.

The cave and the shuttle came into view. It was still in one piece and hadn't blown up or caught on fire. That was a good sign. Opening the door, he carefully stepped inside, ready to defend himself should the little human launch an attack, but none came.

In fact, his shuttle was suspiciously quiet. He quickly removed his clothing and boots and stuck them into the clothing decontaminator in case he'd picked up any irritants during his trip.

A quick search found Dawn still inside the transport. She was still naked, curled up in the fetal position in the back, and seemed to have cried herself to sleep.

He sighed, and leaving the door to the transport slightly ajar, went to look for clues in the PPC.

The last place she'd visited was the ordering portal for one of the larger mega depots at Port Number Two.

But she hadn't used his account to do the shopping.

She must have used Kotch's. He couldn't tell what she'd ordered aside from the fact that she had most definitely ordered something.

She'd also looked at a map of the area focusing on the land between here and the port.

That confirmed that Dawn had been trying to return to the port, rather than trying to escape into the wilds.

Had she ordered supplies needed to survive on her own?

Was the plan to make it back to port, pick up the supplies, and return to the wilds?

Or did she have somewhere else to go? Someone who'd hide her?

It occurred to him that whoever it was didn't need to be a lover. It could be a friend.

He was still wondering this when his stomach let out a loud growl.

They'd skipped a meal, and he hadn't eaten much earlier this morning.

He went to his food replicator. It was a rare thing to have in a shuttle this size, but since he spent so much time in it hopping from planet to planet, it had been a worthwhile investment and one he used often.

If he was hungry, then Dawn must be as well.

There was another similarity between their species.

They both needed to eat every day. But if they had to, Talleans could survive a long time without a meal.

Humans, from what Vasek knew, usually ate multiple times a day.

And they couldn't survive nearly as long without food.

Technically, Vasek knew what humans needed to consume nutrition-wise, but had no clue what they preferred to eat taste-wise.

Up until now, he hadn't needed to know more than what he needed to treat the few humans he'd come across.

Dawn had eaten the food he'd given her yesterday, but had she enjoyed it?

As the replicator prepared his meal, he looked up what humans on the outer planets liked to eat.

He didn't recognize many of the dishes, but after a quick look into it, he realized they were either Tallean dishes altered to include Earth flavors—the spices and herbs imported from Earth, or cultivated in Reka 5 or Vosthea—or they were Earth dishes reimagined with locally available ingredients.

Many of the dishes listed their origin as Reka 5. Some of them were from Vosthea.

He imagined humans working in mines and plantations throughout Dominion space would have their own dishes too, as they created new customs and traditions unique to themselves. Much like how Talleans from different regions had distinct cultures.

Dawn had never been to Reka 5 or Vosthea.

At least not that he knew of. She'd recognize none of these meals.

Still, he chose an Earth-inspired dish made with local ingredients that would be easy for her to consume inside the transport, installed the instructions onto his replicator, and set it to work as he started on his food. .

The “pee-zah” was a flat dough baked with a generous layer of ingredients on top.

It smelled savory, and he recognized the meat chunks often used in the replicators scattered on top.

To his surprise, it also used the curded milk frequently eaten by those who came from his sector of the inner planets.

The original ingredient was near impossible to find in these parts, but a local substitute had been getting more popular on the outer planets in recent years. Was it because it worked as a substitute for an Earth-based food as well? That would explain it.

Vasek actually preferred the substitute over the memory of the real thing. It had been so long since he'd had it. Was it like that for the humans too?

Carefully, he brought the "pee-zah" and a disposable pouch of water to the transport, opened the door, and set them on one of the pull-out surfaces in the back seat.

Dawn woke, looking confused, before noticing him and scrambling back, tucking her feet under her like she expected him to drag her out of the transport. Did she think him a monster?

But the more he thought about it, the more it made sense why she reacted the way she did to the males in bloodlust. It wasn't something humans did, and it usually meant that violence was imminent. She was not meant for this life. It was best that Vasek drop her off at Kean's as soon as possible.

While the drug lord-cum-ruler of Vosthea had a violent streak himself, those living inside his compound lived a sheltered and well-protected life, especially when compared to the rest of the planet.

Going back to his PPC, Vasek made the call and soon had the ruler of Vosthea on his screen.

"Vasek." Kean looked remarkably unstressed for someone who held the future of an entire planet in his hands. "Are you here to accept my offer?"

Kean meant the offer to work as a medic at the compound. Ulkin had suggested it

years ago, and the offer had been outstanding since.

“Not yet, Kean. Maybe in a few years.” This was his response every time.

“Then to what do I owe this call?”

“I’ve found myself in possession of a human female.”

Kean chuckled. “You say that like a human female just suddenly fell into your lap.”

“That sounds about right, ” Vasek said, remembering how Dawn had felt in his lap during takeoff. “Is your compound still taking in escaped slaves?”

“You’re not keeping her yourself? You’ve worked hard, you deserve someone.”

Of course Kean would say that. He was completely enamored with his human mate. The poor sap. Luckily for Kean, the mating had only increased his reputation for being ruthless since it gave him something more to protect on top of everyone else in his compound.

“I have no way to protect something so precious. She will be better off at the compound.”

Vasek wondered if Kean knew about his family’s luck with matings. He might, since he was also ex-Dominion, and Goddess knew how rumors spread through the ranks.

“I’m sure we’ll find a position for her. When will you be here?”

“I’m leaving New Rhea now.”

“Good. Then we will expect you soon. And you will be just in time for the big

celebration. You never did reply to my invitation.”

Fuck. He’d forgotten about that. Kean had been throwing these big bashes every year since he took over all the major ports and cities on the planet.

It was a celebration of the unification and development of a planet that had once only been home to outlaws and thieves, and everyone who was anyone was invited.

There was usually at least one attempt on Kean’s life, so it was the perfect way to lure out any disloyal players.

Vasek wasn’t the type for big parties, but he was stuck with it now.

Dawn

Dawn had never been so confused by someone before. For one thing, her fight or flight—or in this case, freeze—response had burnt itself out. That intense, uncontrollable fear she'd had of him before she'd stormed off now seemed almost silly.

Yes, he looked terrifying. Yes, he'd murdered people right in front of her. And yes, he'd gone after her like she was prey, but he hadn't really hurt her. Maybe she was wrong about being wrong about him.

Ugh! See, totally confusing.

Her anger at losing the chance to be on that ship tomorrow had also fizzled out. She was still upset and disappointed, but there was nothing she could do about it now. No amount of trying to break things was going to make it any better.

Also, it was nearly impossible to stay terrified or angry with Vasek when he'd just offered her an olive branch in the form of a slice of pizza.

Where the hell had he gotten it anyway?

She'd noticed the food replicator on the ship. Kotch didn't have one because the Fiete girls took turns cooking, but the Dominion captain had one in his quarters, and she'd been taught to use it. But that machine couldn't make Earth-style dishes. Vasek had also called it pizza.

She stared at it. It looked like pizza from afar, but upon closer inspection, she saw that it wasn't a slice out of a round pie, but a triangular piece of flatbread with toppings.

Close enough. She recognized the crumbled meat that was a replicator staple.

In this case, it was used to simulate sausage crumbles.

Dawn knew that Reka 5 now produced tomato sauce from real tomatoes, and pouches of it were readily available all over the outer planets.

Kotch had been curious about the savory sauce made from the red fruit and had asked her once to make a meal with it.

She'd made pasta with Tallean-style noodles they'd had on hand, and ground meat from the market.

It had come out close enough, though the noodle texture had been different. Too bouncy.

She sniffed the flatbread. It smelled like pizza.

Kind of. She didn't know what the "cheese" was made of.

Maybe a creamy sauce of some kind? Talleans had that in their many types of cuisines.

Did some of their cultures have cheese too?

There were, after all, as many cooking styles as there were habitable planets.

That was one thing Dawn had realized about these aliens. They weren't just one broad homogenous group, but an amalgamation of many, many different people, with varying cultures.

The shuttle rumbled to life, and Dawn grabbed the platter before the whole thing went flying.

Alarm filled her briefly until she realized they were lifting off.

Vasek had meant it when he'd said they were leaving right away.

It was probably the best thing to do since there were currently several dead Talleans in the area.

It would be a matter of time before someone came looking for them.

There was still the other half of the group.

And of course, Morad was free, so he'd be coming back with reinforcements.

There were also the wild animals and scavengers that the dead bodies would call in. She had caught a glimpse of the giant land-bound birds that they'd passed on their way back to the shuttle. Imagine if a shoebill stork mated with a cassowary, then mixed in a dash of hellhound.

Shudder.

She didn't want any of those poking around the shuttle. Just because they liked to eat carrion didn't mean they only ate carrion. She was pretty damn sure that if they were hungry enough, they would find her a decent meal as well.

After several long minutes, the shuttle stabilized, and she dug into her pizza look-alike.

And hey, what do you know! It was actually pretty freaking good.

It wasn't exactly like pizza as she remembered it, but all the flavors were there, and it hit the spot. The cheese was a little richer and creamier than she was used to, and the meat crumbles weren't quite pepperoni, but this was the closest thing to home she'd had in years.

She had thought she'd never taste something like that again.

Pizza hadn't even been something she liked when she lived on Earth, but the way the cheese melted and got all ooey and gooey and stringy, the pepperoni-like flavoring they'd added to the meat bits, and the real, honest-to-goodness tomato sauce was the best thing she'd ever tasted.

The spices and the sauce weren't even the same, but they were close enough, and dared she say, better?

She was sure that if she compared this side by side with pizza from Earth, she would find it lacking, but all she had were her memories. And according to those and her taste buds, this was a close enough facsimile.

It reminded her of all the evenings she'd ordered in with her best friend and roommate when they'd been too lazy to cook. It reminded her of the pizza lunches at school when she was a kid.

Then suddenly she was crying. Yep, crying. Again! God, what was wrong with her? She'd managed to hold off the tears for years, and today she was making up for it by crying buckets.

She had to pull it together. There was no space for sentimentality out here.

She could only blame having a stressful day so many times before it started sounding like an excuse even to her.

She quickly wiped the tears up with the back of her hand and prayed that her sobs had been quiet enough that Vasek hadn't heard any of the sniffles.

The last thing she needed was for him to think she was even weaker than he already did.

She ate every last bite even though she was so stuffed by the end of it that she wasn't sure she could ever move again, which was fine because she planned on hiding out here for as long as she possibly could.

She wasn't sure Vasek would trust her with a personal computer again, and there really wasn't much to do.

If he found a job for her, he could come in here and ask her himself.

And not to mention, it was spacious and comfortable enough for her to sleep in here.

They wouldn't need to share the bed if they didn't have to.

She didn't want to wake up to find herself climbing him like a tree again and invading his personal space.

Vasek

Dawn sat on the floor of his shuttle, wearing another of his favorite shirts, sorting through his equipment and supplies. It had taken her a while to come out of the

transport after they started their journey to Vosthea.

She'd been staying there for most of the trip and sleeping there as well, since she could lie down in the transport's seats quite comfortably.

A good thing too, because in his haste to leave the planet after the violent run-in with Morad, Vasek had failed to return to port to grab another mat.

That was the thing about leaving from the wilds: there was no waiting for port officials to give the go-ahead.

But it meant he was down one mat, and one canister of olfactinull.

He was going to have to get the almost-empty can to last until Vosthea.

Dawn staying in the shuttle had helped, since he'd only needed to respray the shuttle once after she'd snuck out of the transport in the middle of the galactic night cycle to use the facilities.

After using the facilities and returning the used "pee-zah" platter to the food replicator, she'd scurried back inside.

He'd elected to use a less direct path between the two planets that looped around one of the moons.

It would take longer, but this path was less traveled, and he'd be able to set a proximity alert and let the shuttle fly on its own.

If he did that on one of the regular routes, the alert would be going off constantly.

In the past few years, travel between the major ports and planets in the outer planets

had increased quite a bit, and he didn't want any trouble on the way.

It was midway through the second day of the trip when Dawn wandered back out, probably from boredom.

She saw him struggling to find something in the mess he called his supply cabinet, and offered to reorganize it for him.

It had been their first interaction since she'd answered his question before they took off.

When Vasek told her that she didn't need to do anything for him, she replied that she wanted to. Realizing she must be bored out of her mind, he let her. It was strange having someone in his ship and touching his personal stuff, but an organized supply cabinet would make his life so much easier.

His collection of equipment and supplies had long outgrown his space.

When he'd worked for the Dominion, they ordered supplies when things got low, and new stuff came in just as old stuff went out.

But working alone was different. Manufacturers sold things like robotic arms in sets, and Vasek often only needed parts of it.

Take Morad for example. Vasek used a full ocular enhancement set for him, but due to extensive damage to his nerves, he'd had to "borrow" an extra ocular nerve from another set to extend the first one so he could have feeling in his face.

So now he had an eyeball with no nerve to go with it.

It was a good eyeball too! He'd have to take the nerve from somewhere else when the

time came to use it.

Shortly after taking over his cabinet, Dawn had shooed him away, claiming that there wasn't enough space for them both.

She'd assured him that she was a professional at organizing and running offices and businesses.

She'd turned Kotch's arms dealership into a well-oiled machine.

And she'd been an executive assistant at a real estate development company back on Earth.

The shuttle was suddenly filled with feminine, mirthful giggles. Vasek turned to see Dawn with a drawstring sack open in her lap. She was holding up a prosthetic penis. He'd forgotten he'd had those in there.

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“It’s a literal bag of dicks!” She twirled one in the air as the giggling turned into cackling.

Vasek frowned. “The males who need those do not find it funny,” he said, trying to keep a straight face. It was difficult because her laughter was contagious.

“Right.” She cleared her throat and pasted on a solemn face.

“They are state of the art, and work just like the real thing. Better than the real thing sometimes.”

“Mm-hmm.” She nodded, her face still a serious mask. “Are you speaking from experience?” Her eyes went wide for a moment. “I mean your arm. Not...”

Vasek tried to manage his strict demeanor, but it lasted only a few seconds before he cracked a grin. “I can assure you that my cock is all natural and works very well. You are welcome to see for yourself.”

The slight bit of lust reached his nose, reminding him to top up that olfactinull soon. But even without his sense of smell, he could see her tan cheeks redden just a hint. “Ugh! Men!” But it was clear she was trying to hide a grin.

He lifted his hand. “I meant my arm. Not...” he said, copying her words.

She laughed. “You’re horrible!” She stuffed the dick back into the bag and tossed them over to join the ever-growing pile of artificial limbs.

“Another question,” Dawn said. She’d been asking questions the whole time, having him clarify what things were, and putting everything in neat little piles all over the shuttle floor on top of disposable plastic sheets she’d laid out.

Vasek had no idea how everything was going to get back into the cabinet, but she seemed to know what she was doing.

“Ask.”

“If all your supplies are here, how are you able to do your work on the road?”

“I keep all my essentials in a portable kit. And I refill them between uses.” In fact, Vasek had been trying to do just that when she’d seen him struggling to find what he needed and offered to help.

“What do you usually bring along and need to replace often?”

“The life- and limb-saving essentials are with me in my bag. Things like diagnostic tools and implements, sutures, synthetic skin, common medicines, and a handheld device to speed up healing. The robotic enhancements and an extra bag of blood substitute are in the larger case.”

“You can’t possibly bring everything. What if the patient needs something you don’t have?”

“I stabilize them and return to the shuttle to find what I need. Usually it’s a robotic enhancement component, but by then the limb or eye or whatever is gone and there is no rush to save it.”

“Got it,” she said, wrinkling her nose in the cutest way.

She went back to work separating the multitude of tools and supplies into ever-growing piles, and Vasek tuned into a report that summed up all the latest happenings in the outer planets.

The broadcast touted itself to be the best place to get all the latest news, though Vasek's personal network sometimes got news to him faster than the reports.

The reporter was summarizing a failed slave uprising and ship theft at one of New Rhea's depots that had ended up in a fiery mess when Vasek noticed that Dawn was no longer sorting his goodies.

She sat completely motionless, aside from a very slight trembling of her lips, as the reporter explained how the ship was granted permission for takeoff at the port, only to have the port officials realize what was happening right after the ship had already left.

The ship had made it to space and even managed to evade the security vessels sent up to herd it back. It seemed the humans on board had studied well and learned how to pilot as well as override the ship's anti-theft system.

A privately crewed warship had intercepted it just a galactic hour ago. When given the choice to return to New Rhea or prepare to be boarded, the humans chose to ram the warship head on. The last recorded transmission from the ship had been, "Sayonara, fuckers!"

"There are still no confirmed reports on the number of survivors from either ship," the announcer continued, "but several emergency shuttles were launched from both ships before the explosion."

Dawn was shaking noticeably now, and Vasek knew without a doubt why she'd been willing to brave the wilds on her own to get back to port. The order she'd made had

been from the same depot. It must have been a message, a signal that she was coming. Dawn had been part of the plans.

Had she been that miserable with Kotch that she was willing to make a break for Reka 5? However, according to the reports, the ship had been heading away from Reka 5 and toward Dominion space.

Vasek stood, his legs moving on their own, and approached Dawn, who was still unmoving. He sat down next to her.

“You were supposed to have been on the ship, weren’t you?”

Dawn turned to face him, and the tears welling in her eyes told him all he needed to know. The ones on board must be her friends.

“I am sorry about what happened to your friends. They said several emergency shuttles were launched from the ship; perhaps they are still alive. Perhaps you will meet them again in Vosthea.” Vasek rubbed the back of his neck.

“I’ve already contacted Kean at his stronghold.

He is looking for a placement for you. I was going to grant you your freedom. ”

She sniffed and said a soft “Thank you,” but it was clear that was not what she wanted.

“If you wish, I can also bring you to Reka 5, but I can’t do it right away. I have to join in some festivities and get a few things in order.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to go to Reka 5. Just leave me on Vosthea. I will find my way back to Earth somehow.”

That had a low growl erupting from Vasek's throat. They were heading back to Earth! The trajectory of the ship made a lot more sense now.

"No! That is too dangerous." Then he was a little softer. "You don't want to go back there. Earth isn't the same planet you left. "

The way Dawn's chin suddenly stuck out had him realizing that he'd accidentally hit a sore spot.

"That's what they all say," she said, her voice sounding shaky. "I don't believe them. We don't believe them, not until we see it with our own eyes. And even then... even if it's true... I'd rather spend my last moments there than out here."

"That is illogical and will get many killed. You have a chance for a good life out here, regardless of what you had back on Earth."

"What do you know? This is your home. It's not mine!" She was yelling now, the righteous anger hiding just below the surface bubbling up to take over. "You chose to be here. I was stolen away from my home by Talleen assholes like you!" She poked him hard with an accusatory finger.

Her outburst amused him. There was that human fire he'd heard about.

Fast as lightning, he grabbed her finger, trapping it in his comparably massive palm.

"That is unfair. You know we are not all the same, just as all humans are not the same. I am trying to give you your freedom by bringing you to Kean's compound.

Why should I do that if you are telling me you plan to throw it all away for a chance to see a planet that isn't even what you remember?"

She tried to yank her finger out of his grasp. But he refused to let her go, not until he got it through to her that going back to Earth would be the death of her, and he wouldn't have it.

“And what if I let you out into the universe and you try to convince more humans of your delusional idea? What if the next time, you are on the ship when it explodes?”

“Better than not trying at all,” she said stubbornly.

“What about all the others who'd be on it? Are you willing to risk their lives too? For what? To see a planet mostly destroyed by the Dominion? It is nothing like you remember it. I have never been to Earth, but I've seen enough planets and moons conquered by the regime to know what you'd find.”

Vasek didn't know when he'd released her finger and grabbed her by the shoulders, but he was shaking her now. Suddenly extremely conscious of how rough he was with her, he let go. He took a few calming breaths.

Dawn's chin still jutted out stubbornly. He hauled her into his lap.

“If that ship had been heading to Earth, then the mission was doomed before it started. I say this as someone who is sympathetic to your cause. There is no way it would have arrived in one piece, and if it were found in Dominion territory, everyone on board would wish they had expired in a fiery explosion.”

Her chin dropped, and the anger melted into something akin to resignation.

“Not one to sugarcoat a diagnosis, are you?” she said with a sniff.

“I do not understand this coating of simple carbohydrates. But if you mean I speak the blunt truth, then you are correct. Aside from the destination, it seems to me that

the entire mission was well-planned, and if the plan had been to head to Reka 5, you might have even had help getting there if the Second Chance or one of Trenton's other ships, or maybe the Defiant , caught news of your escape. ”

She pressed her lips into a thin line. “Trenton refused to help after they found out what we were planning. They wouldn't even offer credits. Said it was throwing resources away.”

“And I agree with them. I'm sorry.”

The first sob escaped her lips, and then Dawn was crying in his arms.

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Dawn

Vosthea was a small, blue-green planet that was very clearly not Earth. For one thing, it was more green than blue, rather than the other way around, and no matter how hard she stared at it on the view screen, it didn't look like she could ever call it home.

Things were changing there now, and even Dawn and her friends had gotten news of it.

But even though it was no longer considered a lawless planet, it was still home to thieves, pirates, and outlaws, and most definitely not a welcoming place for a free human.

Most humans there were still slaves, except perhaps in Kean's compound.

And then there was Trenton's group of mercenaries. Dawn was pretty sure she'd heard they'd claimed a little corner of Vosthea, with Kean's permission, of course.

She scanned the tiny green marble, wondering where they'd land.

She couldn't see any major sprawling ports, even though she knew that the planet should have three large ones and several smaller ones.

Instead, there were many small settlements dotted on the planet, and they all looked like they were in imminent threat of being swallowed back up by the jungles.

Vasek seemed to know where he was going, however, because he directed his shuttle

toward the planet.

After he'd figured out that she was supposed to be on that ship and she'd bawled like a baby in his arms, things had come to a quiet, unspoken understanding between them.

Dawn now fully believed it when he said that he was not interested in keeping her.

It wasn't that he had another female, or because he couldn't afford the time or credits to keep her, but because he truly didn't believe in keeping intelligent life.

It hadn't just been words to trick her into a false sense of safety in order to find out her secret, because he had already guessed it. What was the point of lying to him now?

She spent some time mourning and remembering her friends' faces in the depot's back room as they talked animatedly about what they'd do when they got back to Earth.

Where were they now? Had they been on the ship when it exploded, or had one or more of them gotten out in one of the emergency shuttles?

Even if they did, what were the chances they would make it somewhere safe?

Vasek did not need to witness her being a big baby again. She needed to get those big girl pants on and deal with it. There was plenty of time to mourn once she was alone.

If the next chapter of her life was on Vosthea, then she was going to make it count. However, she refused to believe that Earth wasn't worth returning to.

Like those who'd been on the ship, she'd always believed that the stories and images

told and shown to them were lies meant to keep them obedient. Getting home was still her final goal; she'd just decided that she was going to try to enjoy the journey there the best she could.

For the rest of their trip, she dove into the organization of Vasek's supplies and storage.

If he was giving her her freedom, it was the least she could do for him.

But damn, did the medic have a shit-ton of stuff.

She had no idea how all of it had even fit into the cabinet to begin with.

And that was just one of the cabinets. She'd just found out there were more when he told her to dispose of some of the liquids because they were supposed to have been kept cold.

It turned out that there was a cold storage for non-edibles on the shuttle too.

The sudden blaring of an alarm for an urgent incoming contact had Dawn finally looking away from the quickly approaching planet and over to Vasek, whose brows were knitted together in an almost comical way.

It was one of those expressions that seemed to transcend species, at least for Talleans, Fietes, and humans, who all had brows.

Vasek took the incoming message, and it popped up on the view screen.

Dawn squinted at it, wishing she'd learned more of the intricate Tallean glyphs.

She knew just enough to get her job done, which was actually more than most, since

she'd run much of Kotch's business.

Too bad most of the words were related to the trade and selling of weapons.

She couldn't read most of the message, but the few words she could read had her quite concerned.

Especially since Vasek's mask of neutrality faltered, replaced by a look of determination.

She recognized the words "fire," "destroy," and "now."

Vasek closed out the message, then got up and joined her at her almost-organized piles. She still didn't know how she'd be able to store them so they were easily accessible as well as organized in the long run. The fact that the cabinet was just one giant dump zone was the problem to begin with.

"We need to get everything back into the cabinets now," he said, picking up the corners of the sheets under one of the piles and tying them into a bundle.

Dawn followed his lead, doing the same to the pile she was currently sorting. "What's happening?"

"Pirates. They are demanding that we let them board or they will open fire. I have not replied, but I have slowed my ship down. They will not fire if they believe we are choosing the nonviolent option. This ship is not well equipped with weapons."

Dawn frowned. "But you don't plan on letting them on board," she stated rather than asked, because she didn't think him the type to simply roll over.

"No, we are going to get close enough that they can't fire on us, but not close enough

for them to magnetize. Then, I'm going to blast right through them. They'll need to turn around before they can pursue us. And even the mount turrets need time to recalibrate. It will give us a head start."

There was only one pile left to tie and bundle when the shuttle's alert had Vasek scrambling back to the pilot's seat.

Realizing there was no time to pack this one up, she shoved the whole thing into the still-open and overflowing cabinet, then pushed at the door until she heard the click of the locking mechanism.

"Get in the transport now," Vasek demanded. "Strap in. This is going to be rough."

Dawn scrambled to the back of the shuttle and had just barely managed to get into the transport when the force of the shuttle lurching forward had her slamming back hard into the seat.

Vasek

Vasek made another hard left and evaded another shot. He had long since realized that the pirates inside the two ships currently chasing them wanted him alive because they were still trying to get him to give up and agree to be boarded.

If they were only interested in the goods on the ship, then they would've used lethal force already, since the medical supplies protected in the ship's storage often survived crashes, smoke, and small fires. The question was, were they after him? Or Dawn?

Did Morad have the contacts and the influence to have someone already waiting for their arrival? He doubted it.

If he had to guess, he'd bet they were run-of-the-mill pirates who wanted his shuttle.

The thing about stealing ships was that many of them required both a code and a genetic match to operate.

Without them, they would have to tow the ship, then pay someone a lot of credits to hack the system, or they could part it out and sell it piecemeal, but they wouldn't be able to use the ship.

The easiest option was to force him to tell them the code and remove the failsafe, which was what they were likely trying to do.

His best bet was to get as close as possible to Kean's compound and message for help. But he would then owe the powerful drug lord a favor. Vasek preferred it the other way, with others owing him favors for saving their lives.

Another shot flew at him, and he barely got his shuttle out of the way. He sure hoped Dawn had gotten herself strapped in; even safely secured this was going to be rough on her human body. They weren't as resilient to extreme changes in gravity as Talleans were.

Luckily, the shots fired at him were meant to control his ship's direction rather than to kill. But he also didn't like being herded. They were trying to force him behind the closest moon where he could bet another ship waited, ready to ambush him. He didn't want to play that game.

It wasn't only his survival he had to worry about now, but Dawn's. So he did something unexpected, turning and aiming his shuttle straight down toward the planet. They were nowhere near a port or even a major city. The only thing as far as the eye could see was dense jungle.

Would they be desperate enough to follow him in? That depended on when their last successful attack had been. Desperate males did desperate things.

What would they do to Dawn? The thought had him growling and gritting his teeth.

Distracted by the distasteful thoughts, he'd noticed the incoming shot too late.

“Fuck!”

A sudden jolt had the entire shuttle shaking and rattling. The lights flickered, and the screen turned black for a singular moment as he realized that they'd been hit. They were going down.

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Dawn

Dawn blinked, but nothing except the darkness inside the transport greeted her. She reached for the seat's harness and realized she wasn't upright anymore. She braced her feet so she wouldn't slide over to one side. So that was why everything felt wrong.

What had happened? The last thing she remembered was holding on and wondering if they were going to make it as the shuttle veered from side to side. Then nothing.

Had the pirates hit something? Were they even now floating in outer space, completely powerless and slowly leaking oxygen, sitting ducks for the pirates?

She imagined a crew much like the one that had joined Kotch's company marching in, weapons drawn, then reminded herself that Kotch had gotten lucky.

The ones who'd taken the job had been bad as pirates.

The ones who were good at the job were probably much worse.

What if they were the mutated ones she'd heard of?

There was a scratching noise outside the transport door, and she froze. It was pitch black, and she couldn't see a thing. The door opened.

"Dawn?"

Dawn huffed out a breath of relief at Vasek's voice. "I'm here." She reached toward the sound of his voice, and he met her, pulling her into his arms. God, did it feel good to know she wasn't alone! She clung to his strong shoulders, burying her face into his chest.

"Are you hurt?"

She tried to assess her body. She was so pumped full of adrenaline that she probably wouldn't even know if she were hurt. "I... I don't think so."

"Good. We have to get moving."

Moving? Where would they go? Did the shuttle have a secret escape pod she didn't know about?

He moved, releasing her. She immediately felt totally alone.

"Come on. We need to go on foot."

On foot? Did that mean we were not in space anymore?

She didn't remember landing. She didn't remember much of anything other than being tossed around like chicken in a shake and bake.

She'd gone full-on ragdoll mode since she'd read somewhere that it would increase her odds of survival.

Wherever she'd read that, it must have been correct because she was still alive, and she didn't have a concussion that she knew of.

She also managed not to puke, which was a miracle.

“Hurry. We need to grab supplies and go. It’s almost dawn.” It took her a moment to realize what he meant. Why was morning bad? Wasn’t the nighttime worse?

“I can’t see in the dark,” she said, reaching her hand out toward where his voice had last come from.

“Fuck. Stay here.”

She did. It wasn’t like she could do anything else.

There was a sound of things being moved around like he was searching for something before a warm glow filled the shuttle outside.

Dawn was carefully getting herself out of the transport as he approached with a lantern.

It wasn’t just the transport that had tilted, but the entire shuttle.

Sudden vertigo had her fighting the bile rising in her throat, and she had to close her eyes.

Collecting all their supplies while tilted like a pinball machine proved to be a challenge, but soon Vasek managed to get a preloaded bag out from the back of the transport and stuff it with extra packs of water and food for her.

How convenient that he already had a bug-out bag ready.

It made Dawn wonder how often he got into pickles like this.

For extra protection, he’d insisted she tie a pair of his shorts onto her hips.

There was no way they would stay up on their own, and on her, they might as well be capris.

He also dug out some self-adhesive bandages and had her wrap the exposed part of her calves with them.

These would've come in handy back on New Rhea, but it wasn't like she could've said, "Hey Vasek, can I wear a pair of your shorts and borrow some bandages so I can escape while your back is turned?"

But the most surprising of all was the sheer number of weapons the medic strapped to his body. There was his blaster in a holster attached to his belt, a knife tucked into his boot, another knife on his belt, and a scythe-like thing across his back.

He strapped the lantern onto her body since she was the one who needed it to see, then opened the shuttle's door.

They were perched precariously in the branches of a tree, or perhaps trees, high off the ground.

Dawn stared out into the jungle canopy in dismay.

They were so high off the ground that she couldn't see the forest floor because the ambient glow of her lantern couldn't even reach it.

If she looked too closely, she got queasy again.

"This is good." Vasek sounded genuinely pleased.

Was this guy serious?

“How is this good? We’ll never make it to the ground.”

“The most deadly predators in these jungles hunt on the forest floor, and they hunt mainly during dawn and dusk. We are safe up here,” he explained as he helped her out onto a solid branch that was nearly as wide as a sidewalk.

Huh, if all the branches were like this, it wouldn’t be too bad.

The first thing Dawn noticed was just how humid it was.

The air felt moist against her skin. The second was the smell of soil and decay.

The first she could do without, but she kind of enjoyed the second.

It had a quality that reminded her of Earth in a way that the forests of New Rhea hadn’t.

The trees were all giant. Absolute units.

Each branch was as big as a trunk back in the forest they’d left just recently.

Everything was green. Even the bark under her feet was covered with a layer of mossy carpeting, and a fern-like plant growing from the crook of the nearest tree branch was almost as tall as her. This was a primordial jungle in every sense of the word.

Had Earth looked like this once?

Vasek squinted at the ship. “Yes. This is ideal. It will be very difficult for the pirates to magnetize to this shuttle in this position. Even cutting into it would be difficult if they wanted to salvage what is inside. And by then, help would be here.”

She perked up at the mention of help. She doubted there was anything nearby, so at least the goal wasn't to walk to their destination, because she doubted she'd survive that even with capable Vasek protecting her.

And now that she thought about it, she'd heard horrible things about the Vosthean jungles.

There were large predators that roamed the forest floors? If the scary predators were down below, then she was staying up here.

"There is nowhere to land safely nearby, so they'd have to be desperate to be sending anyone down, but we should still put a little distance between us and the ship."

Vasek led the way through the highway of branches, and she followed behind, sometimes walking, sometimes crawling. The forest slowly started to lighten, and the red glow of dawn peeked through the foliage.

Then she felt it. She glanced around her nervously. She didn't see anything, but she could swear they were being followed. Instinctively, she reached for Vasek, seeking... comfort? Protection? Validation that she wasn't imagining things? She wasn't sure.

"It feels like we're being followed," she said, her voice sounding too loud despite all the sounds of the waking jungle.

"We are. There is a stalker on us. Look below."

Dawn glanced down into the darkened underbrush. At first, she saw nothing. But then there was a movement in the shadows. She adjusted the lantern and stifled a scream. Right under her, pacing back and forth as if waiting for her to fall, was the granddaddy of all monsters.

It moved like a big cat, stealthily, and had a similar shape too. But it also looked like a lizard, especially the head and jaws. It had mottled brown fur, and the parts that weren't furry looked scaled, though she couldn't really tell for sure from her angle and the light.

As if realizing that its prey had finally noticed it, the creature froze mid-prowl, staying statue-still.

Then came clicking sounds: they were loud, and everything else in the jungle seemed to quiet in response.

Goosebumps prickled the back of her arms, and a sense of impending danger had her ready to bolt.

Then the creature leaped straight up at her.

She shrieked and nearly tripped over herself to get to Vasek. The big Tallean male wrapped her up in the protective cocoon of his arms.

"It can't reach you up here. But it can try to scare you so you fall. Ignore it."

Now he tells her! The thing almost had her too. She wasn't sure she would've been able to stay on the branch if Vasek hadn't been there.

Vasek pointed to a higher branch overhead. "Let's set up the tent on that branch. It should be far enough from the crash site. We'll wait for help there."

Dawn wasn't sure how he planned on setting up a tent on a branch, but didn't question it. She did, however, question how she was going to get up there. She'd need to scale the trunk straight up, and she knew she couldn't do that. "I can't get up there."

“I’ll carry you up. Stay here. I will go up and set up the tent first.”

Dawn released her hold on him reluctantly and grabbed hold of the rough bark.

She watched as he put on a pair of gloves with sharp, pointed fingertips.

Then he leaped, jumping higher than she could possibly hope to jump, grabbed hold of the nearest branch, and was climbing his way up to his destination.

There was enough light to see what he was doing up there, but the crunching of half-dry leaves made it pretty clear to Dawn that the stalker was still below them. Now that she knew it was there, the creature was foregoing stealth altogether. It tried to climb up the nearest trunk to reach her.

When it managed to haul itself a good body’s length, she started to panic.

How was Vasek so sure that it couldn’t reach her up here? She was just about to call out when the creature slid down the wide trunk. Its body just wasn’t made for climbing despite its almost feline shape. Weren’t there big cats on Earth that couldn’t climb because they were too heavy?

Dawn could hear David Attenborough’s memorable voice and cadence explaining it all to her now in her head.

But knowing that it couldn’t climb didn’t make her feel any more relaxed. She kept an eye on it as the sky lightened and the tent started to take shape in the branch above.

Of course! She should’ve known it would be a hanging tent. She’d seen them back on Earth, but those spanned across two or three trees, not just one. But she guessed that with branches the size of trunks, there was no need to worry about whether it could

hold their combined weight.

And Tallean males weighed a lot. Vasek was leaner than some, but still very cut and muscular. Whatever material his pants were made of, they molded to his ass and thighs perfectly and she got a generous eyeful from her vantage point.

Over the course of the trip to Vosthea, she'd started seeing him more as a companion and less as the reluctant alien owner who couldn't wait to offload her at Kean's compound.

She'd also come to the conclusion that her initial judgment of him had been correct after all.

The next time he went into bloodlust, she'd try her best to stay calm and remember that it was still him.

The alien medic was easy on the eyes too, and as the morning sun came up over the trees and illuminated his damned-near-perfect physique, she let herself enjoy the show.

Too bad nothing more happened between them.

Now that she'd decided she liked him, she wouldn't mind getting to know him a little better physically.

She bit her bottom lip as she watched him make his way back down to her branch.

Up here the trunk was a little slimmer, and with the gloves he'd put on and the claws on his feet, he was able to move between the branches and the trunk quite well, though it did take a lot of strength.

Currently, she could see those yummy glutes flexing under the fabric of his pants.

Vasek was soon standing with his back to her, this time without the giant pack of their supplies.

“Hold onto me,” he ordered, lowering himself so she could wrap around him.

“I’m not sure I can hold onto you all the way up. And you can’t hold onto me. You need your hands. There has to be another way.”

“There’s no other way.”

He turned to face her. One second her feet were firmly planted on the branch, and the next, she was plastered against his chest, and they were already climbing. She threw her arms and legs around him with a squeal.

Vasek’s response was a throaty chuckle. The nerve!

“See, you can hang on.”

She was too terrified to make a retort lest she disturb him, and they missed their next branch. So she focused on hanging onto him instead. It was easier for her since she was in front of his body, but she worried that their position would hinder his mobility.

She was particularly nervous when they got to the part where they had to shimmy up the trunk.

Luckily for them his arms were long, and the gloves made his hold strong and secure.

They were halfway up when Dawn realized just how dangerously intimate their position was.

Every movement had them rubbing up together, and by the time Vasek was nearing the final branch, something rock-hard pressed deliciously against her.

Primed by the fantastic show she'd gotten earlier, her body reacted, exploding in sudden desire.

There was no way he did not detect her scent.

It was so strong it felt like she was wearing a giant blinking light-up sign with the words Come Fuck Me Now in big bold letters.

And for once in a very long time, she didn't mind.

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Vasek

Vasek gritted his teeth as he pulled himself up onto the branch where he'd secured their tent. The last few minutes had been absolute torture, and he wasn't sure he'd survive the next few hours trapped in a small space with Dawn.

He was surprised how quickly the olfactinull had exited his system after they'd left his shuttle. But to be fair, he wasn't sure any amount of scent-deadening chemical would be effective when they were smashed front-to-front and she was smelling like lust itself.

It was hard enough keeping his focus, but trying to stay on that Star-cursed tree had been near impossible with how hard his cock had gotten. He wondered how the fuck he was still standing when all the blood in his body was in his crotch.

If Dawn had missed his very obvious reaction to their closeness while they were still climbing, she'd see his erection now.

Safe on the branch, he carefully released her, and she slid down his body, with his legs still on either side of her.

He groaned when for a moment it seemed like the only thing holding her up on his body was his rock-hard cock wedged between her legs.

Their eyes met, and he was instantly lost in the brilliant green in them. He had to resist the sudden urge to bend his head and nuzzle her.

A rustling of leaves from below them reminded him that they were still being hunted, and while the stalker would never be able to reach them up here, it would stick around as long as it could see them.

As Vasek lowered Dawn into the arboreal tent that would be their home for the next light cycle, he was suddenly extremely aware that he had a very important choice to make. Back on the ship, he'd managed to grab the canister of olfactinull and toss it into his pack. But there wasn't much left.

The plan was to use it to spray the trail leading from the shuttle to their hideout, in case the pirates were desperate enough to come after them. It would also encourage the stalker still lurking under the tree to leave. But he doubted there was enough to also spray their tent.

That would mean he'd have to endure on his own with Dawn in an enclosed space, smelling like the promise of heaven itself.

He'd never make it. That much he knew. But their immediate survival was more important. Not to mention, the irrational part of him he'd spent most of his life shoving away had already decided that he'd have Dawn one way or another.

He'd gotten to know her more during their trip over and found he enjoyed her company.

He hadn't realized just how lonely his life had been.

Sure, he saw many different faces in his line of work, but they came quickly and often left in an equal hurry.

When was the last time he'd spent days with someone?

At first, when she pulled everything out of his supply cabinet, he had wondered if they'd made a big mistake. But every so often, he found himself looking at the piles she'd made on his floor and thinking, "Aha! So that's where it went! I was looking for that." There was a method to her madness.

He dropped down into the tent below and was immediately overwhelmed by the bouquet of her lust. It only got stronger after she closed the tent, zipping them in.

One look over at her was enough to make his decision.

The last sprays of the olfactinull would be used to protect them from danger, because he needed her now.

He reached for her, pulling her into his lap.

"Do not be scared. I will never hurt you."

"I'm not scared. Not anymore."

And she wasn't because she was adjusting herself to straddle him, in much the same position she'd been in on the way up here.

"Not even of my fangs?" Vasek bent his head and dragged the tips of his fangs over the thin skin of her neck.

She inhaled sharply, and instead of fear, desire spilled from her. She arched, rubbing their bodies together.

Dawn was his! Vasek moved, lifting his hips and rolling Dawn onto the tent floor. He now regretted how thoroughly he'd dressed her earlier. The belt came off first, before he could pull the oversized top off her body. The shorts were so big on her that they

came off easily too.

Dawn was helping now, her deft fingers making quick work of the fastening on his pants. His cock sprang out from its prison and into her hands, already hard. Once again, there was no fear. Just wanton need as she bent her head to lick the single drop of precum that gathered on the tip.

“Fuck!” The single word ripped from him like a snarl.

Vasek let her explore him with her hands, gritting his teeth, his eyes fixed on the ceiling of the tent. Her hands on him were wonderful, blissful torture. But he worried he would not last.

“Let me see you. All of you.”

He spread her out on the tent floor and took a moment to admire her full breasts, palming them before dipping his head and drawing a nipple between his lips. Dawn moaned, and the little nub pebbled under his tongue. Her hand slid under his tank top to knead his muscles.

He moved over to the second breast until he had twin peaks.

Her scent called to him, and he longed to taste her and feast from the source.

Replacing his mouth with a possessive palm, he cupped her breast, and he trailed kisses down her body.

The need to touch every part of her was so strong that he even recruited his enhanced hand, glad that it gave him just as much feedback as his biological limbs.

Too eager to wait for his mouth to get there, Dawn encouraged him lower, her fingers

tangled in his hair. It made him as hard as a rock to know that she needed him so much. His cock hurt from how hard he was.

He covered her mound with his mouth, and when he did, her dull little nails dug into his scalp. He reached down with one hand and trailed a finger up her inner thigh toward that sweet little pussy.

“Yes!” she hissed, her hips rising to meet him. “More.”

Gone was the terrified female who’d shied away from him. It was so fucking hot how demanding she was, how needy she was for him.

He plunged two thick fingers into her wet channel and covered the top of her pussy with his mouth. Then he was fucking her, his fingers ramming in and out of her depths. It was the vibrations from the low, sustained growl that had her suddenly quiet, a scream caught in her throat.

Vasek growled again, this time following with several rapid flicks of his tongue over the sensitive little spot of pleasure he’d found above her entrance. The pulsing around his fingers was followed by a keening wail that signaled his triumph.

She whined at the loss when he pulled his fingers out to lick them clean.

“Please.” She pulled at him, encouraging him to cover her. “Don’t make me wait.”

“I will never make you wait for anything. You have all of me.”

But his pants were still on his legs, hindering his movement. He let out a frustrated growl and shoved them down before attempting to kick them off. The fabric caught on his claws, and he snarled.

The sudden fear that filled the tent was not the effect he wanted.

“Do not be frightened.” Stars, please do not let her change her mind; he would die right now if he couldn’t have her.

But it wasn’t his outburst that had frightened her.

“The tent.” She clutched at him, scared. “It’s swinging so much.”

“The tent is secure. We will not fall,” he reassured her, glad that he’d done the optional tie-downs by securing the tent to the large trunk as well. There was just enough movement to account for the swaying of the trees even in a storm, but that wasn’t nearly as wild as it could be otherwise.

He tried to kick his pants off again, and she whimpered as the tent swung harder.

“I will flip us. The tent will move less.” And those fucking pants wouldn’t be in the way.

He did just that, flipping them over so that she was on top, straddling him.

Stars, she was beautiful. Her hair formed a golden halo around her shoulders, and he wanted to worship her more than any goddess. Inspiration suddenly hit, and he pulled her down over his body and captured her lips with his.

Dawn

Vasek was kissing her human-style!

And holy hell, was he good with his tongue. She tasted herself on him, and it was a total turn-on. Heavy hands palmed her ass, his fingers kneading her flesh as he

claimed her mouth.

She writhed against the hard cock that was trapped between their bodies, suddenly not caring if the tent was swinging or not.

When he had first flipped her, she felt for a moment that she was the one in control, but that illusion was quickly dashed. Vasek was so big and strong that if he wanted to, he could break her in half. But he was being so gentle, and trying so hard to keep the feral beast at bay.

Suddenly feeling brave, she reached back and gripped his cock, marveling at the velvety feel of the thick, rigid shaft.

The veins were so prominent that she could feel them under her fingertips.

Vasek's hand was there too, lining them up.

Then his hands were on her hips, pressing her down to his broad, mushroom-shaped head.

She gasped at how big he felt and tried to slow down, but Vasek's hands on her hips were like a vise. Every movement only forced her down his hard length, stretching her open.

Vasek's eyes were closed and his head tilted back. Mouth open and fangs on display, he panted like he was barely in control.

As the pinch of pain transformed into pleasure, she rocked her hips. The motion had her moaning. Then Vasek was lifting, but Dawn only had a moment of reprieve before he was slamming her back down on his cock. She let out a breathy scream.

A snarl escaped Vasek's lips, and his hips jerked, thrusting into her hard.

She fell forward onto his chest, eyes wide at how full she was.

She wasn't sure she could take any more.

But before she could recover, Vasek was fucking her, his restraint gone.

He pistoned up into her wildly, drawing scream after scream from her lips until there was nothing but blinding pleasure.

Vasek's eyes were open now, and she found herself lost in the dark depths as the first wave crashed into her, turning her screams into sobs.

"Fuck. You feel so good around me. So fucking tight."

He continued driving into her, and a vicious snarl filled the tent the moment before he seemed to grow even larger inside her.

He shifted and the change had him hitting something inside her that sent shockwaves of delight through her body.

Fully consumed by ecstasy, she crested, her body shaking and quivering so hard she wondered if she'd ever survive.

Vasek's roar joined her scream, his hips jerking, as spurts of hot seed filled her.

Dawn was acutely aware that she'd collapsed on top of him, but when she tried to move, he wrapped his arms around her possessively, keeping her in place. She listened to their hearts beating together as the sounds of nature filled the tent.

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Vasek

Vasek depressed the tab of the canister again, but nothing came out except for a tiny hiss of air.

He shoved the canister back into his pack.

He'd retraced their steps halfway back to the shuttle.

And it seemed the pirates had not lost interest, because Vasek could see two ships hovering above.

The question was whether they'd sent any shuttles down, and if they had, where did they land?

If they hadn't, maybe they'd give up after realizing how precariously perched the shuttle was, and decide to focus on their next victim instead. But Vasek wasn't willing to bet on it.

And how in Stars' name was Vasek going to get his ship safely out of its treacherous position?

It was time to call in that favor. He needed a rescue. The plan originally had been to call in the rescue immediately after landing, but he had been pleasantly distracted by one super sexy female.

It was well into the morning by now, and with the olfactinull he'd sprayed below

their tent hiding their scent, the stalker had gone back to its den to sleep off the hottest part of the day.

But when it woke up with an empty belly, it would remember and find them again.

And by then, the chemical would be starting to fade.

They didn't have any more of it left since he'd used the final bit to mask their trail away from the shuttle, which was why he needed to call on someone who'd get to them quickly.

Pulling out his comm unit, he went through his contacts looking for the best option.

It would need to be someone likely to be around Vosthea, and preferably have the means to rescue his shuttle as well.

And it needed to be someone who wouldn't turn around and steal Dawn from him.

He'd promised her he would bring her to Kean's compound, and he wasn't going to let a dishonorable thief make him break his promise.

But what if he wanted to break that promise himself? What if he wanted to keep her? What if he'd finally found the one person he was willing to risk it all with?

He could offer her a job on the ship. Technically, she would still get her freedom, but with him. He wasn't sure she would take it, though, not after what she'd seen of his life these past few days. His life wasn't always this exciting, but it wasn't event-free either.

What if he was the one who finally broke this horrible streak of bad luck in his family? This line of thinking was dangerous, and Stars did he know it! But he

couldn't stop the idea from filling his chest with warmth and hope.

Had he lost the gamble already? Was this the mate bond starting?

He'd let her choose whether she wanted to stay with him or at Kean's compound. He had to be there for the unification celebration anyway.

He selected Berus's contact. Berus looked like a total brute, but was actually a good and honorable male.

He also had a female of his own. The most recent news was that Cami had decided to stay with him, joining the crew of the New Horizon , formerly known as the Revenge .

It would also mean that Vasek might be able to convince the crew to help him get his shuttle out of the trees.

The New Horizon would have the capability since the crew sometimes dealt in salvages.

"My friend. How can I help you?" Berus's voice came from the speaker, scaring a few small creatures that had gotten used to Vasek's silent presence.

"I'd like to call in a favor." Vasek started back toward his tent, eager to see Dawn again.

"Of course. I'd never deny a male who's saved my life. What do you need?"

"I require an immediate evac. I'm in the Vosthean jungles, and I need to get to Kean's stronghold. There are enemies after us." He sure hoped that Berus was on the planet, and not in the middle of a mission. There wasn't anyone else who would be as

ideal a candidate.

“You are not alone?”

Vasek couldn't miss the interest in Berus's voice.

He hesitated. Berus was Dominion once, and despite Vasek's insistence that he hadn't wanted a mate because of his job, he wondered if Berus knew the real reason.

Surely, Berus had heard about the curse.

“N-no. That's why I called you and not someone else.

I assume you still have a human female, so you will not covet this one.”

“You have a human woman?” asked a surprised-sounding and definitely feminine voice in the background. Cami must be with him.

“Yes. No.” Vasek looked even more flustered. “It's... a long story. I know the jungles are dangerous, but can you please bring Cami? This one is wary and doesn't trust me. I think a friendly face will help her relax.”

Even as he said the words, he wondered if there was truth to them anymore. Yes, Dawn had been wary of him, but that was days ago. But seeing a happy, well-adjusted human would definitely help. Maybe Cami could convince her that Earth was no longer an option.

There was a short pause as if the brute of a male was weighing whether it was too dangerous to bring his female along.

“I will bring her. Send me your location, and we'll be on our way.”

Vasek relaxed. "Thank you."

Then he sent all the information he thought they might need, including images of his shuttle's current predicament, and a code to track his whereabouts through his comm unit. Help would be here soon. He just hoped that the New Horizon got here before the pirates found them.

Dawn

It was the sudden deathly quiet that had alerted Dawn to the presence of a predator near her tent.

She hadn't even realized how loud the jungle was, with the constant sounds of bird-like noises and the rustling of foliage as the small animals moved around them, until everything just stopped.

It was quieter now than it had been when she'd first noticed the stalker earlier.

Did that mean this predator was more dangerous?

Or did it only mean that it was more dangerous to those up in the trees?

What if it wasn't a predator but a sign that something bigger was about to happen?

A ship flying overhead? She didn't hear any engines.

And she knew what Talleen ships sounded like.

They were not silent like the electric vehicles back on Earth.

Didn't animals go silent before earthquakes? The calm before the storm. Or was that

a myth?

But then she heard the rustling outside her tent and to the right. Dawn froze. A feeling of dread filled her chest.

She tried to tell herself that it was just Vasek coming back, but she knew better. The many creatures of the jungle hadn't gone mute when he'd left, so why would they clam up now?

There was another faint rustling, this time from the left. Her eyes darted to that side, peering at the tough alien fabric of the tent like she expected a claw to slice right through it. To her relief, none did. But the spine-tingling sound of many feet along rough bark had her holding her breath.

Was that from one creature with many legs? Or many creatures with few legs? She didn't know which one was better. One big, scary thing. Or a swarm of smaller, but still just as scary things.

Dawn almost shrieked when something landed on the tent. She plastered herself flat against the floor, her heart pounding so hard in her chest that she worried the thing outside could hear it.

There wasn't enough light outside to cast a shadow of whatever it was, but there were light indentations where the creature's feet were, and the tent was swinging just a little more now. Which meant this thing had some weight. It made scratching sounds on the tent as it moved.

Dawn followed its movement toward the mesh viewing port at the side of the tent. Shit! How strong was that mesh?

Then it came into view, and this time, a small scream left her lips before she could

stop it.

From her angle, all she could see of the head of the creature was the mouth.

It reminded her of a starfish's mouth or maybe an octopus's mouth—just a big maw in the center of the head with rows and rows of sharp teeth, each pointing inward.

It had antennae too. Not just one set but several sticking out around its head.

It was clearly an arthropod of some type.

She wasn't sure if there were such things on this planet.

But it was definitely buggy, with a hard shell on the outside.

And it was huge. The scratching of its feet behind her told her that it was at least as long as the tent.

Vasek had no problem lying down in this tent, so this thing was at least seven feet long, probably longer.

It crawled over the viewing port, giving her a view of the different segments of its body. It was like an alien centipede, except not, because the segments were not smooth; instead, they were hard and spiky. Whatever it was, it was a hunter. And right now, it wanted her.

Her heart dropped when she realized there was more than one of them. The first had just cleared the viewing port when she saw the second one on a branch. Then it was flying toward the tent, aimed at the viewing port, its many legs extended to the side like a face-hugger.

Holy crap, she was screwed. She'd made it all the way here, so close to freedom, only to get eaten by alien centipede face-huggers. Well, at least she'd had some mind-blowing sex with Vasek before it all ended.

The creatures weren't completely stupid either, because they both zeroed in on the mesh portion of the tent, probably realizing it was most likely the weakest. They stank too. Now that they'd walked across the mesh, she could smell them. It was like stinky feet with a side of carrion.

She wanted to hurl. And for a moment, she wondered if that would deter them from eating her, but then they might just eat her faster.

The creatures gnawed at the mesh, but the flexible grid was made of tough stuff, so they tried clawing at it instead.

Fuck! They had claws too?

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They couldn't quite rip up the mesh, but they were leaving marks all over it. One side looked ready to tear.

Dawn had never been so glad to hear the sound of a Tallean blaster.

There was a piercing zing as a bolt of energy sliced through the air, hitting one of the creatures and knocking it off the tent.

The scent of burnt protein and ozone combined with the putrid smell of the creature had her wishing they had more of that olfactinull stuff and that it actually worked on humans.

She'd learned the hard way after purchasing some marketed as a deodorizing spray for Kotch once that humans were immune to the effects of the chemical. It had hidden the horrible stench of a creature that had crawled up into his home's roof and died well enough from his nose, but not from hers.

There was the smell of burning plastic or similar, and she worried that the tent was burning with her in it. Then she was coughing and wheezing. She covered her face with the fabric of her makeshift dress, trying to filter out the stench.

There was more blaster fire and the vibration of something large and much heavier than those bugs landing on the tent. The sound of the zip opening—yes, Talleans had their own form of zippers too—was loud in the once-again silent jungle, and Vasek stuck his head in.

He waved his arm at her. "Get out of there. Let it air out."

Dawn let him help her up onto the branch, still coughing and wheezing, all the while watching her surroundings for signs of the creatures. She saw a few singe marks on the branches and trunks around them, but no man-eating starfish-centipede-face-huggers.

He guided her to the crook of the branch and sat down cross-legged, pulling her into his lap. "Help is coming soon. We wait."

But Dawn was still scanning the trees, sure that one of those things would be back.

"They won't be back," Vasek assured her. "And even if they are, those creatures are not known to attack Talleans."

"Just humans? That doesn't make me feel any better."

"Well, you are good enough to eat. But if more come, I will dispose of them."

"If you don't, I'll never forgive you."

Vasek hadn't been wrong yet, so Dawn relaxed, and soon so did the rest of the forest.

Most of the afternoon had gone by when the sound of a large ship rumbled the skies above the jungle. Dawn couldn't actually see the ship through the thick canopy above them, but Dawn felt and heard it.

And by the sound of it, this ship dwarfed the two pirate ships that had been looking for them.

"You should've seen how quickly those two ships fled when they saw us coming,"

said a gruff male voice on the other end of the line when Vasek picked up the comm.

Dawn leaned over to check out his screen. There were two males, one sitting in front who was dressed as the captain, and another Tallean behind him who was so big he took up most of the screen.

“Uzzar, Berus. Just the males I was hoping to see.”

“It’s been some time,” said the captain. This was another voice, so the big guy must’ve been the first one who’d spoken. “We are hovering over your signal location,” the captain continued. “Do you have a way to signal us?”

“I do,” Vasek said. “I’ve got a signal flare.”

“Get as high as you can. But make sure you are stable enough to connect yourself to the line we’re sending down. Do we need to prepare for any injuries? How is the female with you?”

Dawn tensed at the mention of her, suddenly wondering if she was truly safe with these Talleans. They looked tough.

“She is fine. We are both uninjured.”

“Good, then let’s get you two up here, and we can figure out how to get your shuttle out. You crashed that thing good.” The captain frowned. “I expect one of the idiots on my crew to do something like this, but not you.”

Vasek chuckled. “They can’t have all the fun.”

The captain just grunted and ended the comm.

“Let’s go signal for our ride out of here,” Vasek said, reaching for the tent’s zipper.

Dawn stood on the branch and watched Vasek pack up the tent.

Detaching it from the tree was a bit fiddly, but she was surprised to see how easily it packed up.

The shelter they’d been staying in all day, protecting them from the elements and the wildlife outside, was just several easy steps away from fitting back into a slim, waterproof sack about the size of her legs.

It was strapped neatly back onto Vasek’s pack in minutes.

Then, they were scaling the branches to get as high as possible. Or rather, Vasek was carrying her up, branch by branch.

Dawn was glad to be finally leaving the wilds. Despite her stay here being relatively uneventful compared to how much danger she knew surrounded them, she was done being in the wilderness, no matter which planet it was on, for a very long time.

But she also wasn’t so sure about boarding this ship. The male on the screen had looked big and brutish, terrifying even. And Vasek had hesitated briefly before calling the older Tallean male Uzzar. Was that something she should know about the New Horizon ?

What if they weren’t as trustworthy as Vasek thought they were? Now that she’d had a taste of freedom, even with Vasek, or was that especially with Vasek, she didn’t want to ever end up on the auction block again. Not even if her new owner was on his way to Earth.

Yup, that was right, sometime in the last few days, freedom had trumped seeing Earth

again, which was huge to Dawn. And it was all because of Vasek.

But that didn't mean that getting back to Earth wasn't still at the top of her list of to-dos. It was. It just meant that she now had a secondary goal, which was to remain free.

Dawn had known that the ship coming to get them was big from the shadow it cast. But it wasn't until Vasek moved aside the bough overhead that she finally saw it in the late afternoon sun. She gasped. This thing wasn't just any old ship. It was a Dominion warship!

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Dawn

Dawn didn't know who she expected to greet her at the top of the rescue cable, but it certainly wasn't the multicolored-haired woman currently helping her out of the makeshift harness Vasek had made for her with his belt.

“Hi, I'm Roxy. You must be Dawn. Welcome aboard the New Horizon .”

The woman wore a jacket with the ship's name on it, a jacket that was very clearly tailored for her body. No Talleen female was that busty. She looked and acted like a part of the crew, so Dawn assumed she was. The woman held out a hand.

As the door of the ship closed behind her, Dawn reached for the offered hand, but instead of a shake, the woman pulled her in for a big hug. As she looked over Roxy's shoulder, she realized Roxy wasn't the only human on board.

Dawn gawked at the very human grins and faces that stood in the next room, waiting to greet her.

Vasek had told her that a few of the males onboard, including the captain, had human mates, but he'd failed to tell her that half the crew was human.

Well, maybe not half the crew, unless this was a very small crew.

Maybe the humans were just all here to greet her?

Dawn and Vasek found themselves ushered into the larger common room, and she

realized she was staring and being rude. Oops.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to stare. I’m just a bit shocked.”

She knew Trenton’s ships were manned by humans, but Vasek hadn’t mentioned that this was one of them.

And of course, there were the Wildview starliners, but this wasn’t a cruise ship either.

Were there others as well? It would make sense considering how many Earthlings had ended up in the outer planets.

Of course there would be other ships with human crew. Duh!

“Vasek didn’t tell you we’re a half-human crew?” asked a man in a polo that looked like it belonged more in a business casual office back on Earth than on a Dominion warship in the outer planets. “I’m Dex, by the way.”

He offered a hand, and this time when Dawn reached for it, she braced in case it was another hug. But instead, the man kissed her hand.

Behind her, Vasek let out a low growl. In an instant, he was between her and the new man. Dex danced away behind one of the biggest Talleans Dawn had ever seen. It was the male on the screen, except he was even bigger in real life. That guy was a mountain.

“Dex,” the captain said, still leaning against a wall, his muscular arms crossed over his chest. “Try not to antagonize our guest.”

Then Dex proceeded to name everyone. Vasek seemed unfamiliar with many of the crew, so it must be his first time meeting them as well.

The giant guy Dawn had seen in the video feed was Berus; he was easy to remember because he was huge.

Next to him was a pretty human woman with light, reddish brown hair and brown eyes named Camila.

The captain was Uzzar, and his mate, a dark-haired woman in coveralls and a pair of pruning shears sticking out of one of the pockets, was Lana.

Dawn tried, but couldn't catch many of the other names. She was still too much in shock. She'd even forgotten Roxy's mate's name, though Dex had just said it a moment ago.

"Why don't I give you a quick tour of the ship?" Dex offered with a wide grin. He'd somehow gotten next to Dawn again. He offered her an elbow with a wink.

The guy was a bit of a flirt, but Dawn didn't get any bad vibes from him.

He didn't come off as sleazy or anything, just fun and playful.

Dawn wasn't exactly interested in a fling or anything else right now, but she wouldn't mind a tour either.

She'd always wondered what the inside of a Dominion warship looked like.

But Vasek was in between them again before she could even react.

"She does not need a tour," he growled.

What the fuck. Why was Vasek acting like this? Was he... jealous? This wasn't the reaction of someone who just wanted to drop her off to fulfill his promise.

The captain stepped up, and Dawn took an automatic step back. He positively reeked of power even though he looked older and past his prime.

“Dex, your job is to put those brain cells of yours to work and get his shuttle out from the tree in one piece. Roxy can give her the tour.”

“Aww, fine. Roxy gets all the fun jobs.” But Dex didn’t seem that upset at all as he gave Dawn a flirty wink.

“Ignore him,” Roxy said, taking her aside as Dex, Uzzar, and one of the other Talleans disappeared into a side room. “Dex is harmless, but he does get kinda annoying over time. Come on, you’re going to love the greenroom.”

Roxy started leading her down one corridor, and Cami followed them. They were soon stepping into a lush tropical jungle, right there on the ship. Everything smelled fresh and green. The captain’s mate was already inside, reaching for a wayward vine with a pair of pruning shears in hand.

“Welcome to my little piece of paradise,” she said. “I’m the greenroom tech.”

It was only now that Dawn realized that the ship’s name and logo were on the woman’s coveralls as well. It had been covered by her hair during the introductions.

Dawn wondered if Lana had gotten the job first, then had an onboard romance with the older captain, or if she’d gotten the job because they were mates.

“This place is beautiful,” Dawn said honestly. “I used to collect houseplants, and always wanted an indoor jungle like this, but I was never this good at it.”

“These plants are specially selected for use on the ship. They all work together synergistically. I barely have to do anything except keep the growth under control.”

“Whatever,” Roxy said with an eye roll. “Don’t listen to Delaney. She’s a miracle worker with these plants. We all tried to save this place and failed before she came around.”

“You guys were killing it with love!”

Then, before Dawn could figure out what felt a bit off about this interaction, because something was, Cami asked, “Can I bring these over for the tepins?” She was standing next to the basket of discarded vines and plants.

“Give me one moment, I’ve got a few more.”

Lana quickly clipped a few more vines and tossed them into the basket. Then Dawn was following Roxy out of the greenroom. They didn’t go far, just across the hall. Cami went in first with the discarded vines.

“This is our food production lab,” Cami said. “Here’s the herbs I’ve been growing.”

Dawn frowned at the very familiar plant, then found herself walking toward it. “It is... oh my god, it is! It’s basil!”

Cami joined her, pinching off the top of one of the growth points and handing it to her. “Sure is! This stuff grows like weeds hydroponically, and we’ve gotten the Talleans on board liking it too.”

“This is your job then?” Dawn asked.

“Yep! Well, technically, running this and cooking is a two-person job, but I only cook proper meals every few days. The other days are fend-for-yourself days. Plus, Berus helps with the tepins,” she gestured over to the enclosures stacked one on top of another on the other side of the room, “since he doesn’t do much on the ship. ”

“Well, considering he eats most of the tepins, he better help,” Roxy said.

“If we’re going to split hairs, Nibbles eats more than Berus does now.”

Nibbles? That was a strange name for a human or a Tallean. It must be a nickname.
“Who’s that?”

“Nibbles is just the most adorable little cutie patootie on this side of the galaxy,”
Roxy replied, dissolving into baby talk.

That was not very helpful. That description could be anything, and Dawn still had no idea what Nibbles was.

Cami went to the other side of the room and opened one of the clear enclosure doors and started stuffing handfuls of the discarded greenery into it. Almost immediately, several chubby birds came to fight over the scraps.

Dawn had prepared and eaten tepins before, but she’d never seen the meat in bird form. Heck, she didn’t even know they were birds. The meat had come prepackaged in strips, ready for cooking.

“So those are tepins! I had no idea they were so cute.”

“Yep,” Cami replied. “Their biggest downfall is that they’re so tasty.”

“I’d call it a rise to fame and not a downfall,” Dawn said. “Their tastiness means they will never go extinct.”

“I agree!” Roxy said, nodding. Then, seeing that Dawn had started helping Cami feed the chubby little birds, she said, “I’m going to go get Nibbles from my room. Why don’t I meet you two in the hall in a few minutes?”

“Sure! We’ll see you there.”

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

Vasek

Despite the fact that the human male had come up with an ingenious plan to get his shuttle safely out of the trees, Vasek still wanted to punch him in the face. He hadn't missed the way Dex had looked at Dawn. They might be different species, but Vasek knew interest when he saw it.

"Ignore the male," Ulrek said when they were alone in his office. "He tries his hand with every pretty female he sees. Calls it a numbers game. If you ask me, he's just like any other young Tallean male."

Dex, Berus, and Vhast were out putting the brainy human's plan into action.

Vasek had wanted to help since it was his shuttle, but was told he'd just get in the way, which had made him want to maim the mouthy human even more.

But he didn't for Ulrek's sake. The captain had come to his rescue, offering the use of his ship and his crew, even though it had been a favor asked of Berus.

Vasek didn't want to cause any trouble for the infamous captain.

Vasek had never worked on Ulrek himself, but he'd known him from back when he'd been with the Dominion. He hadn't been particularly close with him, but the captain had worked with his father for a while.

Ulrek had been one of the few people who'd known where Vasek had disappeared to after he'd called it quits and disappeared.

The two shared one interesting thing in common: they both had a robotic arm, on the same side too.

But Ulrek had only lost his real arm recently and was still getting used to the new one.

Currently, the captain was mindlessly doing the exercises suggested to help connect the nerves and brain to the enhanced limb, touching his thumb from fingertip to fingertip.

Vasek wondered who'd done the work. He couldn't see the joining on his forearm so whoever had done it must've been well-trained.

But that could be part of Ulrek's disguise.

He'd gone on screen earlier as Uzzar, which Vasek had taken to mean that he wanted to keep his secret a little while longer in front of Dawn.

And sure enough, Dex had introduced him as Uzzar and his mate as Lana, instead of as Ulrek and Delaney.

Vasek already knew, so it had to be because they weren't sure of Dawn.

If Dawn decided to stay with him or with Kean, she'd figure it out eventually anyway.

Most important people out here knew, and the rest were so certain that Uzzar was who he said he was they didn't question it. His disguise was very convincing.

Ulrek opened a cabinet and took out some good Rhean spirits and two heavy glass tumblers, set them onto the table, and poured them each a drink.

“It’s been a while, Vasek. I can’t believe you’re still doing what you do.” The captain held up his glass.

Vasek frowned at the strange motion, and Ulrek chuckled, putting his drink down.

“I’ve been around humans for too long. They have a tradition of clinking glasses together as a sign of respect and solidarity.”

Seeing all the humans on board had been a bit startling. He’d known Ulrek had taken on a half-human crew, but he’d never actually met them, aside from Cami.

“I am surprised you are so protective over a female, especially with the new development with your brother.”

Vasek froze with his tumbler halfway to his mouth. New development?

“Have you not heard then.” Ulrek’s words were a statement, rather than a question.

“I have been out in the jungles, evading capture. And before that, I had my news tuned in elsewhere.”

“On New Rhea, and what was happening with Kotch and Bakum, I wager. And then on Morad.” Ulrek didn’t miss much.

“I thought the female looked familiar. I purchased a small shipment of armaments from him for the ship recently. Dawn does not recognize me, but I went with only the Talleans on my crew to avoid too much attention.”

And if she had, she hadn’t shown it.

“I suppose she sees many people working for Kotch, and wouldn’t recognize yet

another captain.” Not one to play games with hints and double speak, Vasek got straight to the point. “What is this about my brother?”

“Ranek escaped lock-up. They tried to recapture him but lost him two days ago and have not found him since. With your sire gone, there isn’t enough reason to put any more credits into his recapture.”

Vasek immediately knew the implication. His brother was probably coming to the outer planets. And if he was anything like the last time the two had met, he was dangerous.

It was so long ago, years, almost a decade ago. Stars! How time flies.

Would he still be blaming Vasek for the death of his mate?

Technically, she hadn’t been his mate yet, since she was bonded to someone else.

But Ranek’s bond had already been fully formed, so her death had hit him hard even though the female had never accepted him.

And Vasek hadn’t truly been at fault for her death; he’d tried everything to save her.

But her handiwork had been thorough, and death had claimed her, just like she’d wanted.

What a horrible joke the Goddess had played, giving Ranek a mate who’d already loved another. Then, when her family had ordered her to form a partnership of convenience with Ranek instead because they disapproved of the other male, the two lovers had taken their lives.

It had been tragic. It was after this incident that people started referring to his

family's inability to find happy matings as a curse.

Fuck! What the hell had he been thinking?

How could he be considering offering Dawn the option to stay with him?

It would only end tragically. And what would happen when Ranek arrived in the outer planets?

Would his brother still want his blood for failing to save Channa's life?

If Dawn were with him, Ranek would target her for sure.

These past few days with her had been magical, a small taste of what life could be if Vasek wasn't cursed to be alone forever, but that was all it could ever be.

"Thank you for the warning," Vasek said, the vision of what he had to do now clearing in his mind.

"Berus said we are dropping you off at Kean's compound. It surprised me, but now that I see you have a female, I can see why you might consider taking the offer to work for him."

Vasek grunted. "Dawn is not my female." Just saying the words felt wrong, but he had to get used to it.

"No? You seemed rather protective of her."

"Bakum left her with me. I promised to bring her to Kean's stronghold. So I will. I will not let some human male lure her away before I can fulfill my promise." That sounded like a cop-out even to Vasek's own ears. "Kean is also expecting me. I am

joining the festivities this year.”

“I see.” Ulrek downed the rest of his drink in one go.

“It’s for the best you stay at Kean’s for a while anyway. He has good, reliable mechanics who can get your shuttle back in perfect working order. My mechanic isn’t in right now. Neither is my medic.”

“I did notice that Tahra isn’t here.”

“She’s taken up with my mechanic. The whole ship knows it, but they’re still trying to be discreet.

It’s some strange human hang-up Gavin has about ‘banging Tuhror’s sister.

” Ulrek shook his head. “They are so similar to us, sometimes I forget they are another species until one of them says something like that.”

That reminded Vasek. “Congratulations on finding a mate. May the...” he paused, trying to figure out if the captain preferred the Stars or the Goddess; Ulrek had been Dominion for much of his life.

“The Stars. I have left the Goddess’s arms long ago, much the same as you.”

Vasek understood. The captain had done more than enough in the name of a false goddess; it was time he made his own way in the universe. Vasek had done that himself, just much earlier. Losing an arm and a brother in one go did that to someone.

“Then, may the Stars look kindly on your mating.” Vasek put his fist to his chest, with the smaller finger facing outward.

Ulrek did the same, returning the gesture.

The captain's comm unit buzzed, and he picked it up to read the screen. "Ah, your shuttle is safely on board."

That was quick.

Ulrek stood, and Vasek finished his drink. "Let's go see the damage."

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

Dawn

Man, did it feel good to be clean and in actual clothes again!

After their visit with the tepins, they'd gone past the medical bay, and Cami had asked if she wanted to take a quick shower before meeting up with Roxy again.

"She wouldn't mind at all," Cami had assured her. "I'll just let her know we're here."

The detour had been a wonderful idea. The New Horizon had a cleansing unit in the medical bay, and Dawn hadn't realized how dirty she was until she saw the water draining away. She felt so much better, and smelled better too.

And she didn't even need to get back into dirty clothes after.

Cami had put the clothes Vasek had lent her in the clothes decontaminator and had a fresh set that actually fit her ready.

Dawn was now dressed in a soft, stretchy top with the New Horizon's logo on the chest, and a pair of sweatpants in a soft but durable alien fabric.

"I owe you big time, Cami."

"Nah, it's on Ul...Uzzar. It's technically a part of the uniform. We go through them quickly, especially the tops. Delaney and Roxy are in the mess hall. Let's go find them."

There it was again. Cami just called her Delaney. Dawn was sure it had been Lana during the intros. Oh well, maybe Lana was a nickname.

Food sounded perfect. She was ravenous.

As she walked to the ship's mess hall, Dawn couldn't kick the feeling that something was really off, like if she closed her eyes for too long, reality would disappear.

Everything felt too good to be true, which meant it wasn't.

What were these people hiding? She felt horrible about feeling like this too, because these women had been nothing but nice to her.

A giant pom-pom running at full speed at her jogged her out of her thoughts. The creature was cute until it opened its mouth. Holy chompers, Batman!

Cami dashed in front of Dawn and caught the toothy furball in her arms. But it continued to snarl and snap its teeth in Dawn's direction, like a chihuahua on Red Bull.

"Sorry!" Roxy exclaimed, running toward them. "I didn't know Nibbles was going to react that way."

"I think we need to get him used to strangers now that he's getting a little bigger. He's getting a little possessive over us," Cami said.

"A little?" Dawn's question came out on this side of incredulous.

"Okay, more than a little. He needs training before we end up with a situation."

The way Cami said the word "situation" made it seem like she thought the little pom-

pom would swallow someone whole. It was probably still a baby, but how big could it get?

Roxy handed Dawn a bundle of polymer-coated wire. “Here, hand that to him. Wires are his secret kryptonite.”

Dawn eyed the bundle warily before carefully offering it to the toothed pom-pom, keeping her hand as far away from the toothy maw as possible. Nibbles yanked it from her hand then, chewing happily on the wire.

“Okay, I think you might be right, Cami,” Roxy said. “I think we need to get him a trainer.”

“There’s the dragus breeder at Reka 5. We can drop by next time and see if they have any recommendations,” Lana said.

Dawn gawked at the feast laid out in front of her. Everything was mildly familiar but not totally recognizable as any Earth dish. “We weren’t sure what you wanted, so we got the food replicator to make a bunch of stuff. We can all share.”

They did, and as they ate, they talked. Nibbles ate with them, devouring the raw, unplucked tepins whole until he was so stuffed that he couldn’t even lift his head.

Thus incapacitated, Dawn finally ventured to pet the creature on the head.

It was just as soft as it looked. It was crazy that such a cute and fluffy thing could be so bloodthirsty.

It wasn’t long before the topic of Earth came up.

“Yeah, you really don’t want to go back to Earth,” Roxy said.

“I know, you probably think it’s something the Talleans tell us so we don’t run off. But I’m telling you, I’ve seen the footage when I was still back in the inner planets,” Cami said. “Earth is a mess. The Dominion has control of most of the big cities, and the rest are owned by the SOG.”

“The what?” Dawn had never heard of them.

“Soldiers of God,” Cami clarified. “It’s Earth’s reaction to the Dominion and its Goddess.”

“A resistance?”

“Kinda.” Cami made a face.

“Then why are we here? We need to go back and help!”

The women all looked at her like she was crazy. What the actual fuck? She wasn’t the crazy one—they were, for settling for a life out here.

“I’m not sure they’ll accept your help even if you could make it back to Earth,” Cami said. “Which is highly doubtful anyway. If there’s one crew that could make the trip and survive, you’re looking at it. And trust me, we aren’t going.”

Dawn scowled. What was so special about this crew anyway? Sure, they were half human, but that didn’t make them any more suited to get to Earth.

“Trust me, Dawn. You don’t want to try to get back to Earth,” Roxy said again.

“So what, you want me to be like you guys? Find some Tallean man and pretend to be happy?”

Roxy put her hands on her hips. “Hey, that’s not fair! You don’t know anything about me. I fought tooth and nail to get to Kean’s compound. Then I had to be literally the best on the entire planet to get noticed and hired for this job.”

Lana put a calming hand on Roxy. “It’s okay. She’s just upset. We all went through this.”

“Anyway, you don’t want to help the Soldiers of God,” Cami continued.

“I wouldn’t exactly call them the good guys in the fight.

They’ll probably use you to pump out a bunch of future soldiers.

That is if they don’t deem you already tainted and stone you to death.

Earth decided to fight fire with fire. The Dominion went in with their Goddess bullshit, and Earth thought, hey, we can one-up that.

Imagine if all the most fanatical religious nuts got together and decided to write one singular holy text to rule them all.

Trust me, it’s much better out here now.

“Last I heard, there’s a small faction of the Dominion Army that defected and joined up with a bunch of humans who weren’t so gung-ho about the new religion. And even they are trying to find a way to get out and set up base as far from Earth and the Dominion as possible.”

Dawn was shaking her head now. Sure, Dawn had heard bits and pieces here and there. And every time she’d tell herself that whoever was saying it was mistaken, maybe they were lying, or maybe they were lied to. But Cami was so honest. And

that was the worst part, because Dawn believed her.

“I’m sorry, Dawn. I know it’s hard to accept, and I don’t expect you to believe everything I’m saying, but please, consider anything else instead of returning to Earth. Kean’s place is really nice if you like nature. And there’s always Reka 5.”

Suddenly, Dawn lost her appetite. She also lost her cool. “I’m so fucking sick of hearing about Kean’s compound and Reka 5. If you want those to be your home, fine! But don’t drag me into it. Those aren’t my home. Earth is home. I want to go home!”

It was only after her outburst that she realized that they were no longer alone.

Dex, Berus, and an older human man whose name she didn’t remember were at their table.

Great, more people to witness her being completely irrational.

Now she felt like a grade-A turd. These people had been nothing but nice to her.

Dex, bless him, pretended not to hear her outburst and instead snatched what passed for a chicken tender, or was that a tepin tender, off her plate. “Are you gonna eat this?”

Then, before he could get it to his mouth, Nibbles woke and lunged at the tepin strip so fast it was a blur. Dex almost lost a finger.

“Dang it!”

“That’ll teach ya to dangle your meat in front of the ladies,” said the older man, cracking up. Then the three men hurried over to the replicators for their own dinners.

Dawn noticed the moment Vasek's eyes were on her. She looked up to see him and the captain walking in. The moment their eyes met, Vasek looked away.

"Vasek is nice," Cami said. "He helped Berus and me when we were in New Rhea. I'm glad we were able to return the favor. Are you staying with him after?"

It took Dawn a moment to realize that the question was aimed at her. Cami was trying to gloss over her outburst and make things less awkward.

"I... I don't know. I accidentally ended up with Vasek, and he promised to bring me to Kean's compound. He never asked, so I don't think so."

Which was how she'd wanted it in the first place. With her freedom, she'd be able to find a way back to Earth. The thought of Earth had her feeling guilty.

"I'm sorry I yelled," Dawn said. "I just..."

"It's okay. We've all been through it. Some react worse than others."

Dawn sniffed. "You mean more delusional?"

"We have people on Reka 5 who still think Earth is viable," Lana said.

She'd been quite silent for a while now.

"They aren't dangerous when they are alone.

But when they get together, it usually spells trouble.

I don't know you well, Dawn, but please don't cause trouble for people I care about.

Most people at Reka 5 are happy there. Same with Kean's place. ”

Dawn nodded, understanding her. This was as close to a warning as she was going to get from the captain's wife. Don't cause shit. Got it.

She didn't want to be trouble for any of them either. They'd been nothing but kind to her, and they'd come to Vasek's rescue.

She glanced over at Vasek, who immediately looked away.

Cami cleared her throat. “So... do you want to stay with Vasek?” Cami asked. “Because that's a look if I ever saw one. And he got super jealous of Dex earlier.”

“He was pretty adamant that he wasn't interested in keeping me around. It was one of the first things he told me. I mean, if he asked me to, I would. But...” She shrugged.

“Well, I think he's going to ask you. You just wait.”

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

Dawn

Cami was wrong. Vasek never did ask her.

He did, however, make sure she got set up at the compound. She now had an official ID number, which was recognized throughout the outer planets. It meant she could now collect her own credits and be her own person.

Dawn hadn't realized just how important that was until it happened. She'd been so happy and grateful that she'd thrown her arms around him. But Vasek had shoved her away, like she'd burnt him with her touch. He'd apologized after, saying something like it was his fault and not hers, then ran off.

Dawn couldn't believe it. All the way at the butt-end of the galaxy, and she got the "it's not you, it's me" spiel from a freaking alien? Unbelievable!

Roxy, Cami, their mates, and Dex had taken her out to celebrate her newfound freedom afterward, and Dawn had done her best to pretend she was happy when it felt like her heart had been torn apart.

But what the fuck had she been expecting anyway? Vasek had said from the beginning that he didn't want to keep her. Just because they spent some time together and did the horizontal tango didn't mean he'd change his mind.

It fucking hurt, and she had nothing to blame but her dumb, stupid heart.

But Dawn wasn't the best actress, and she was sure they all knew something was

wrong. To their credit, no one said anything.

The next day, she started her new job working in the medical facility.

Luckily, Ulkin didn't remind Dawn of Vasek at all, and his medical wing was nothing like Vasek's shuttle.

The older Talleen asked her several times about Vasek, but when Dawn didn't reply as enthusiastically as he had hoped, he stopped.

The other day, when Cami had come to pick her up after work so they could hang out, Berus and Ulkin had talked.

She couldn't help overhearing Vasek's name and the words "curse" and "mating." They also mentioned someone named Ranek.

They tried not to look at her too obviously, but she felt their eyes anyway.

Dawn didn't know why the fuck she still cared. She forced herself to focus on work. But managing Ulkin's medical wing wasn't really a challenge as it was so well run already, much like the rest of the stronghold.

The compound itself was so much bigger than Dawn ever thought it could be.

For some reason, she'd imagined it to be much smaller, maybe a few buildings, walled in and almost prison-like.

Instead, the stronghold was huge and sprawling, with its own shops, restaurants, and bars, almost like a little town inside a city.

And if it wasn't for her new friends, she would've gotten lost already.

Half of the stronghold was indoors, but every building was linked by gorgeous, well-kept gardens.

They'd kept many of the more mature trees that had been here before, building around them, and they used the others to furnish the dwellings.

The décor throughout the compound had a rustic ski lodge feel, with heavy wood furniture and hunting trophies of alien beasts.

And despite everything being oversized, it still felt warm and cozy.

It was a beautiful amalgamation of nature and technology.

Everywhere she went, Dawn kept hoping she'd turn the corner and bump into a certain sexy medic. She never did.

"The plasma is coming in tomorrow, right before the big party," she said as Ulkin walked into the office. He'd been waiting on that since yesterday, and the shippers got held up by pirates.

Ugh! Why was it always pirates?

"I'll receive the shipment. You just get ready for the celebration. You young folks need to have more fun." Ulkin was more excited about her going to the party than she was.

Cami was already waiting for her outside the med bay. "Ready for the baths?"

Dawn had heard all about the public baths on Reka 5 but hadn't known that the compound had a small version of one as well.

It was fun, and kind of a big ego boost to have all eyes on them, like they were fresh meat.

At least until Berus and Dex showed up, both naked as the day they were born, and all the male eyes looked away.

No one dared look in Cami's direction too long with the bear of a Talleen marking his territory.

And Dawn guessed they automatically thought she was with Dex.

Dawn didn't mind. She wasn't up for hunting for a bed partner anyway.

Occasionally though, she felt eyes on her, but when she turned there wouldn't be anyone.

She was still butt-naked when a tall, suave-looking stranger approached their oversized private tub.

"Hey! It's the male of the hour!" Dex exclaimed. "How's it feel to be the ultimate supreme ruler for another year, Kean?"

Kean? The Talleen male was well-muscled but lean.

He had his dark, wiry hair tied back off his face and wore an almost playful grin that showed the tips of his fangs.

He looked like he was ready for a GQ shoot.

This was Kean? The big, scary drug lord she'd heard about for so long? He didn't look that scary.

But then again, he was currently totally naked and unarmed, aside from the eight talons of his feet, which were currently capped with dark shiny wax. Kotch had used something like that for his claws too.

Dawn's eyes drifted back up to his face, and on their way, accidentally passed over his crotch. She'd gotten used to nudity, but only if she didn't look too closely. She quickly looked to the right and realized there was a petite human woman hanging onto Kean's arm.

That was right! Kean was mated to a human. What was her name? Sarah.

For some reason, when the humans back in New Rhea talked about her, they always assumed her to be a supermodel or something. Sarah looked like just any other woman. She had thick brown hair, big, kind eyes, and a friendly smile.

Just as they finished their introductions, Lana showed up. But... what the fuck? That wasn't Uzzar with her. She was plastered to a Tallean in his prime, who oozed power. Unlike Kean, whose good looks were universal and conventional, this male had a more rugged appeal. He also looked very familiar.

Dawn had a feeling she should know who this male was, but all she was thinking at the moment was that Lana was stepping out on Uzzar! In front of everyone! And she wasn't even trying to hide it!

"Hey, boss!" Dex waved to the couple.

The two turned to them, smiling, and started toward their tub. No one seemed to care that Lana was with another man. In fact, they were welcoming them in.

What the hell was going on here?

“Oh! You poor thing!” Cami said, giving Dawn a hug. “You must be so confused.”

It was strange to feel another naked body slide up against her, but it wasn't uncomfortable.

“Oh, right! We never did explain that part to her, did we?” Dex asked.

None of this was making sense.

Lana slapped her palm to her forehead. “You're right. Our bad.” She looked up at the Tallean next to her.

Kean, unaware of her utter confusion, moved over to make room for the couple. “Ulrek, my friend. Nice of you to join us.”

Ulrek! That was why he looked so familiar!

He was Ulrek, the ex-Dominion captain who so famously switched sides to fight for and live in the outer planets.

It was all coming together now. Of course he was!

Ulrek had a half-human crew. The New Horizon had a half-human crew.

Ulrek was mated to a human. Uzzar was mated to a human.

And didn't Cami say that if any crew could get to Earth, it would be theirs?

Dawn had been so dumb. Uzzar was Ulrek! Duh! The New Horizon was the infamous stolen Dominion warship Revenge.

“I apologize for deceiving you, female.” Ulrek’s voice was slightly different from Uzzar’s, but it was definitely the same person. “We were unsure if you were an agent working for Morad. Morad knows me as Uzzar, and the New Horizon recently purchased a shipment from Kotch.”

Dawn suddenly remembered it. “You did! I remember it now. That’s why you looked so familiar.” He’d come in with two other Tallean males, no humans.

“And I’m Delaney, not Lana. We really should’ve told you once Vasek confirmed you were running from Morad, not working for him.”

“It’s okay. I understand.”

But now that Vasek had been mentioned, Dawn couldn’t stop hoping he’d show up and join them too.

She tried to follow the conversation as Dex and Berus went on about some crazy cool mech suits they’d recovered, and Cami, Delaney, and Sarah talked about the all-new, Earth-style amusement park they were building on Reka 5.

Ulrek and Kean occasionally spoke in hushed tones, but generally just relaxed.

Dawn felt a little like a sore thumb, but tried to enjoy herself. She kept feeling like someone was watching her, but there was never anyone there. If someone was, she was sure the others, especially the Tallean males, would’ve noticed as well and said something.

At the end of the evening, Dex offered to walk her to the room she shared with a Tallean named Danka. Danka was an orphaned teenager who’d taken Roxy’s old job after she’d gotten hired by the New Horizon .

It didn't feel like Dex was coming onto her, more like he was making sure she got home alright. She wondered if the fact that she was heartbroken for a medic who clearly didn't care about her was that obvious.

"Vhast and I will come pick you up for tomorrow's big celebration," Dex said at her door. "You better be all dolled up and ready to party."

Dawn woke to a buzzing from her door. Danka got to it before she did. A young Tallean male stood with a soft package draped over his arms.

"It's for Dawn."

"That's me." Dawn reached out to take the package from him, surprised by how heavy it was. "I wasn't expecting anything."

But the male's attention wasn't on her anymore. It was on Danka, and it was full of boyish admiration. Oh-ho! Dawn's little roommate had a not-so-secret admirer. And from the sudden way she was fussing with her already straight and perfectly styled hair, she was interested.

Dawn wasn't great with guessing ages, especially with Talleans, but these two must be teenagers. The boy mumbled something about seeing Danka at the party and made a break for it.

"I thought Tallean males are supposed to be aggressive and not shy when it came to females," Dawn said.

"Oh, he will be," Danka said quite self-assuredly. "If he doesn't shape up, he's not getting a chance."

Dawn grinned. Young Tallean males were expected to be just on this side of too pushy when it came to pursuing the opposite sex, and the females were sometimes just as energetic when on the prowl. It was just a different culture.

And there was the crux of it. Vasek hadn't pursued her like that at all.

That alone told her enough. He'd done the literal opposite.

The only reason they'd ended up sleeping together was because they'd been hiding together, like some form of mild trauma bonding.

Or maybe it was because she was just there and convenient.

"What's in the package?" Danka asked, peering over her shoulder.

"No clue."

They opened it together, and Danka let out a girly squeal. "It's beautiful!"

It was a dress. Except it wasn't the stiff, jewel-encrusted evening wear with indecently high slit that was common in the Tallean culture.

Sometimes, Tallean evening wear skipped a skirt completely and had something resembling a jeweled belt that barely covered the essentials, and a thong.

This dress looked more like Earth-style evening wear, except the bodice was bejeweled very thoroughly in a Tallean style.

The skirt was flowy and flared out past her knees.

But it had a series of slits so high that it came with a pair of matching underwear just

in case.

There was a note attached to it from the crew of the New Horizon .

“You can borrow this for the party. Have fun! From the crew of the Revenge ,” she read out loud.

“Oooh, you know the crew of the Revenge ?” Danka’s eyes were wide and sparkling.

Dawn looked down at the note in her hand, and there, at the bottom in a pretty cursive, were the words, Go knock ‘em out! – Cami.

You know what? She was! She was going to knock ‘em out. Screw sitting around moping over a stupid medic who didn’t care about her. She was going to waltz into that party looking like a million bucks and have the time of her life!

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

Vasek

Vasek leaned back onto the rough bark of the tree.

He'd been hiding outside of Dawn's door all night, and he wasn't proud of it.

He'd followed her and Dex back last night after she'd joined the crew for a soak at the baths and a dinner at one of the on-site pubs.

He now had a set of nail marks on his biological hand from how hard he'd clenched his fist to stop himself from barreling toward them to rip her away from the human male.

Luckily, Dex had not tried to go into her room or even share a kiss. The male could live another day.

Vasek had been invited to the baths as well, but had declined after realizing she was going to be there. He'd given a barely believable excuse, and he was sure he'd either offended his old friend, or Kean knew something was wrong.

And something was wrong. Because he hadn't been able to stop thinking about Dawn since the moment he'd left her the other day.

He wasn't stupid. He knew what this was. This was the start of the mate bond.

It wasn't too late, though. If he avoided her from now on, the bond wouldn't fully develop, and he'd be safe. Then why the fuck was he camping out in front of her

door, hidden behind a bush like some creep?

He watched as the young male making a delivery to her door walked away. Had the package been for Dawn? Or for the young female?

What he really should be doing was finding out more about Ranek and his whereabouts. The news was that he was already in the outer planets.

“Should I be worried that you are sneaking around in my gardens watching a female currently under my protection?”

Vasek whipped around to find Kean leaning against the next tree over. How had he gotten in here without Vasek hearing?

“I...” Vasek had no response.

“I’ve been trying to reach you for the past galactic hour. I should’ve just come here last night when one of my guards reported a male hiding in front of one of the female dorms. You’re lucky I recognized your ugly mug and told him not to knock you out.”

Shit. Was that who’d been trying to comm him?

“Are we going to have a problem, Vasek?”

“No. I was just leaving.”

“Right you are. You’re coming with me for an important meeting.”

Vasek frowned, but followed the male through the intricate gardens to his office, curious as to what type of important meeting Kean had planned the morning before the big party celebrating the unification of Vosthea under his rule.

Vasek tensed the moment he saw the male sitting at the table. Ranek.

“Sit,” Kean demanded, pointing to a chair at the other end, but still on the same side of the desk. Two armed guards settled in front of each door, as if to say they were sealed in until Kean chose to release them.

Vasek did, feeling the heat of Ranek’s eyes on him.

His brother looked so different, so much leaner after years of captivity, but he recognized him all the same.

They shared the same dark, nearly black-green eyes as their sire.

Ranek had cleaned up and looked presentable, and was even wearing a typical merchant’s outfit.

“You are both guests at my stronghold, and I expect no trouble to come from either of you. Every year, there are attempts on my and my mate’s lives at these events. I do not need to be babysitting quarreling brothers as well.”

Kean set a tumbler each of an amber liquid in front of them. “Drink and promise there will be no fighting or violence from the two of you in my compound.”

Vasek looked over at his brother, and the realization that he sat next to a virtual stranger had his chest tightening.

It had been so long. He no longer knew who sat next to him.

Did Ranek still hold him accountable for not saving his mate?

Ranek had been held in a Dominion facility for so long, Vasek wondered if there was

any part of his brother left.

It was Ranek who took the cup first, downing the liquid in one gulp. “You have my word, Kean.” He put the cup down, then placed his hand on his chest, pinkie side out. “I owe you for getting me out.”

Kean had gotten Ranek out? Suddenly, Vasek felt a sense of guilt, but pushed it back, reminding himself that his brother had taken his hand in a fit of rage and given him the scars on his face.

It had felt like a fair trade at the time when Vasek had left him locked up in a Dominion facility for life.

And here, Kean was simply asking them to put the past behind them and stay civil. He wasn’t even asking them to make up and work together.

Vasek realized both males were watching him now. If Ranek could promise not to cause trouble, then it was the least Vasek could do. He took the glass and drank the liquor down. “You have my word.”

“Good. “ Kean sealed it all by chugging his cup as well.

“Now, my friends. Go get ready for the party of a lifetime.”

Vasek arrived at the party late. He’d considered not showing up at all when he’d gotten news that the newest addition to the stronghold arrived looking sexy as hell and ready to break hearts, but he didn’t want Kean to think that he’d missed the celebration because of his brother.

Kean was one person he didn't want to get on the bad side of, considering Vasek did more than half of his business on Vosthea.

Kean was also a fair and honorable male and had always had an open offer for Vasek to join him here.

Vasek needed to be there. Here on the outer planets, as it was in the Dominion, connections held the key to survival.

He noticed Dawn immediately. It was impossible not to.

She practically radiated with beauty and grace.

She was dancing with the females from the New Horizon .

The chime-like sound of her laughter struck something in his heart that had him wanting to fall to his knees in front of her and offer her the universe.

Kean, Zharor, Ulrek, and their mates were only one table over, and Delaney, Sarah, and Christy were dancing their way over to join them.

Ulrek was there as himself, like he had been at the baths.

Truly, at this point, the fact that Uzzar was Ulrek was an open secret; all they had to do was look at the humans on the crew.

While some of Ulrek's Tallean crew went out in disguise when they needed to, the humans rarely did, relying on the fact that many Talleans thought all humans looked the same.

Which was just silly. Humans came in so many varieties; they most definitely did not

all look the same.

Like Dawn with her green eyes and golden streaks in her hair. She was definitely the most beautiful female there. That was very clear to Vasek.

“Vasek!” It was Zharor who saw him standing there like an idiot and waved him over.

Before he could even consult his brain, his legs were moving on their own, bringing him toward Kean’s second-in-command, and closer to Dawn.

“So nice of you to finally join us. Thought you weren’t going to show.”

This was when Vasek noticed Ranek sitting off at another table. His brother must’ve decided to make the most of his freedom because there was a drink in his hand and several used Euphora pods on the table. There was also a female on each thigh.

Well, at least one of them was having fun.

Dawn had noticed him; it was impossible to ignore the burn of her gaze on him.

He wanted to go to her, pull her into his arms, and dance to the driving beat that rumbled the dance floor.

Instead, he took the drink Kean was handing to him and raised it into the air before downing it.

The other males joined him. And it wasn’t long before the strong drink was pulsing through his blood along with a generous amount of Euphora.

Back in the Dominion, Vasek had avoided the stuff. But Kean’s Euphora was clean

and strong, and designed to be less addictive, not more. As long as it didn't become a habit, it wasn't detrimental.

He noticed there were smaller tabs in a bright pink color. He picked one up. "What's this?"

"One eighth doses for the humans," Kean replied. "Some of the males need two, but it's a good dose for many of the smaller females."

Vasek followed the male's gaze to the dancing females, and regretted it immediately.

Dawn's body moved to the beat, the slit on her skirt showing plenty of skin.

It flashed glimpses of her thighs and even the bottom crease of her ass.

There were several pairs of male eyes on her, and one Tallean male had braved the circle to dance next to her.

He was young, extremely fit and in his prime, and Dawn must have noticed because she was encouraging him with her smile.

"If you don't claim her, someone will, my friend."

Vasek glared at his friend.

"It's not like you're hiding it very well. Don't think we didn't know you were following us around yesterday. You want her. So go get her."

Even as Kean said the words, the music changed, becoming a little slower, and instead of bouncing like they were doing, many of the females slowed, their movements turning sexy and hinting at something more carnal.

Dawn did too, and the male was most definitely reacting to her.

He pulled her into his arms, and Dawn let out a giggle.

That was it. Vasek had had enough. He stood and stormed toward them.

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

Dawn

Dawn was happily buzzed. She really enjoyed the amberberry wine the ladies had introduced her to, especially when it was diluted just a bit. It felt like she could drink it all night, but she knew better than to do that.

Then there were the little Euphora pods.

She'd been a little nervous to try them until Sarah had assured her that the pink pods were formulated for her specifically, and Dawn had at least thirty pounds on the petite woman.

The idea of putting something in her neck crept her out a bit, but she was also very curious. And in the end, curiosity had won.

She was glad she'd tried them, because now colors were more beautiful. The music sounded so good. And every accidental touch on the dance floor was wondrous. Everything was perfect. Well, at least it had been until Vasek had shown up. Now she was acutely aware of him watching her.

She tried to focus on the Tallean male trying to dance with her instead. He was pretty good-looking and very, very fit. Like all muscles, not an ounce of fat, and could probably lift a house kind of fit. Except he wasn't Vasek.

The music slowed, and the male corralled her into his arms. He was grinning, and she giggled in response. Maybe he wasn't so bad.

Then suddenly there was a low, familiar growl, and the male was gone. Vasek was there instead. Excitement filled her for one glorious moment. He wanted her after all. But an angry little voice inside would not be silenced.

Did he think he could just show up and scare her dance partner away after what a jerk he'd been? Oh hell no!

“Hey!” she exclaimed. “We were dancing.”

“And now you are dancing with me.”

Dawn looked around for the male, but Dex and Berus were already dragging him away. Dex winked at her, and Cami gave her the thumbs up.

Oh, those scheming little...

Dawn was suddenly wrapped up in Vasek's arms. God, he smelled so good. She wondered if she could bottle it up and sell it as an aphrodisiac, then realized she would probably be too jealous to share.

“Stars! I missed you.” Vasek's words had a lump of emotion forming in her throat.

He'd missed her. The words made her giddy, but she refused to give in to them.

“That's on you. You were the one who disappeared on me.”

“I thought... Forget what I thought, I was wrong.”

They weren't really dancing, just hugging and talking, even though they were taking up the dance floor.

So Dawn started to move, letting the music guide her.

Vasek groaned as her body rubbed up against his.

Even in her Euphora-enhanced haze, she remembered how Danka had declared that her young suitor would have no chance if he didn't shape up.

Well, Dawn wanted more than just this. She wanted Vasek to really want her.

"You can't just say that because you don't like me dancing with someone else. I'm my own person. I can dance with whoever I wish." She eyed the dance floor for an escape route. She wasn't sure she could handle being here if Vasek didn't do something to prove he truly wanted her.

"I was wrong, Dawn. You are mine. Mine. I can't let you go."

Words. All Dawn heard were words.

Maybe she was broken, but she was too afraid to believe him. What if this was just because he was jealous now? What if tomorrow he went back to not needing her? If she let herself spend more time with him, she was going to fall, and she was going to fall hard.

She imagined waking up in the morning to find that Vasek had left after another wonderful night together. No. She couldn't let that happen; she couldn't handle it.

Spying an opening in the throng of people, Dawn made a dash for it. Tears stung her eyes and blurred her vision as she ran, weaving through the ocean of jeweled fabric, glitter, and drinks. Recognizing the guard who usually stood in front of her section of dorms, she made a beeline for him.

“Scuse me. Pardon me. Coming through!”

He noticed her flying toward him, but his eyes were on Vasek instead. The guard opened the door for her and let her out, but then promptly stood back in front of the closing portal. She heard the start of the resulting fight as the door slammed shut, closing out the noise of the party.

Dawn found herself in the extensive gardens that ran through the entire compound. She didn't recognize this part of it, but she knew that everything was interconnected, so she kept walking through the organized chaos of green, hoping she'd find a way to her room eventually.

The gardens looked so wild in the night despite being lit here and there with lanterns and sconces.

She marveled at the size of some of the trees.

The trunk she was currently walking around was so thick that she'd originally thought it was a building since the bark was covered in climbing vines just like the stone walls.

She made a mental note to come back to this section of the garden sometime after work to explore.

Exploring this place was so much better than the wilds.

At least she knew nothing could really harm her.

Correction. Nothing could really harm her here except for Vasek, with his promise of a broken heart.

She went by several more doors, but didn't recognize any of them. It wasn't until the third door that she realized the doors were labeled with plaques on the side. The other ones must have been covered by the growing vines or the bushes. The plaques even had English words added to them!

“ Training simulator ,” she read aloud to herself.

That was where Danka worked. She'd mentioned that if Dawn missed Earth, she could always go visit the Earth scenes they'd programmed into the machines.

She went all the time to visit New Rhea.

That had been where she grew up, and when she'd found out that Dawn had just been at Port Number Two, she'd asked a bunch of questions.

Danka had been rather disappointed that the park her mother used to take her on walks in had been turned into a giant shopping complex.

Didn't the simulator lock when in use? That was one way to hide safely for a little while. And she could see these Earth scenes for herself.

She was greeted by a lit hall with dozens of doors on both sides. The plaques here didn't have English, but she could read well enough to understand that some rooms were for training in groups and others were for single players. She chose one of the latter and stepped inside.

Vasek

Punching one of the compound's guards in the face might not have been Vasek's best idea, because he immediately found himself surrounded by about half a dozen more.

He was ready to fight all of them too, and had already started going into blood lust when a sharp prick had him staring at his chest. The assholes had drugged him.

His limbs went limp as they dragged him back to his table. He couldn't even talk.

"Sorry, my friend." Kean's face greeted him.

"I can't have you fighting my guards. Don't worry, it will wear off soon.

The chemical works synergistically with the Euphora so just a tiny bit will put you on your ass if you're already high.

Gives you a few minutes to cool your head.

I developed it myself. Works great to de-escalate fights at parties. "

Zharor leaned over, his head of fine braids swinging.

"Our mates were sick of all the guests bleeding and in our lockup at the end of the night. We told them it's normal for Talleen parties.

But they insisted there must be a better way.

They call it the Time Out chemical. You've been put in time out. "

Vasek wanted to smear the smug look off his face.

Sure enough, as the song changed again, Vasek started getting movement back. And after a few more minutes, he was ready to go after his mate again.

"Keep your ass seated," Zharor warned as he placed another drink in Vasek's hand.

“Normally, I’d think someone acting like this is too drunk, but I think you’re not drunk enough.”

“I need to go after Dawn.”

“No, you don’t. We know where she is. She signed into one of the training simulators.

You won’t be able to get in anyway while it’s running.

Just relax. I’ll let you know when she comes out, and you can go find her.

” The look in Zharor’s eyes said Vasek should listen if he knew what was best for him.

Zharor was the muscle and violence behind Kean’s razor-sharp intelligence and cutthroat business know-how, and Vasek wasn’t stupid or desperate enough to challenge that. Not yet. But every minute that ticked by without his mate by his side made him reconsider.

His mate! Dawn was his mate! He’d been a fool to think he could stop it in time.

Did that mean it was too late? Or had it already been fated? Carved in stone like the river had carved the canyon, and he could never have bested the curse. Dawn had run from him. He’d told her she was his, and she’d run. She hadn’t even spared him a single word.

Vasek had always wondered what type of male he’d be if and when the curse caught up with him and the universe gave him a mate who didn’t want him.

Would he be the one to watch and pine for her from afar, slowly going insane from

the lack of contact and the unfulfilled bond?

Or would he be the type to steal her away and attempt to force a bond?

This was the most common route, especially since many times the bond eventually filled in.

But Dawn wasn't Talleen, and humans didn't form mate bonds. It might never work with her. Would they need to lock him up?

Vasek poured himself more of the drink, trying to dull the sharp pain in his chest. It didn't work.

Every second seemed to drag on, and it felt as if Dawn had been in that training room for hours.

He couldn't focus on the dancers, the sex performers, the fight arranged for their entertainment, or the knife-throwing competition.

By the time Zharor nudged him, he was ready to fight everyone to get to Dawn.

"She's out." Zharor checked his comm unit again, frowning. "There's another guest there. Let me pull up the feed."

Vasek looked around him, really taking in the scene for the first time in a while. Ranek was gone. Fuck! His brother had seen them together, and he'd seen Vasek go after her.

He didn't wait for Zharor to check the feed. Vasek stood and headed toward the door. And this time, no one stopped him.

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

Dawn

The soft female voice telling her that the simulation was going to time out soon had Dawn standing from the park bench she'd been sitting and crying on for the past who knew how long.

The training sim was easy to use, and there were even English translations available on the screen.

She'd selected spectator mode, opting for scenes from Earth.

At first it had been tempting to visit the Eiffel Tower and the Taj Mahal, but in the end, she'd selected Central Park.

She'd gone to Columbia University and had spent more than her share of afternoons there.

It was autumn in the setting, and the show of orange, gold, and red was exactly as she remembered it.

There were even NPCs wandering around, making the scene more realistic.

Squirrels too. But they didn't quite behave the same way the real ones did.

She'd taken the route she used to take, but the moment she'd tried to leave the park, she'd hit a wall—well, not a hard wall, more like a giant marshmallow—and was reminded that this wasn't real.

This was just virtual reality, a simulation of the real thing.

And that had brought her to tears. The Euphoria hadn't helped.

She really missed the Dawn of just a month ago, who cried at nothing.

Now, Dawn only had a few minutes left before the door opened and she'd be forced to face Vasek again, and she wanted to make them count.

She returned to the screen by the door and scrolled through the options.

She frowned at the ones at the bottom. One of them was labeled Central Park: Time-lapse .

There was a paragraph under it, but she didn't read it. Instead, she just selected the program.

Nothing happened. She was still standing in Central Park, except the timer hovering in the sky had changed. It was now counting down from a new number, this one even shorter than the time she'd had left before. That sucked.

Oh well, might as well enjoy it while she could.

She started back toward the bench, but things started changing.

The leaves underfoot turned brown, and snow started to fall.

Soon, Central Park was covered in a thin layer of white.

When she tried to touch the snow, she found that she could no longer interact with the scene, and all the NPCs had disappeared.

This must be what they meant by time-lapse.

So she just stood and watched as the seasons changed.

But when spring arrived, the bench was gone.

So were all the other benches. Then some of the other trees started disappearing.

Seconds later, Bethesda Fountain vanished, and in its place was a grounded Dominion ship.

But a minute later, that was gone too, replaced by tents with Dominion insignia.

Dawn watched, her heart breaking as her beloved park turned into a Dominion base.

But even that did not last long, because those too were razed to the ground, and Dawn realized it was because the Dominion was being attacked.

The time-lapse ended suddenly, even though the date didn't match the current galactic date.

She was back in the training simulator with its sterile white walls.

She walked back over to the screen and read the badly translated paragraph next to the selection, hoping to find some answers.

She did. But it wasn't the ones she wanted.

What better way to get rid of the alien invasion than to nuke their base?

The park was gone. Her home was gone. It was all gone.

She waited for the tears to come, but she'd already cried herself out at the bench, and there were none left. Or maybe it was because in her heart, she'd already known.

She used the rest of her time in the sim to make herself presentable, grateful for the reflective surface around the door. She didn't want Vasek to see her a mess. Things were complicated enough between them.

But when the door opened, it wasn't Vasek who leaned against the wall, waiting for her, but Morad.

Kean's celebration must've been the event Kotch had been planning to head to Vosthea for. He'd said it was his chance to work with and meet someone very powerful. Morad must be here in his stead.

"I'd expected to see the medic here, but I never would've believed I'd see you dancing at Kean's table." He came to block her way. "I guess with Kotch gone, you had your sights set higher."

Dawn stood straighter, hoping she projected confidence and calm she did not have. She was a free person now and still in Kean's stronghold. "What do you want, Morad?"

"Straight to the point, I like that. I found the two Fietes. They have no idea what the code is. Now, I've tried threatening you.

And I've tried ordering you. These tactics clearly did not work.

I have clearly underestimated you. That is my fault.

So let me try one more thing. I'm offering you a deal, Dawn. "

“I’m not interested.” She started down the hall toward the double doors leading out to the gardens. She just had to get out there; the guards wouldn’t be far.

He blocked her way again. “I have the physical key. You can’t do anything with your knowledge without it. You want that artifact Kotch has been hoarding? So do I. We can help each other.”

She tried to go around him, and he grabbed her by the arm hard enough to make her hiss.

“Is it the fancy dresses?” he asked, eyeing the gown she had on. “The parties?” He pulled her close and inhaled. “The Euphora? You can have all that. We can be partners.”

Dawn was certain that Morad would go back on his word the moment he got his hands on whatever was inside that safe. And she didn’t know the code anyway. Seemed like Kotch had taken it to this grave.

She moved quickly, not letting herself think too much, her knee coming up and making very solid contact with his crotch. At the same time, she brought the heel of her hand up and into his nose.

Morad roared, and Dawn used this crucial moment to make a run for it.

She was glad she’d changed out of those sexy heels Sarah had lent her and was back in her only pair of shoes, flat sandals that many at the stronghold wore on a daily basis.

She knew she’d never outrun him, and when he got his hands on her, she’d be in trouble.

But her goal was just to get outside. She did, with Morad cursing and hot on her heels.

“You bitch! I gave you a fucking chance.”

Once outside, she screamed as loudly as she could, cursing the fact that she was so out of breath.

She almost ran right into a burly chest. She recognized the Tallean as one of the thugs who had worked for Kotch. He was all decked out in Tallean formal wear, the military style, not the gaudy, bejeweled style Morad had chosen.

She made a hard left, avoiding his grasp. But Morad was already there. He caught her by the arm, swinging her around. And fuck! He was pissed!

Vasek

Vasek grabbed Ranek and tore him off the human female.

“Fuck!” Ranek roared, throwing a blind punch in his direction.

Immediately, Vasek knew something was wrong. That wasn’t Dawn’s scent, and that wasn’t her indignant gasp either.

Ranek’s second punch caught him on the jaw because he was too confused to duck. But his brother must have sensed that something was wrong because that was the only punch that came.

“What is wrong with you?” Ranek yelled. “I’m here for another chance at life. I do not wish to fight.”

The female, a Talleen, eyed him. “Ooh! Brothers. We can make room.”

Shit! This was not how he’d imagined it.

“Where is she?”

“What is wrong if you are not here to fight? I know you are not here for this female.”

The female glared at him, ire rising. “That’s rude!” She pulled her dress back up her body, shoved her way out, and started back toward the party.

“My mate. She ran off. You were gone and...”

“And you thought I’d gone to exact my revenge? Or maybe to steal her from you?”
Ranek looked offended.

Fuck! Vasek felt like an asshole for assuming the worst. “I apologize.”

Ranek deflated. “I do not fault you for thinking I’d do something like that. I might very well have in the past when I was blinded with anger.”

Vasek spared a glance over at the female disappearing inside a door. “Still looking for love despite the curse?”

“The curse? I don’t believe in that shit.”

He gawked at Ranek.

“I am still alive. I mourned Channa for many years. But one day, I woke in my cell and realized I never knew her. But I am still alive. I am sane. Well, sane enough anyway. And I have a chance at a new life. I’m willing to try again. I will find my

mate. And when I do I will give her the Stars.”

There wasn't even a hint of the derangement in his brother's eye that he remembered from their meeting so many years ago. There was only a zest for the life he planned on living.

“I'm sorry for leaving you locked up.”

Ranek bellowed a laugh. “I deserved it. I was... out of control. I'm sorry about your hand.”

It really was time to forgive and start fresh. He missed having a brother. Missed having someone he could depend on. Vasek held up his hand. “This one works just as well.”

A shrill scream had Vasek's blood freezing in his veins. “Dawn!”

He ran toward the sound, weaving through trees and bushes and leaping across the low-planted flower beds. What he saw filled his vision with red. He snarled as bloodlust took over. He lunged for Morad, who had his hands on Dawn's neck.

Morad met him, his fangs and cheeks extended. They exchanged several blows, their punches meant to kill and maim. But each had their edge dulled by Euphora, and they were well matched. They exchanged several blows before Morad sent a kick flying in Vasek's direction, claws extended.

He rolled, acutely aware that next to him, his brother was going into bloodlust as well. He and the other male clashed in a mess of fists and claws.

But Morad didn't fight fair; he reached for Dawn and put her in front of him as a shield. Rage filled Vasek, and with a fluid, practiced motion, he reached down for the

knife in his boot. The hilt was sticking out of Morad's neck before he could even flinch.

Vasek looked around and realized that they were now surrounded by Kean's guards, and they had blasters trained on all of them. Even at Morad, who was clutching at his throat as red spilled forth, filling the air with the tang of iron.

Zharor marched in, looking irritated that he'd been dragged from the party.

His eyes landed on Morad, his quick brain coming to the right conclusion.

"Looks like these males have already done our job for us." He turned to the other culprit, who was down but not out.

"Escort him out of the stronghold," he demanded.

Zharor then knelt in front of Dawn. "Are you hurt, female?"

Dawn's hand went to her reddened throat.

He reached for the marks. "We will get Ulkin to look at..."

Vasek growled and got in between them. Every blaster came out, aiming at him.

Zharor put his hand up, not even looking worried in the slightest. "Stand down." He stood and turned to Vasek. "I put this female in your care, medic. I will give you access to our medical wing."

"I will bring my mate to my shuttle," Vasek said, lifting Dawn up off her feet and into his arms. She felt perfect there, and he would never let her go.

“As you please. At least you and Ranek are fighting together now as brothers should, instead of battling each other. Go through that door there and continue to the end, then turn right and follow the path around to the hangars.” Zharor turned to Ranek.

“I know you wish to start your life as a merchant, but know that you have a job here should you wish to join our forces. You are a commendable fighter.”

Vasek never heard his brother’s response, because the portal was already closing behind him.

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

Dawn

Dawn couldn't believe what she'd just heard. Vasek had just referred to her as his mate. His mate!

That couldn't be true, could it? Was that why he'd been avoiding her? Because he'd been trying to avoid a mate bond?

That possibility suddenly put a damper on her high of finding out they were mates. If he'd been avoiding it, that must mean he didn't want it. The mate who didn't want her but couldn't let her go. What a horrible life!

"Let me down," she demanded.

"No. I will not. You are mine, Dawn. I was stupid to try to deny it." Beautiful green eyes met hers. "I should never have let you out of my sight. I will not make that mistake again."

And there went the butterflies, throwing a rave in her belly. But the logical and rather annoying little voice in her head insisted she dig a little deeper.

"But you did leave. And you've been avoiding me for days. Why would I want that for a mate?"

A low, rumbling growl rattled her body. "I will make it up to you. I promise. And you know I keep my promises."

They were already outside the hangar door where several guards stood. One of them looked up at them and waved them through, just as the door opened to let them in.

“I should not have left,” Vasek said as he carried her into his newly repaired shuttle.

He set her on the bed, and in the dim light of the shuttle, his eyes seemed to glow. She knew they weren’t really glowing, just reflecting light, but the effect was the same.

“Where are you hurt?” he asked.

“It’s just the skin on my neck,” she said, turning her head to expose her neck to him.

He bent his head and nuzzled her neck gently, like his tender touch alone would heal her. Then he followed the nuzzles with a tenderly applied salve that had the pain almost vanishing immediately.

Dawn knew Vasek was just looking for injuries when he stripped her of her dress and shoes and started running his hands over her skin. But her body had other ideas. Desire started as a tingling in her belly.

She cupped his cheek, catching his attention.

“Vasek.”

It was like he felt everything she did, because the look in his eyes changed, turning hungry.

“You are in need.”

“I can’t help it when you touch me.”

That earned her a smirk as he tugged on her legs.

She yelped as she was suddenly on her back on the bed.

Then Vasek was crawling over her, caging her body.

Fuck! That was hot. And now that the danger was over, she was starting to feel the happy buzz again.

She didn't want to waste it. Especially now that Vasek was here.

"Is that so?"

She nodded. "Yes. I don't want to fight right now. I want to fuck."

The words had Vasek pushing her onto the mattress with a greedy growl. She was glad she was already naked because she was sure the sudden move would've had the gems popping off her borrowed dress.

She arched her back, offering herself to him as he licked and kissed a trail down her neck and across her collarbone.

He shoved his pants down his legs and freed his cock.

But the silky shirt he was wearing, so different from his usual clothes, was still in her way.

She clawed at the front blindly, until one of the buttons popped off with a ping.

"Oops." She followed the golden bauble as it hit the shuttle wall and bounced.

“Doesn’t matter.” Vasek tore the shirt off with a sexy grin that showed his fangs.

Her jaw dropped at the display of firm, perfectly sculpted muscles. Damn, she was one lucky bitch!

But she didn’t have time to marvel at his perfect physique.

Every touch of his firm fingers and skillful lips threatened to set her alight with desire.

She kissed every part of him she could reach, smelling and tasting him, and reveling in his wonderfully masculine scent.

Need was searing through her, and she was ready to beg by the time his hand reached between her thighs.

Then his mouth was there too, and Dawn, needing something to hold onto, undid the thong holding his hair at the nape of his neck. She slid her fingers into the long, dark strands. But now, his mouth was at her mound too.

She moaned at the first lick.

“Fuck. You taste so good, my mate.”

His mate. Why did that make her even hotter?

Then Vasek was devouring her, kissing and licking her clit as he thrust his fingers into her. She panted and grasped for whatever control she could as something inside her tightened and her knees started to shake.

Every thrust of his fingers and exquisite circle of his tongue had her hips jerking.

And when he added another finger, stretching her, she crashed headlong into bliss.

The world exploded around her in sparks of white.

She was still shaking from her release when Vasek flipped her over to her hands and knees.

He pushed her chest down and lifted her hips, supporting her with strong hands. He palmed her ass before leaning in and biting lightly at one cheek and making her yelp.

“This ass is mine, Dawn. You are mine. My mate. And I’m never letting you go.”

In her lust-filled mind, that sounded just about right.

She was sure they’d still need to hash things out, but that was for later.

Right now, she just wanted to get fucked.

She wiggled her ass, then shoved it back at him, trapping his cock between their bodies.

She giggled, satisfied, when he groaned.

Then he was there, spreading her cheeks and lining them up.

He filled her in one fluid motion, and she hissed at the sudden and thorough intrusion.

He filled her so completely that there was no room for air.

Maybe it was the position, but it bordered on pain, and she instinctively tried to crawl away.

“Mine,” he snarled.

She wasn't really trying to get away. She wanted him. But it was just so much, and she needed—

Then he was fucking her, fighting to pump in and out of her, as her channel gripped onto him despite how wet she was.

Pleasure and pain assaulted her senses, and there was nothing she could do, not even scream, as he pummeled into her with firm, powerful strokes.

She dug her fingers into the mattress, scratching and scraping through the overwhelming sensations.

She finally drew enough air to scream into the mattress.

Then the world seemed to fade away, and it was only them with everything they shared.

One shared breath. Two hearts beating. A silence so loud it was deafening.

Then she was consumed by the fireworks that lit up around her and brought her back into the world.

Vasek

Vasek rejoiced in the sense of ultimate victory. Dawn's body shook from rapture, her screams filling his ship with proof of her bliss. He continued to fuck her, trying to draw out her pleasure.

He loved the sound of her screams. The way she shook and shuddered under him. He

loved the feeling of her channel clenching around him, milking him. And he wanted to feel it again and again.

But it was too much. The tingling was starting at the base of his spine, and he knew it was a matter of time before it took over. Jaw tight, he closed his eyes and pumped wildly into her, his movement bordering on erratic. Then he was there, his release pouring from him with a loud snarl.

He was leaning over her, one hand on the mattress, holding himself up, afraid to move in case he collapsed on her. With much effort, he lowered himself to the bed beside her and rolled them so she was lying on top of him.

“I think you tired me out,” she said, yawning.

“Then I consider that a job well done.”

“There’s no doubt about that. I think I might need an encore.” She yawned again.

“But maybe after a nap.”

Vasek’s translator paused briefly at the strange word, but eventually filled it in, finding it in another Earth language. “Of course.”

But Dawn was already drifting off. As her breathing slowed, Vasek closed his eyes, praying to the Stars that this would not be the last time they were together.

“Good morning, my mate.” The endearment felt so right, and Vasek knew he would never be bored of calling her his mate.

He’d never felt so much joy as he had with her in his arms and his bed. But he wasn’t

sure how she'd react when she woke. Afraid that she'd demand he let her go, he'd taken off in the middle of the night, so they were currently above Vosthea, staying synced with Kean's stronghold.

Dawn reached over, looking for something, and Vasek handed her the glass of nuri leaf tea he'd made for her.

It must've been the right thing because she took several large sips before slowing down.

Nuri leaf tea was good any time, but was especially useful after an evening of booze and other recreational substances.

Dawn had added a fight and a kidnapping to her list. Well, technically two kidnappings, one attempted by Morad and one successful by him.

"Morning," she said after finishing almost half the glass. She looked around his shuttle and Vasek could see all the events of last night, probably hazy through a fog of drink and Euphora, run through her head. She frowned.

"What time is it?"

"Almost midday on Vosthea at Kean's stronghold."

Her eyes went wide. "I'm supposed to be at work."

"On the day after the celebration?"

"It pays twice as much today. And I wanted to build my credits." She started to get up, but Vasek lightly pushed her back down onto his bed.

“Who are you working with?”

“Ulkin.”

Vasek huffed. He bet Kean had put her with Ulkin, hoping to get Vasek to stay and work for him. The conniving male might just get his way. But first, Vasek had to get Dawn to accept their mating. Last night proved that her body wanted and needed his, but what about her heart?

Dawn tried to get up again, so he moved, straddling her to keep her pinned.

A sudden rush of lust filled the air, but he ignored it the best he could.

He pulled his comm out from the pocket next to his bed and contacted Ulkin.

The older medic sounded like a youngster the morning after he'd had his first encounter with hard drink.

“What do you want, Vasek? This better be you accepting my offer.”

“Unfortunately not.”

“Then how the fuck am I supposed to retire?”

Dawn listened in, amusement on her face.

“I'm just comming to let you know that I have kidnapped your newest recruit, and she will not be in today, or anytime in the near future.”

“Hey, I didn't—”

Vasek covered her mouth with a palm and delighted in the fiery glare Dawn sent him.

“About time you took a mate!”

Dawn turned her glare on his comm even as the call disconnected from Ulkin’s side.

He replaced his palm with his mouth, and Dawn melted under him, her body softening to press against his.

“You can’t just do that every time I’m angry,” she panted when he finally released her mouth. “And I am still angry at you. Just because we fucked doesn’t mean I forgive you for disappearing. You never even gave me a reason.”

Vasek took a deep, calming breath, then launched into his story, telling her about his family’s supposed curse. He told her about his father and his half-brothers. And finally, about Ranek.

“That’s the man who came in with you to rescue me.”

“Yes. I tried to save Channa, but I couldn’t. He was so angry. He lashed out at everyone and everything. He was already at the edge of sanity after she’d rejected him so many times for another male. She’d told him she’d rather die than be with him.”

“God! That’s horrible. I’ve heard stories of Talleans going crazy because of unreciprocated mate bonds.” Her eyes softened. “So this is why you ran. Because of this... curse?”

“Yes. But that was a mistake.”

Vasek thought of his brother’s words. If Ranek was willing to take another chance on

finding his mate, even after all that had happened, then Vasek could do no less.

“Now I wish to fight the curse. You are mine, Dawn. I love you, and I cannot let you go.”

“So you’ve kidnapped me to force a mate bond. You do know I’m human? I can’t form one.”

“But you can love. I wish to earn your love.” He held her tight and looked into her eyes, wishing she could see his sincerity.

“I will do anything for you. Go anywhere for you. If you wish to return to Kean’s compound after our current excursion, I will accept Ulkin’s job offer.

But if you want to travel with me, we can do that as well.

I’ll need to increase security for your safety, but I’ll make it work.

And if Earth becomes safer, I will even take you there. Anything to make you love me.”

The corner of her lip started to shake. Then her whole body was shaking. Her next words came out a small sob. “I already do.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. I do. I love you.”

Vasek wanted to roar at the triumphant feeling that seized him. She loved him!

“I was trying to deny it, but I do. And I don’t need Earth anymore.”

“You don’t?”

“No. I just wanted to go home. But now I realize that home isn’t just a place. It’s a place, and time, and people, and things... all mixed together to form a feeling. I’ll never get that again on Earth.”

Vasek understood. And that feeling had been something he’d been avoiding for far too long. He, too, craved to be home.

“Dawn.” He looked into her vibrant green eyes, his chest feeling warm and full of hope. “Will you make a home with me?”

“Yes, Vasek! Yes, I will!”

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Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 4:48 pm

Several years later...

Dawn closed her eyes, humming at the ocean breeze blowing through her hair. It was hard to believe that they were still on Vosthea. It was so much better than a stuffy jungle.

She was on a beach. A breathtakingly beautiful beach with sparkling white sand as far as the eye could see. The sun was shining, and the sky was a gorgeous blue dotted with white, fluffy clouds. Waves crashed on the shore not far away. It was paradise.

And the best part was the sexy Tallean male, lounging mostly naked right next to her in the massive lounge for two, his feet up and claws splayed like he didn't have a single care in the universe.

Vasek's tanned skin was glistening with protective oils, showing off every bulge and crease of his extraordinary physique.

His hair was still a little wet from his recent dip, and he had on that sexy, playful smile she loved so much.

She reached for the giant globe drink in between them, holding the refreshing cocktail with both hands.

Ah! This was the life.

They'd been coming to this resort at least once a year for the past few years. It was a great break from traveling between planets. It wasn't their only vacation of the year,

though; they often spent time off in Reka 5 and on New Rhea as well. But this was Dawn's favorite.

And this time, it was particularly special because after this, they wouldn't be returning to their old life.

Nope. They were finally settling down. Vasek had finally accepted Ulkin's offer to help him run the medical wing at the compound. He said it was because he was tired of moving around so much, but that was a lie, and Dawn knew it. She knew the truth. He wanted to start a family.

It helped that Ranek had broken the familial curse as well, and the last they'd heard, he and his human mate had just signed up for the fertility treatments designed to help bridge the gap between their species.

Dawn wasn't getting any younger, and while Tallean technology had extended the childbearing age of human females by a good decade, she also didn't want to be dealing with a Vasek Junior in her fifties.

Once they were used to the new life at the compound, she and Vasek were going to start the treatments as well.

She was nervous, but like everything done with Vasek, she couldn't wait.

But she was going to miss spending so much time with her friends.

For the past few galactic years, Vasek had started planning his movements around those of the New Horizon/Revenge.

It had worked out well. They'd docked with the ship when traveling through space, then split once planetside.

They got the benefit of safety with a crew, she got to spend time with her friends, and the warship gained access to a second medic.

A sudden loud shriek had her putting her drink down. There was a commotion at the far end of the beach.

“It’s just another sandslicer. The security will take care of it.” Vasek didn’t sound one bit worried.

She bet he was secretly hoping the monster would come this way so he would have an excuse to fight it.

Predators were the reason why she preferred to stay away from the edges of the resort. This was Vosthea after all. And a bunch of lounging bodies was bound to attract hungry beasts.

She leaned over him to get a better look... and found herself pulled over his lap. He gave her ass a smack. Did she mention this was a clothing-optional resort? Many Tallean resorts were.

“You have not reapplied the protective oils, my mate,” he tsked, reaching for the oil and squeezing a generous amount onto his huge hands.

Then they were all over her, spreading the silky oil all over her skin. She moaned as his touch changed, becoming more sensual, his erection growing between their slippery bodies. Two could play this game. She snuck her hand between them to stroke his burgeoning length.

All she got as a warning was a growl. He was instantly over her, caging her body with his. Slick fingers delved into her, even as she wrapped her legs around his hips. Then the fingers were gone, and he was burying his cock into her to the hilt, making her cry out.

And there on the beach, as her hot-as-sin Tallean mate took her to nirvana, she knew there was nowhere she'd rather be.

THE END

Thank you for reading A Mate for Vasek. If you enjoyed this story, please consider leaving a review on Amazon or Goodreads.

Also, come follow me on Instagram and Facebook.

Looking for more Tallean Mercenaries? Check out this excerpt from Snowed in with my Alien Boss ,a Tallean Mates novella.

Abby froze in front of her apartment door, unable to believe what she was hearing. Inside, her deadbeat dad had just promised her to his loan shark to cover a debt.

“S-she’ll be back soon, I swear. An hour, tops.” Her father’s voice shook as he spoke.

Abby backed away from the door as icy fingers of dread filled her chest. Somehow, she wasn’t surprised her father had stooped so low.

“Y-you’ve seen her,” he continued. “She’s young. Pretty. Totally worth the credits.”

Abby shook her head, more in dismay than in disbelief.

Numb, she turned and marched down the stairs and out of the building.

The colony transport she’d taken home was still there, thank goodness.

Grabbing her comm unit, she hired it again, and the door opened when she held her comm to the sensor.

She didn't allow herself to stop and think too much until she was safely inside and hidden behind the darkened windows.

Where the hell should she go now? She didn't want to be there when they came looking for her.

She directed the transport to drive around the block.

Reka 5 was decked out in festive Christmas decorations, and if she ignored the Talleans and the Tallean glyphs on every sign, she could almost pretend this was a foreign city on Earth gearing up for the holidays.

A mixed human-Tallean colony made up of mostly escaped Dominion slaves, Reka 5 celebrated something that was a mashup of Christmas and the Tallean winter solstice festival.

Together with the clearly recognizable signs of Christmas—lights and decorated trees—there were also baskets of white azak flowers on every street corner and garlands of winter berries hanging around the doors and windows.

She considered calling her best friend Jenny.

The two women had become fast friends when, as a volunteer on the colony welcoming committee, Abby had been sent to meet with Jenny after Ckarus found and rescued the human woman from New Rhea.

But Abby knew her friend would insist she stay with her and her mate, and she didn't want to be a third wheel in their home during the holidays, especially given that the Tallean winter solstice festival focused on inviting fertility for the coming season.

Talleans weren't exactly secretive about their sex lives, and she might see or hear too much.

After circling the block twice, she ordered the transport to head back to her workplace.

Today was the last business day before the repair shop she worked for closed for the winter solstice, so she could probably stay there without anyone knowing.

Her boss, Grogen, was probably on his way to his cabin in the woods already.

He'd let everyone leave early today so he could get home, grab his supplies, and head out before the forecasted storm hit.

It was a trip Grogen took every winter solstice to get away from all the celebrations.

It wasn't that he was a Grinch per se , but he did get a bit grumpier during the annual mid-winter festivities.

Right now, Abby didn't blame him. The holidays were supposed to be a time of family and celebration, and she didn't have any family to celebrate with—unless you counted her deadbeat dad.

To be honest, she currently regretted letting him back into her life.

Abby sighed as she climbed out of the transport. The front door of the repair shop might set off the alarm after hours, so she went around to the back, but not before grabbing a white azak bloom from the basket she'd set out a few days ago by the front door.

For three days straight, the two younger Talleen mechanics had been keeping their eyes on her hair, hoping to see her come into the shop with one or two of the fragrant blooms in it.

They'd been sorely disappointed. Now that the shop was empty, she could safely

wear one without accidentally giving them the false hope that she'd gift the blooms to one or both of them, indicating that she'd like to spend the winter solstice in their beds.

There was nothing against hooking up with co-workers in the Tallean culture. It had been weird at first, but she was used to it now.

The only person in the shop who had never hit on her was Grogen. And unfortunately, he was the one that piqued her interest.

But she knew that her boss wasn't interested in her in "that way." He was never unkind, but he didn't speak with her any more than was necessary for the job.

If Abby hadn't been working here for years and become accustomed to his resting grump face, she would've thought he only put up with her because she was a damned good receptionist, and it would be too much hassle to find and train someone else.

She did most of the front-facing work for the transport repair shop, communicating with clients and vendors. She also did most of the business filings. The pay was decent—good enough that she could afford her own apartment without need of a roommate. So she didn't mind the grumpy boss so much.

Grogen was generally curt and gruff to everyone, especially around the winter solstice, so she knew it wasn't her. Plus, grumpy disposition aside, her boss was covered in bulging muscles and very easy on the eyes. And his distinctive Tallean cheek creases gave him a sculpted look.

She enjoyed watching him work, particularly when he was moving the larger pieces around. Mmm. Yummy, yummy muscles. And the way he knew his way around every single vehicle and piece of machinery that was brought in was hot as sin too! Grogen was the epitome of capable.

And capable was the ultimate in sexy in her books.

She pushed the thoughts of her grumpy-but-sexy boss out of her head and focused on her current dilemma. Legally, Daddy Dearest couldn't just trade her like that, not here in Reka 5. But the people he dealt with probably didn't care if they were breaking the law.

The smell of machine parts and oil greeted her as she stepped into the garage. There were no vehicles here today, and it was strange to see it so empty. She made her way into the tiny staff room and flopped down onto the couch, wondering how the hell she had ended up here.

"Why did I ever think he'd change?" she grumped aloud to the empty room.

She could so easily have pretended not to recognize him.

He probably wouldn't have recognized her .

But when she'd first seen her father there with the group that had been rescued from the Dominion mining ship, her heart had broken for him, and she'd had a lapse in judgment.

She'd thought that getting abducted by aliens and being forced to work in a mine for a few years would've given him a chance to cut his double whammy of an alcohol and gambling habit.

She'd been wrong. But by the time she'd realized that he hadn't changed one bit, it had been too late.

But Abby wasn't the same unsure young woman she'd been when she packed her bags and moved out of her father's house all those years ago. She was smarter now. Besides, that was her apartment he was currently squatting in.

What did he think would happen after he offered Abby to his loan shark, anyway? That she'd keep paying the rent so that he'd have a place to stay? Yeah, fuck that.

It was time she left that crappy apartment, anyway: it was too far from the shop, the walls were paper-thin, and her neighbors sucked. She'd only rented it because it was all she could afford back then. But she'd been saving up for a better place.

She fished her communicator out of her purse and messaged the housing office for her apartment complex. She immediately got an automated reply that they were closed for the holidays. Duh. Everything was closed.

She probably wouldn't be able to reach anyone for the next two or three days. Whatever. At least when they finally checked their messages, they'd see hers and know that she was ending her stay there, and not to expect any more rent from her.

With the azak bloom tucked into her hair, she took off her coat, tossed it over the back of the couch, and removed her shoes.

Then she got to work, looking for a new place to live.

Reka 5 had grown a lot since she first arrived.

The repair shop had once been at the edge of the colony, but now the entire sector was built up and thriving.

Ooh, maybe she could find a unit in one of the newer fancy buildings.

She was interrupted by an emergency colony-wide broadcast on her comm unit warning that the incoming storm would be hitting early and for everyone to get to shelter, stat.

She went to the window. Sure enough, the snow was coming down harder now, and

the wind was blowing the wet, heavy flakes sideways.

She was glad Grogen kept the shop heated throughout the holidays to protect the various fluids from freezing. It looked freaking cold outside, but she was toasty warm in here—so warm, in fact, that she felt overdressed.

She pulled off her super comfy sweater dress and leggings and folded them neatly on the table before returning to the couch in just her silky slip.

There was a message from her father on her comm which she ignored, deciding she wasn't going to waste a second more on that ass.

Instead, she sent a message to Jenny, explaining what had happened and that she was staying at the repair shop since it was empty and not to worry.

Then she continued her search for a new place to live.

She was trying hard not to fall asleep and focus on her screen when a sound had her bolting straight up. Fuck, was there someone in the shop? Suddenly, the door to the staff room swung open, slamming against the wall, and she gasped when she saw her boss there, arms crossed and glaring at her.