



Royal Cargo (Romance Among the Stars #2)

Author: *Leslie Chase*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Don't touch the cargo. That's rule number one for an independent ship's captain, and I've never been tempted to break it.

When Onyx, my beloved pest of a cat, claws his way into a container, I don't have a choice. Which is how I find out I'm transporting a devilishly handsome alien, frozen in stasis. An alien I recognize from the news.

Kidnapped from his homeworld, half the galaxy is searching for Prince Karkonar. Thanks to Onyx, I've found him. It isn't hard to see why he's so popular. Mr. Tall, Dark, and Muscular is hot enough to melt steel, and he's big—in every sense of the word!

The safe option would be to reseal the container and forget I saw him. The daring option would be to return him for the reward. Waking him up is the stupid option, so guess which one I'm going to choose?

Royal Cargo was first published in the Pets in Space 9 anthology, though this version has minor changes.

Total Pages (Source): 15

1

ELAINE

“ H ey! Come back here,” I shouted at Onyx as he soared away, my Meat Flavored Protein Product hanging from his jaws. Who thought giving a cat wings was a good idea? If I ever find out who it was, I’ll give them such a smack.

I looked at my plate, nose wrinkling. Without the slab of meat protein, it looked even less appetizing than usual. Vitamin Slurry A, Potato Substitute with Cheez, and a glass of Drink, all of which somehow tasted worse than their names implied. In the glamorous life of an independent hauler, this counted as a quality meal. I pushed my plate away.

Sometimes I wondered if I was in the right trade.

“Fuck it.” My announcement fell flat in the empty mess, the only communal room aboard, not that I shared it with anyone apart from that thieving bastard, Onyx. “You aren’t getting away with it this time, you little shit.”

Don’t get me wrong, I love that black-furred bundle of trouble, but I had to budget my maker-credits until I got paid for this delivery and refused to give Onyx the most expensive item on my menu whenever he felt like it.

So I pushed myself off the metal table and out into the central corridor of the Dashing Rogue. No sign of Onyx there, and nowhere to hide. A tube of metal with only regular hand holds breaking up the monotony ran the length of the Rogue from the

bridge at the prow to the engine room aft. Between them, it passed through every level of the ship. In theory, Onyx could be anywhere with his feast.

That wasn't the issue it sounded like. With four of the five crew quarters sealed, and the last one mine, the residential level was safe. Aft of that, the gym had a level to itself, but it was bare, offering no hiding places. Then came the utility rooms, which scared Onyx. He'd have to choose between frighteningly wet (the showers), uncomfortably loud (life support), and his least favorite, the room that smelled wrong (medical). So he'd be in the cargo bay.

In better times, finding him among the cargo would have been impossible. Back then, the hold was always full. Now? A half dozen crates, some spools of industrial monofilament, a small hydroponics shelf holding sad, droopy flowers, and a sack full of packages to deliver to the postmaster on Harry's Moon when we arrived.

"Come on out, Onyx, you know I'm going to catch you." My voice echoed in the emptiness.

"No! Elaine Not Find Onyx. Not." The faintly robotic sound of Onyx's translator sounded smug. I prowled the perimeter, trying to follow his artificial voice.

"You know I will, Onyx. I always do." I realized I was smiling as I stalked him. Was he being annoying to get me to play with him? He played the lovable idiot fuzzball so well it was hard to say.

"Always Have," he corrected me. "Oynx Due a Win."

I sighed. "Why did I build you that thing, anyway? Just so you can torment me?"

"Yes."

His flat delivery shouldn't have been that funny, but I dissolved into helpless laughter, sinking to the deck and hugging my sides. Maybe it was hunger, maybe loneliness, or perhaps Onyx had an unappreciated gift for comedic timing.

With an effort, I pulled myself back together and wiped my eyes, ready to sit up. Except, from my vantage point on the floor, I saw two green eyes shining back from under the hydroponics tray.

“Oh No.”

“Got you.”

We spoke over each other, and I lunged for him as he bolted out the far side, launching himself into the air in a flurry of black feathers and laughter. I picked myself up and threw myself after him with wild abandon. Around and around we went until I had to stop, panting for breath and holding my sides. Onyx landed on top of the largest crate with a thump and looked down at me, his enormous eyes wide.

“Elaine Cannot Catch Onyx.” The winged cat spun around on the spot until he tottered and fell on his side. “Onyx Dizzy.”

I chuckled and shook my head. “I'll catch you, don't you worry. And since you ate the only edible bit of my dinner, when I catch you, I'll eat you.”

The threat was a running joke between us. His response, as usual, was a horrified squeak. “No! Onyx Is Not A Food!”

He scrambled back from the edge. The chase was back on.

Except this was a short chase. I dashed around the crate but saw no sign of the cat on the far side. Had he gotten clever? I tried thinking about the hunt from his point of

view and grinned. There was a hiding place he might have chosen, one I'd almost overlooked.

He could have stayed on top of the crate. A wooden cube over ten feet on each side, it gave him ample hiding space. I leaped up and caught hold of the top edge, pulling myself up to look. No cat.

But a half-eaten protein bar told me he'd been there, beside it... fuck.

A gap in planks of the crate. Small enough that no one could get inside, easily overlooked. Who'd have expected a cat? I grabbed a ladder from the wall and scrambled up the crate. Yep, it looked like plastered-on documentation had covered it up. Someone had clawed it up, though why Onyx would do that, I had no idea.

An independent ship's captain needs to decide early on—are you going to pry into what cargo you're shipping, or are you going to stay in business? I was careful about my clients, as careful as I could be, and they all knew there were things I wouldn't touch. I trusted them to keep that off my ship, they trusted me not to invade their privacy, and we all won.

“Help Onyx.” His tiny voice rose plaintively from inside the crate, and I swore. Swore in every language I'd picked up a few words in, and that's a lot.

Dad always told me, list my choices. Okay.

One, I leave Onyx in there. Either he gets out alone, or he gets delivered to whoever the Vaher cartel is shipping giant boxes to. And he doesn't think he can get back out.

Two, I break The Rule and open this up. See what I'm shipping, and hope it's not anything too nasty.

I closed my eyes, rested my forehead against the crate, and sighed. Yep, that was no choice at all. I couldn't abandon Onyx, so in I went.

The tamper-proof lock proved to be anything but. Apparently, whoever was in charge of the shipment did their shopping on the cheap. It took me less than five minutes to open it in a way that wouldn't show. However, opening the container a crack didn't result in Onyx zipping past me.

Nope, that would be too easy. "Onyx? You're safe now. Come on out."

"No." Onyx yowled. "Danger. Danger. Stuck."

I pursed my lips and counted to five. Nothing changed. I hate it when that happens.

Nothing for it, then. Swinging the crate door open, I stepped inside and stopped dead. Complex circuitry covered the back wall of the container, connectors gleaming in the light. At their base was a sarcophagus-style pod, large enough to give the biggest human who'd ever lived that extra legroom feeling.

Somehow, Onyx had gotten himself tangled in wires about halfway up the wall. Enormous eyes stared at me, pleading, and I shook my head. "I hope you didn't damage any of this gear, Onyx. Repairs are coming out of your share of the pay."

His ears drooping, Onyx endeavored to look innocent and upset that I trusted him so little. I snorted, blew stray hair out of my face, and looked at the pod. Gold decorations on black ceramsteel, a clear panel where a face should be, and scenes of battle inlaid into the lower surfaces. If it hadn't been for the cabling running in from above, it might have been the burial site of some alien god-king.

If so, I was about to commit sacrilege. I clambered up on the chamber to reach Onyx and disentangle him from the wires. What happened next was an accident, pure and

simple. My foot slipped on the smooth black surface, and I fell. The impact was hard enough to sting my hand and my knee, and I found myself looking through the glass panel, face to face with him.

Prince Karkonar Arisran, heir to the black throne, son of King Tragorar Arisran, etc., etc. A week earlier, I wouldn't have recognized him. Now? He'd been all over the news—journalists talked about 'The Kidnapped Prince' and you could hear their hope that his aging father passed away so they could use 'The Kidnapped King' instead.

He looked exactly like the holos the Arisran royalty showed. Powerful muscles, corded like steel cables, under deep red skin with dark, vine-like tattoos winding around him. A mane of hair, black as the darkness between the stars, spread out around his head like a dark halo, and two thick horns swept back from his brow, thick and intricately ridged.

The face they framed was, by any measure, gorgeous. A hint of fine stubble shadowed his sharp, aristocratic jawline, and his full, firm lips seemed to call out for a kiss. In the holonews, he looked like a glamorous, swoon-worthy playboy. In person, he was dangerously hot, with the looks to get a good girl to make bad decisions.

He laid there, frozen in time. Whatever this sarcophagus started out as, someone had modified it into a bootstrap stasis pod. The perfect way to ship a prince without attracting suspicion.

And here I was, inches away from him. I'm not sure how long I stared through the glass before Onyx's squeals demanded my attention again, and I reluctantly turned to help him out of the trap he'd made for himself.

"Free," Onyx exclaimed, hopping out of my hands as soon as I'd disentangled him.

He landed in an awkward tumble, then did his level best to pretend it was what he'd planned to do. "Free Red Man, Too?"

"Don't be stupid, Onyx," I said, getting an annoyed hiss back. That raised the question of what else I would do with him. Again, I listed my options.

One, I reseal the container and pretend that nothing happened. Don't get involved, take the payment, fly away. Pros: it's the safe option. Cons: it's a coward's way out, and the cartel might not let me live even if they didn't spot my tampering.

Two, I change course for Aris, return him to his family, claim the reward. It would make me powerful enemies, but powerful friends as well. Pros: lots of profit, and new friends. Cons: I'd be looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life.

And three. I open the stasis pod and wake him up.

Who am I kidding? I'd known what I was going to do from the moment I saw the prince's face.

KARKONAR

Before the stasis field hit me, I roared in anger and pain. Not physical pain, but my attackers had no sense of propriety or restraint. I'd seen my assistant blasted apart, my driver caught in the hovercar's explosion. The attackers gunned down the Royal Guard, catching them off-balance and giving them no time to react. Bystanders fled, trampling each other in their haste to get clear of the trap closing around me. In mid movement, something slammed into me and carried me backward to trip and fall into some kind of pod.

They'd regret taking me alive, I swore to myself as the pod closed around me. Then, nothing.

Time snapped back into existence. With a roar of rage, I flung the lid off and burst through to face my attackers.

The disconnect was bizarre. As far as I was concerned, no time had passed since the ambush on my car in Kingstadt five seconds earlier. My brain insisted I must still be nearby, surrounded by the same black-uniformed attackers who'd dragged me from the wreck.

Instead, I was in a tiny room, mostly full of stasis equipment. I didn't even give it a look—as soon as I saw the figure standing at the stasis controls, I leaped to the attack. The small being squealed as my hand closed on her throat, then fell silent as I slammed her into the nearest wall.

“Where am I?” I demanded, shaking her. “How long have I been here?”

Whoever and whatever she was, she had courage. Rather than fainting or surrendering, she grabbed for her tool belt. I caught her wrist in my free hand, snarling at her, our faces inches apart. She snarled right back, and headbutted me. I reared back, more from surprise than pain, and something flew into my face.

“No Hurt, No Hurt,” the fuzzy attacker screamed at me, putting a lie to its own words as needle-sharp claws scratched my cheeks and wings battered my ears. Releasing the human, I raised my arms to protect my eyes and grab the creature, which twisted in my grip and bit my wrist, hard.

Instinct took over, and I flung the beast away. It had done no damage, but it had bought its mistress the time she needed. A familiar click and hum announced she had a plasma gun at the ready, and I turned slowly to look at her.

“Hold it right there, buddy,” she said, voice deadly serious. “Let’s talk this through.”

I took a breath, pushing back my rage and examining her. My body responded to her instantly, and I wanted to do so much more than talk. The human female was stunning. Her heart-shaped face was pale, dusted with freckles, and framed by fiery red hair which she wore in a practical braid. Or tried to—loose curls sprung free, giving her a delightful, disheveled appearance. Emerald green eyes flashed as she fixed me with a gaze that seemed to reach into the depths of my soul, weighing me.

She wore a utilitarian, dark gray jumpsuit, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. Fitted to her form, it gave enough hints of her figure to make me want to tear it off her and inspect her in detail. A sturdy tool belt and a scuffed pair of boots added to her practical appearance, so unlike anything I was used to.

Her blaster, too large for human hands, wavered in her grip. I’d have bet the recoil

would knock her on her shapely ass if she fired it, but at this range, that wouldn't matter. She'd be bruised, but I'd be dead.

I straightened and looked at her again. The human was dangerous, yes, but not like the professional assassins who'd thrown me into the stasis chamber. If I moved fast, I had even odds of disarming her before she fired.

"You're not with them, are you?" I asked, opening my fists. Her pale cheeks reddened, making her even more desirable. "Is this some kind of rescue?"

"I'm not with anyone," she said, a note of defiance in her voice. "I'm just doing my job, that's all. And no, this isn't a rescue."

"So what is it? Where am I?" I lifted an arm, let it drop, and nodded to myself. The artificial gravity had that slightly sticky feeling, giving it away. "Aside from 'in space,' that is. Whose ship?"

"Lots of questions for a man with a blaster in his face," she said, gesturing with her weapon. I smiled but stayed silent, and after an awkward pause, she continued. "Fine, whatever. Yes, you're in space, aboard the Dashing Rogue. I'm its captain-owner, Elaine Jessop, hired to take you, or rather, this container, to Harry's Moon. Your turn—why? Who?"

I opened my mouth, confident I'd have something to say, then shut it again, realizing how little I knew. "Those are good questions, Captain. When I answer them, I will know who to skin. Whoever they were, they killed far too many innocents capturing me."

My voice hardened, jaw clenching at the memory. However long it had been for the world, for me, mere moments had passed since the attack. It was all raw, new, and painful. "Why they kidnapped me, I do not know. There are too many possibilities.

My father is near death, and I am heir to the throne. Do they intend to control me, somehow? Or did they go to this much trouble to extort a ransom? If so, they'll get a rude surprise from my sister."

Something didn't add up, and that irked me. But the adrenaline of the fight was wearing off, and I felt light-headed. I leaned against the wall, and seeing that, the human Elaine lowered her blaster cautiously, then holstered it in her tool belt.

"After you." She gestured toward the door.

Outside, I found myself in an almost empty cargo hold. There were only a few other crates, none even half the volume of mine. I looked back at the crude wooden container, eyes narrowing when I saw the bill of lading declared me to be 'dehydrated industrial fertilizer.' That had to be an intentional insult.

I wheeled on the captain as she exited the container. "How the hell did you get hired to ship a prince?"

She held up empty hands but held her ground. Few people could take my angry gaze so calmly. "I took a contract, same as always. It's not like they said what was in the box. I figured it was drugs or firearms or something."

"You could have—" I cut myself off before I said too much. The human was a criminal and a smuggler, but she had released me. If she'd turned down the job, I'd probably still be in stasis in the hold of a different ship, and on my way to Harry's Moon, wherever and whatever that was.

Rage burned in me, hot and deep and raw. I was still in fight mode, yearning for enemies to strike and hunt and kill. But the human wasn't a fair target. She hadn't attacked me, hadn't harmed me, and something about her called to me as no other female ever had.

Was this my mate? Had fate taken a hand in my kidnapping? No, she cannot be. I am a prince royal, soon to inherit the Black Throne. She isn't even Arisran. I cannot be mated to her.

With a snarl, I stalked away to think.

ELAINE

“Well, my first idea is terrible,” I said as we sat down in the mess, the closest thing to a communal area aboard the Rogue. At least it let us sit facing each other to talk. My cabin would have been more comfortable, but putting Karkonar, myself, and a bed in the same room was asking for trouble.

The best kind of trouble... my libido piped up in the back of my mind, and I did my best to squash her. This wasn't the time for complications, no matter how deliciously tempting.

“I can reseal the container and deliver it.” Doing my best to ignore my inner turmoil, I carried on. “I didn't know what was inside, so how should I know where you'd gone? That way I'd have gotten paid, and whoever's after you would start looking in the wrong place.”

Prince Karkonar shook his head. “That's a terrible idea. Do you really believe it would work? More likely, they'd murder you on principle. I have a better plan. You go to meet your client, and when you identify him, I pounce from the shadows and tear the information from him.”

Tapping his fingers on the tabletop, Karkonar left scratches where his jet-black claws hit the scuffed metal. I didn't doubt his ability to get information out of someone, but I hoped it didn't come to that.

“Okay, fine, it’s a draw. We both have terrible plans. Whoever meets me probably won’t know more than I do.” I shook my head. “Maybe Onyx has a better plan?”

Hearing his name, the cat looked up from licking his wing. “Treat? Food?”

I laughed and even Karkonar cracked a smile. Opening a box of Meatish Treats, (the off-brand synthetic meat replacement your pets will love!), I threw a couple to him and laughed again at his ungainly pounce. “Well, you’re not wrong. Eating something and taking some time to think is probably our best bet, short term. We’re still four days out from Harry’s Moon, so we’ve got time to decide on a plan.”

Karkonar cocked his head to the side, looking at me with a raised eyebrow. “I have been kidnapped, packaged, and shipped across the stars. And you, human, ask me to relax? I may be four days from my foes, but that’s four days to plan my vengeance.”

I know something that’ll help you relax. My cheeks burned as that thought popped unbidden into my mind, and I did the mental equivalent of kicking my libido in the shin.

“You won’t be any good at planning if you’re starving,” I pointed out. “It’s been, what, a week since you ate?”

He grimaced. “With stasis, it’s only two hours since breakfast. But apparently being ambushed takes a lot out of me. Fine.”

I glanced at the tray with my abandoned meal on it. Leaving it sitting for a couple of hours hadn’t made it any more appetizing. With a sigh, I dumped it into the foodmaker’s intake hopper. That got me back a few of the credits I’d spent, and I called up the menu to see what I could afford.

None of my food was fit for a prince. Honestly, it wasn’t fit for anyone sapient

enough to leave a review, but I'd put up with that while I was only cooking for myself. Serving a meal to royalty was different. "Onyx, you just had to steal one of the last good foods, didn't you?"

The winged cat chirped indignantly. "Not Steal. Starving!"

I looked at his half-full food bowl in the corner. Karkonar looked at it. Onyx looked at it. A pause hung in the air before the cat spoke again. "Starving."

With that, he turned to cleaning his whiskers and pointedly ignoring me. Karkonar chuckled, a dark and dangerous sound but an improvement on stony silence. "Do not be too hard on the creature. If not for his 'theft' you wouldn't have discovered me."

"Jury's still out on whether that's a good thing," I replied, smiling to take the sting out of it. There was a harsh reality under the joke, though. This would be a very expensive day. "Okay, we're still talking, not eating. I'm going to make us something, and we can talk afterward."

I searched the menu for the best options I had the credits to offer. The choice wasn't great. Nacho-style chips with mock artificial cheese substitute? Had any of that ever so much as seen real food? Then we had a Real* Food Pizza with Genuine Tuna-Equivalent Protein. I'd carefully avoided following that asterisk—whatever explanation it led to couldn't be good.

"I can't offer that to a fucking prince," I muttered under my breath, imagining the feasts he must be used to. Even at my best, I was eating vat-grown foods. The Crown Prince of Aris? Had he ever tasted meat that didn't come from a living animal?

A giant red hand reached past me to tap the holoscreen. "Is that a Goodhut Pizza?"

Is he mocking me? "You almost sound like you're pleased to see it."

He was right there, almost touching me, warming my back with his body heat. My cheeks burned and I kept my face turned away, hoping he wouldn't notice my reaction. It seemed unlikely that anyone would miss how fast my heart beat; it was deafening to my ears.

“Pleased isn't the right word.” His deep voice rattled me, sending a tingle down my spine and making my breath catch in my throat. “I have fond memories of it them, that's all.”

I didn't voice my doubts, but I must have given some sign of them, because he chuckled. “Oh, don't think that just because I'm the son of a king I've always eaten at the feasting halls of the nobility. At boarding school, we snuck out when we could to eat junk food. For some reason, the nearest shop stocked Goodhut.”

He stepped back, and that was the moment I realized he'd had me trapped against the wall. Apparently, my situational awareness went to shit with him around. Somehow, he just hadn't triggered my threat response, which was worrying. Fuck.

“I guess it's pizza for lunch then, if you can call Goodhut pizza.”

KARKONAR

We ate in silence, the female avoiding looking at me. If she thought that hid her feelings, she was mistaken. I felt her attention on me, saw the flush on her cheeks, and knew that she wanted me. That wasn't unusual. Without false modesty, I am an attractive man, and as a prince, I received more than my fair share of interest.

The strange thing was how badly I wanted her, desired her with a fiery passion beside which the stars were cold. It's the adrenaline, I told myself. Not a genuine emotion, just lust. I snapped from the middle of a fight to looking at her. It would be weird if I felt nothing.

"I think we can agree," I said aloud, wanting to break the silence with something uncomplicated. "Goodhut pizzas are awful."

"Oh thank fuck," she said, dropping a half-eaten slice. "I can't believe you liked this, even as a kid."

"Thinking back, it's possible that we were showing off by eating the junkiest food we could find." I chuckled. "Human food is infamous."

This time, she looked up at me. Her emerald eyes flashed, looking into my soul, and I held her gaze steadily. She had no trouble holding mine, either. I liked that.

"What exactly is it infamous for?" Her tone had a warning note to it. I raised an

eyebrow.

“Cheap, artificial, and borderline toxic.” Her outraged expression was priceless, and I couldn’t restrain my laugh. “Hey, you asked.”

There was a touch of the surreal to the situation. My memories and my body insisted I was fighting for my life. Sudden assassins, an explosion, chaos everywhere. And then—nothing. I was days away from anywhere, on a rickety ship, alone with a beautiful, exotic female. One who blushed whenever I looked in her direction, but who still stood up to me. The emotional whiplash was disconcerting.

Focusing on her was a terrible idea. She was a smuggler, a criminal, and hadn’t so much as visited Aris. In no way was she a mate fit for a prince, but every time she smiled, I wanted to sweep her into my arms. When she looked worried, I wanted to slay whoever caused her stress. And I’d known her for less than a quarter-day so far.

This had the potential to be trouble. I had to manage it now.

“I must contact my family as quickly as possible,” I said, steering the conversation back to my situation. Elaine blinked, sat back, and nodded. Suddenly, she was all business. If not for her flushed cheeks, I’d have no clue that our proximity was still distracting her as much as it was me.

There I go again. Focus.

“Your family. Right. Well, once we reach Harry’s Moon, you can send a message and let them know you’re okay. Then they can come and get you.”

“I do not know this Harry’s Moon. All I know is that my enemies consider it a safe place to send me, which does little to inspire confidence. Not somewhere I can just wander into a courier station to send a message.”

“Point,” the captain conceded. “I could send the message for you, but whoever’s after you will expect a delivery from me.”

“Then we agree. We change course and head for the next nearest settlement.”

“Now, hold on. I have other deliveries on Harry’s Moon. I can’t just take a couple of weeks out. It’ll trash my reputation.”

“The alternative risks worse,” I pointed out. “Your employers will be there, waiting. If you arrive and do not deliver me as arranged, it might go badly.”

She lifted the pizza remnants, threw them into the recycler, and sighed. “Okay, that makes sense. Damn it. I’m running close to the edge on finances already, defaulting on these deliveries might sink me.”

“I will not permit that.” Anger flooded through me at the possibility that our meeting might leave Elaine worse off. Which made little sense, given that she was part of a plot to kidnap me.

That did not help, of course. My anger cared little for logic.

She stood, watching me carefully, with the air of someone who’d been disappointed too often to trust easily.

“I will buy out your contracts. Whatever penalties you face for late delivery, I will cover. That’s on top of your normal fare for transporting me to the nearest Cirial Nexus.”

Elaine blinked. Her fingers twitched as she looked away, then back at me. “That won’t be cheap.”

“You are speaking to the heir to the Black Throne. I can cover your losses. Though I am, unfortunately, without any immediate funds. I may not be able to pay until I am back on Aris, but once there, I will cover all costs.”

She muttered something I couldn't hear, closed her eyes, deep in thought. Onyx flew down to land at her feet, rubbing against her ankles and purring approvingly. Was the little mischief maker backing me up? Hard to tell. Whatever he intended, though, it worked in my favor. The captain picked him up, stroking his fur as she nodded to me.

“Okay. You're a prince, so I guess your credit is good. If you're hiring me, though, we've got to do it right. A contract and everything.”

“Of course,” I replied. “I've no desire to have you worry about your pay.”

“And also...” she trailed off, licked her lips, took a deep breath. Started again. “And also, aside from my pay, there's the question of professional and personal relationships.”

She fidgeted with her comm for a moment, and a contract hologram appeared for me to look at. My turn to hesitate. I wanted, needed, to claim this female. But the contract forbade ‘fraternization’ of any kind, and I reluctantly saw the point. Relationships between employer and contractor could turn bad.

For me, though, it would make our journey a frustrating one. But the needs of Aris took precedence, so with some reluctance, I put my palm on the hologram, accepting the contract.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:31 am

5

ELAINE

I watched Karkonar make his mark, trying to convince myself that what I felt was relief. With the contract signed, our roles were clear: he was my boss, my responsibility. Not a romantic partner. It simplified things, took unwanted options off the table. No matter how hot he is, I will not fuck someone who's paying me.

And I am relieved about that, not regretting it already.

Honest.

Fuck.

Another awkward silence filled the mess until I pointed out that I needed to consult my charts to find a new destination with one of these Cirial Nexuses. I pointed Karkonar at the gym down below the residential level. It offered somewhere to beat things up in hologram sims, a chance to work off some of his aggression.

Watching him leave, I tried not to stare at his muscular ass, and failed. Failed again to keep myself from imagining him working out, taut muscles moving under his crimson skin. I bit my lip and closed the mess door, leaning back against it and squeezing my eyes closed.

“Fucking fuck, he's got no right to be that hot. This is going to be trouble .” I shook my head. “I have to get him off this ship soon.”

Onyx gave me a pitiful meow, his eyes huge, and I held up my hands. “Don’t start, Onyx. I’ve already kept you, and that’s my limit for strays.”

He hissed in response, tail flicking from side to side. “Bad Elaine. Bad.”

“You don’t know anything about it, Onyx. I’m human, he’s Arisran, and you’re an alien cat-bird-thing. We have completely different relationship styles.”

“No. Elaine No Relationship. Bad.”

I pressed my lips together, swallowing what I wanted to say long enough to count to five. That let me give him a gentler version. “You’re not wrong, but that’s also fucking rude, Onyx.”

He gave one last flick of his tail, dismissing my criticism, and launched himself out of the mess. It would have been a more elegant exit if he hadn’t clipped the doorframe with a wing on his way past. His squawk of alarm, followed by a thump, turned a dignified exit into a slapstick routine.

“Onyx Meant That.”

“Suuure.”

I left him to sulk, making my way to the bridge and the navigation computers. I needed to find a system with a Cirial Nexus, whatever that was, and get us pointed that way, fast.

With an air of inevitability, the computer gave only two results near enough to reach, both of them familiar to me. Aris, at nine days away, was stretching my ability to feed two of us and a cat. Possibly too far—Karkonar didn’t seem like a guy to eat small portions, and I couldn’t risk the paying customer starving to death. That left

Sudoya, which made me groan. Fuck fate and fuck this job.

Sudoya wasn't just home to a Cirial Nexus. The almanac listed a half-dozen settlements in the system, but only Harry's Moon mattered. There seemed to be no avoiding it.

The next two days were uneventful but frustrating. I stayed out of my devilishly handsome alien client's way as much as I could. He kept his distance from me, too. It made for a miserable, but bearable, trip.

If only Onyx hadn't become a complete nightmare. Every time I looked away, the furball found something new to mess up. So, on the third night, when the environmental alarm sounded at 2am, I was sure where to place the blame. "My cat is a saboteur," I grumbled as I fumbled on some clothes and checked what had triggered the alarm.

"Oh great. Onyx, you're a saboteur and a menace, and I'm going to?—"

I trailed off, unable to come up with a satisfying threat. The glowing red dot on a hologram map of the Dashing Rogue told me that whatever the flying cat had done was in Karkonar's room. Fuck.

Grumbling, I stamped my feet into boots, grabbed my emergency kit, and pulled my way across the zero-g corridor to what I'd started calling the Royal Suite. The previous occupant, Valnisse, had been the last crewmember to leave, so her room was the easiest to get running again. It also had the Akedian's tacky taste all over it, but Karkonar would just have to deal with that. I hammered on the door—the intercom wasn't working right yet—and wondered how long to leave it before barging in.

The door slid open almost immediately, and Onyx flew past as though fired from a cannon, complete with a smoke trail. Behind him came a coughing Karkonar, and the

acrid, awful smell of burning hair.

Fire aboard a spaceship is a deadly danger. I didn't wait for an invitation, pulling myself past him and into the room, looking for the source of the gray-white smoke and covering my mouth. My boots hit the deck, and I adjusted to the gravity with the ease of long practice.

Behind me, my employer landed with a loud thump and grabbed my shoulder. "Don't go toward the fire, idiot."

I shrugged him off. "You're going back into a burning room, and I'm the idiot?"

Too much talking. I choked on my next breath, dissolving into a coughing fit which only strengthened his argument, but I'd spotted the fire. Fumbling at my tool belt, I pulled out the fire extinguisher, pointed it at the open panel, and pulled the trigger.

Thump.

The extinguisher slammed back into my hand, firing a pellet of fire retardant into the flames. Meanwhile, the recoil hit hard enough that I felt the impact in my shoulder. Already off-balance from the coughing fit, that was enough to tip me backward into Karkonar, who wrapped his powerful arms around me to keep me from falling. My back pressed into his torso, the burning heat of him enveloping me, taut muscles moving under his skin. Arms like mighty tree trunks, strong enough to break me, held me with the gentle care one might give a work of art.

For a moment, those sensations were all I could pay attention to. Fire? What fire? Then I took a deep breath, letting the smoke burn its way down my throat, and things snapped back into place.

I pulled away as though Karkonar's touch scalded me, which was, to be fair, close to

the truth. He made no move to stop me, thank goodness—I had no chance of escaping his grip if he hadn't.

With the fire out, the air cleared fast, recyclers pulling in the smoke and replacing it with healthier air. My coughing subsided just as fast, and I leaned back against the wall, wiping my eyes. Karkonar sat on the bed, about as far from me as possible in the small cabin, waiting for me to recover. He should have looked a mess, streaked with smudges of smoke and fire-fighting goo. Despite being singed and soot-stained, he looked better than ever.

Once I caught my breath, I looked at the fire's source and cursed. A fine, fire suppressing film coated the panel and the surrounding wall, and I brushed it away to retrieve a water glass. "What the fuck is that doing in there?"

The prince shook his head. "I only looked away for a moment, Captain. Then Onyx knocked the glass from the table and?"

"You're blaming this on the ship's cat?" I wanted to sound outraged, but what came out was more long-suffering than angry. I sighed, raking my fingers through "I mean, fine, I guess it checks out. He can be a little shit sometimes. How did he get in here, anyway?"

"I truly do not know." The prince sighed and leaned back. I tried not to think about joining him on the bed. For one thing, it barely had enough space for him. "When it happened, I was looking through your shipboard library for something to read. I left my drink on the desk, and then Onyx was yowling, and smoke everywhere."

Oh, for fuck's sake. I could picture the scene. Onyx, up on the desk, pushing the water glass to the edge—and then batting it across the narrow room to land in the exposed wiring. What did he think he'd achieve, though?

“That cat is a menace. I don’t know why anyone would give cats wings.”

“Whoever taught them to speak is worse.”

I shot him a mock glare. “Shut it, Your Highness. I built him that translator collar myself.”

“Oops.” The gleam in his eyes didn’t look the least bit apologetic. “I suppose that’s better than him having to resort to this kind of thing to communicate.”

His airy wave took in the cabin’s smoke-streaked walls, the gray-blue dust the fire extinguisher had left, the singed carpet beside the hatch. I shrugged. “I don’t know. Perhaps he has a future in abstract art.”

The prince’s laugh surprised us both, a sharp quick sound, gone as quickly as it appeared. “Maybe so, but it’s an expensive hobby, at least for you. And he’s shown no sign of cleaning up the mess he made.”

“Speaking of which, let me get the cleaning supplies,” I said with a sigh.

I saw no sign of Onyx as I crossed the hall to the storage closet and back. Smart move under the circumstances, but I hoped he was okay. Angry as I was, I didn’t wish him any harm.

How much trouble can he get into? I wished I hadn’t asked myself that—just an hour earlier, I wouldn’t have thought he could get himself into this trouble. “I guess I just have to pray he doesn’t blow up the hyperdrive or something.”

Returning to Karkonar’s room, I tried to put the flying cat out of my mind and set to work putting the place back together. To my surprise, Karkonar pitched in without comment, and while he didn’t have any skill at cleaning, he was quite willing to put

in the effort. With his help, the work didn't take too long, and against all expectations, I enjoyed it. We shared a look as we uncovered the hot pink carpet from the powdery film, shaking our heads at Valniss's strange aesthetic. At least I'd changed the bedding from the gold-lined powder pink stuff she'd left behind, though it would have been hilarious to see Karkonar try looking dignified reclining on that.

It took an hour, but at last the room was clean. We exchanged glances and shared a grin. If I looked half as messy as he did, I couldn't expect him to be not amused by what he saw.

"Come on, we'd better get washed up."

And that's how we ended up showering together. It shouldn't have been a big deal. The communal showers were set up for five people to shower with some amount of privacy. Until today, being separated by translucent panels had been enough.

Today, the frosted plex concealed just enough to tease. Karkonar discarded his tunic as we separated, and my gaze kept slipping sideways to his fuzzy silhouette as he stripped the rest of the way. Watching him slide off his clothes was an exquisite torment, my mind trying to fill in the blanks.

Trying to keep my eyes, and my mind, off him, I undressed quickly and without ceremony. Leaving my clothes in a heap on the tiled floor, I couldn't resist looking up at the prince again.

Fuck. He looked at me, eyes burning bright enough that I saw them glow through the plex. I shivered, my skin tingling under his gaze, and turned to step under the showerhead.

Did I put some extra sway in my hips? If so, I'll never tell.

Pipes groaned as the showers activated, the water appearing first as a trickle, then as a torrent. Hot, cleansing water pounded my skin, and I breathed deep. Across the room, Karkonar sighed happily, loud enough to catch my attention. I couldn't help glancing in his direction.

A mistake. He was soaping himself up, and I had a hard time keeping my eyes off him. The muscular bulk of him was more than a little distracting, and I bit my lip when he turned sideways, and I saw he was erect. And massive. I couldn't help staring. It was all I could do to not applaud.

That was the moment the hot water cut out. Ice cold liquid hit me, making me jump and scream in shock, practically teleporting out from under the showerhead. The plex wall flew aside as Karkonar burst through it, wreathed in a cloud of steam. His eyes sought the threat to me as he swept me up in his arms, warmth flooding through me from his touch.

It felt like being hugged by a friendly sauna. Wherever his skin came near me, the water evaporated, and part of me wished I knew how he pulled off that trick. A tiny part; the rest was consumed by the sensation of his touch.

His skin was smooth and hot, like heated glass, and I tingled under it. With a growl, he lifted me and pulled me back, his dick pressing against me. It felt even larger than it had looked, and I gasped. Shuddered. He hardened against me, growing even larger.

Fuck it. We were here now. I wriggled against him, wringing a hungry growl from him. Whatever self-control he had left broke, and he pushed me against the tiled wall, icy water washing over us, turning to steam. The contrast between his aura of heat and the cold of the water was delicious, even more so when he slid his hands around me. Fingers traced the curves of my body, left hand rising to my breasts, right hand heading downward.

I tried to reach back, to caress him as he teased me, but he wasn't having any of that. Pushing me forward again, pinning me to the wall with his weight and strength, he had me helpless. And I loved every second.

His lips planted a kiss like fire on my shoulder, then another, kissing his way up to my neck, alternating each kiss with a bite. Each bite was harder than the last, the waves of burning pleasure they sent through me growing, too. Fingers teased and pinched my nipples with a gentle precision, and I realized I was panting for breath.

“Mine,” my alien lover growled in my ear, claiming me. I whimpered something, and his fingers teased across my pussy, making me aware of just how desperately I needed him. “Mine!”

My breath caught as he slid a finger between my folds, and I arched back against him with a wordless snarl. I couldn't have wanted him more, needed him more, craved him more, and when his finger found my clit, I was so desperate for his touch it pushed me into an orgasm almost instantly.

“Mine,” he said again, voice so low I felt it in my bones. He bit down, hard, into my shoulder, and I jack-knifed into ecstasy. Together, we sank down onto the hard deck, and I squirmed around to look up at him. His eyes blazed with passionate fire, his mane of black hair was plastered to his shoulders, his muscles gleamed as water ran over them, sharp teeth showed in his hungry grin. He looked every bit the demon lover I craved.

I glanced downward, needing to see. His cock did not disappoint—long and hard, as thick as my fist, skin ribbed. I could hardly imagine it fitting inside me, and I'd never needed to try something as much.

Grabbing his horns, I pulled him down to meet my kiss, hungry for his touch. He roared at that, a cry of triumph and lust, and he thrust into me, pinning me to the cold

tiles with the force of it. I gasped and bucked wildly as he thrust again. And again. Slow, steady thrusts speeding into a crescendo of intense sensation. He was too large, or should have been, but my core opened to welcome him, and he was perfect. With each thrust, the whole massive thing vibrated inside me until it became too much to bear. I howled up into the pouring water, orgasm after orgasm racking me.

“Please,” I begged. “Please, come, come with me.”

I think that’s what I said, anyway. In the middle of so many orgasms, I’m not sure I managed comprehensible words.

The meaning must have carried, because my demonic lover took the cue to fuck me harder, almost brutally. Clamping down on him, I writhed, and that’s when his cock’s vibrations went into overdrive.

The world melted under the relentless waves of ecstasy, and Karkonar came with me, his hot seed filling me to overflowing.

KARKONAR

We laid together, water pounding on us from above. Elaine clung to me, her touch testing my self-control. In her arms, I found a peace I'd never known. A muted, powerful joy that made my problems seem small against the blessings of her presence. What we'd found was more spiritual than carnal.

And I knew she felt the same. The way she clung to me showed it, the soft little breaths she took, the way she relaxed into my embrace—all combined to let me see Elaine, rather than Captain Jessop. Elaine, in turn, saw me at my most open—Karkonar, not the Crown Prince of Aris.

And she liked what she saw. The way she looked at me, the way her fingers traced along my muscles, the way her cheeks flushed, told me as much. As I watched, though, she drew on the mask of Captain Jessop, putting distance between us once more.

At the same time, the mask of Crown Prince Karkonar settled on me. I knew what we had was fragile and dangerous. Karkonar might claim Elaine as his mate, but what future did the Heir to the Black Throne have with the captain of the independent ship Dashing Rogue?

One day, my family would require me to marry. Technically, I would choose my mate, but the good of the royal house placed certain immutable expectations on my decision. Not an alien female with no connections or influence, but an Arisran noble

who'd strengthen the dynasty. I'd seen the folders my parents kept, lists of names and titles. No one would expect love from such an arrangement. At best, we'd be friends as my parents were. At worst, it would be like my father's parents—their mutual hate hidden on public occasions.

Duty bound me. Duty that would crush us both. Elaine knew it, same as me.

“This,” Elaine said with stern dignity, “was a one-off. I'm glad we did it, and I wish we could do it more. Much more. We can't, though. If we don't control ourselves, if we don't get professional, then someone's heart is getting broken. Sorry, I don't have time to pick up the pieces and glue you back together.”

She managed a shaky grin, which I felt like a stab to the heart. She joked, but it hit close to the mark.

“You are right,” I told her, lifting her to me to kiss the cool skin of her forehead. “This is too dangerous, too tempting. I regret nothing about our mating, but it will not happen again. From now on, we follow the contract.”

For a moment, her resolve wavered. Then she pushed off from me, and stood, maintaining a surprising dignity as she walked through the freezing water jets and over to collect her clothes. I followed suit, careful to give her space. I didn't want either of us getting distracted and breaking our new agreement before we'd even left the room we'd made it in.

And that wasn't entirely honest. Waiting, I watched her dress, gazing at her naked body for what might be the last time. I did all I could to commit her beauty to memory as she dressed, then dressed myself. We were client and patron once more.

From somewhere nearby, a 'cat' hissed. I looked around, but Onyx hid too well for me to spot him. I just heard his disapproval.

You and me both, little one. You and me both.

The Cirial Nexuses are rare and ancient, too useful for anyone to destroy. Which meant they were also too useful to own, since people do stupid things in war. Thus, the creation of the Siblinghood of the Nexus. A neutral quasi-religious organization that held the Nexuses in trust and facilitated communication through them.

Only a very few ways to send messages faster than light exist, and the Siblings had a near-monopoly. They'd charge me a hefty fee, but since Aris had a Nexus too, my message would reach home instantly. That was worth the money.

"I've never seen one of these before," Elaine admitted, staring out the viewport at the floating stone edifice. "It's impressive."

A smile twitched on my lips. What a talent for understatement she had, and what an effort she made to appear unmoved. "They never stop inspiring awe, Captain. There's one on the edge of my home system, so I have seen it often. It feels this way every time."

This Nexus looked like a gigantic fist, honeycombed with tunnels that would, through whatever Ancient technology they used, connect with other Nexuses. It hung suspended in front of a gas giant, vivid bands of color providing a glorious backdrop for the artifact and its companion moon.

The Dashing Rogue came in on an approach, not to the Nexus itself, but to the habitat trailing its orbit. No one could claim a Nexus, but anyone could build next to one, and so they did, offering services to those visitors who had business with the Siblings. Back home, that station was my sister's duchy. Here, things were less formal, and the station looked like a haphazard collection of wrecked ships welded together around a small moon rather than something purpose built for the job.

The mysterious ‘Harry’ had built his moon up quickly, haphazardly, and doubtless fatally for many of the residents. From his point of view, it had been worth it. The trade in information would be worth a fortune. A message sent via the Nexus would arrive on Aris days before the fastest courier ship could make the trip.

“Looks like a good spot for us, relatively speaking,” Elaine said, looking at the moon’s datafeed with a slight frown and no enthusiasm. “No docking procedures to deal with beyond paying for a berth, so you don’t need to worry about ID. Though I’d cover up if I were you—your face has been all over the news for weeks.”

I grimaced but nodded. She had a point, and as Elaine brought her ship in to dock, I looked for something to wear. The Dashing Rogue’s maintenance bay had several spare pressure suits in various sizes, one of which fit me. It didn’t work, and one sleeve had slit down the seam, rendering it entirely useless for its intended function, but for hiding my identity, it worked perfectly. No one expected a prince to wear this

To be safe, I tied back my hair as well, which was when Onyx made his reappearance. I’d just started wrapping a piece of cloth around my hair when the cat dropped from above, hissing as he came.

Startled, I moved to the side, but Onyx’s claws caught in the fabric, and he dragged it from my hands as he spread his wings and soared to the top of a tool cabinet.

“No. Bad Red.” The collar translated Onyx’s hisses into a scolding tone. “Bad. Not Cover Fur. Fur Pretty.”

My eyes narrowed. “Did you just attack me to offer fashion advice?”

The little mammal cocked his head to one side. “Not Advice. Instruction.”

That was so absurd that controlling my laughter proved impossible. My attempt ended in a spluttering guffaw that doubled me over, clutching at my sides. “You are giving me orders? Me? I am Crown Prince, I am the Duke of Dis, and I am big enough and fast enough to catch you. How do you believe you are in control?”

Onyx leaped back at the start of my tirade, fur on end and eyes wide. By the time I’d finished, though, he’d stepped forward again and started ostentatiously washing himself while waiting for me to finish.

“Could Catch Onyx,” he said when I fell silent. “Won’t. Too Clever. Captain Would Not Like.”

“Am I a slave to her whims?” I asked, scoffing, only to trail off. The furball had a point, sadly. I would never hurt Onyx. Not only was he Elaine’s pet, but I liked the little troublemaker too much.

Onyx had my number, and worse, he knew it. I crossed my arms. “Fine. I won’t tie back my hair, and when I’m recognized because of it, you can take solace from the fact that your captain wasn’t subjected to that awful sight before she died.”

We stared at each other, locked in a battle of wills. Then, with a hiss, Onyx batted the cloth down to me. “Stupid Red.”

He stepped back into the shadows and vanished, leaving me looking at the rag.

ELAINE

“ Y ou look...fine?” I said, trying not to laugh. Not that Karkonar looked bad with his hair tied back, just ridiculous. It was obvious this wasn’t how he usually wore his magnificent mane, and it fought against its improvised confinement. Though the resulting mess was comical and unflattering, it worked as a disguise. No one would focus on his face.

Which was soon put to the test as Karkonar growled and stalked down the boarding ramp, into the crowds beyond. No one stood in his way, his aura of rage driving everyone back. No one seemed to recognize him, either.

I followed in his wake, glad to see other Arisrans in the crowd. I’d feared the prince would be unique enough to make him unmissable, but Harry’s Moon was still close enough to Aris that he didn’t stand out too much. That let me relax and take in our surroundings. The station was a chaotic mess, as though a market crashed into a nightclub and the owners had shrugged and made the best of it. For all I knew, that was exactly what happened. An anarchic mess of symbols and words covered every surface in an incomprehensible riot of colors. Music blasted from a dozen competing venues, and shops offered everything you could imagine, from rugged fabrics by the meter to holovids which would make a sybarite blush. Several of those were playing outside stores and clubs, serving as advertising for the businesses within. Delicious smells wafted through from the food stalls set up throughout the market, mixing with less pleasant odors I tried to ignore.

It was a dizzying display, and these were the castoffs. Harry's Moon served as a clearinghouse for pirates, a way to negotiate sales with those far away. Low value goods ended up here, on the market. The real prizes would sell across the galaxy, via the Cirial Nexuses. Which was a reason I'd never been here before—I'd never had a prize worth the effort, or the fees.

Until now. Prince Karkonar walked ahead of me, and I knew that many people in my line of work would see him as a stack of credits on legs. That I didn't was one reason I never got the juicy jobs.

We passed through the markets unrecognized, dozens of traders trying to grab our attention. I could buy silly hats. Weapons from a dozen worlds. Holoshows from a hundred. Collections of jewelry. Collections of teeth. A market where you could get anything your heart desired, if you didn't mind the suffering piracy caused.

No one made any effort to hide that suffering. A slave market stood off to one side, unfortunate passengers of hijacked vessels sold to the highest bidder. Holograms advertised particular dealers and their wares, with no fear of retribution.

I looked away, feeling nauseous at the sight. By luck, that movement tugged at my belt in a way it shouldn't, and I looked down to see a dainty hand plucking at one of my pouches. I followed it up to see a child. In a human, I'd have guessed around twelve years old. She was a Liil, and I had no idea how quickly they matured in comparison to us.

The waif yanked at the pouch, pulling free my spare blaster cartridge. Moving with surprising speed and grace, she stepped smoothly backward, and my hand closed on thin air. Her eyes sparkled, and she grinned at me, displaying needle-sharp pointed teeth, before turning to run.

A giant red hand landed on her shoulder, gripping hard enough that she dropped the

cartridge. She hissed, prompting Onyx to do the same from his perch on my shoulder.

Looming over her like a vengeful demon, Karkonar growled. The girl tried to pull free, but I knew she didn't stand a chance. My alien warrior looked at me as though to ask what to do with the little sneak thief. I didn't know. Law enforcement was non-existent on Harry's Moon, and the crowd ignored us completely.

"Let her go," I said.

"That is unwise," Karkonar replied, twisting his grip to discourage the girl's struggles. "We should make sure that everyone knows better than to rob you."

"I'm not planning on hanging out around here long enough to earn a reputation, Red." I sighed and dug around in another pouch, pulling out a Food Equivalent Energy Bar (Green Flavor). Not much of a treat, but something. "Right, take this and get out of here."

I flipped the bar over to the alien girl, who caught it and made it vanish so fast I couldn't follow. Karkonar grumbled, but let go of her arm, and she scrambled away.

"You will attract every hungry mouth here," Karkonar said as we watched her run to an older girl, a human, who glared in our direction. I gave her a cheerful wave, she responded by giving me the finger, and then the two of them left. Under the circumstances, I thought that was a pretty good outcome.

Turning back to my alien prince, I smiled. "We aren't standing around waiting for the news to spread. Let's go."

On the far side of the market, we encountered the Siblings of the Nexus, standing aloof from it all. Their blue-gray robes lent them a serious air, and no one invited trouble by bothering them. Even in a nest of gangsters and pirates, some things were

off limits—and at the top of that list, you’d find the monks. Without them, the Nexus just put a target on this place.

Beyond them, the deck opened into space, an airshield holding in the precious atmosphere while letting ships through. Seven small shuttles waited here, seven Siblings sitting beside them. They looked out into the void beyond, motionless, meditating or praying or doing whatever else they did in veneration of the Nexus, which covered half the sky. This close up, it looked shaped, though I couldn’t tell what that shape was. My eyes slid off it when I tried to follow its lines.

As we approached, one Sibling stood. Tall and spindly, I recognized him as an Akedian male, but I could tell little else. His robe, the same blue-gray as the Nexus itself, hid all details.

“Travelers,” he intoned, voice solemn and serene. “You wish to use the mystery of the Nexus?”

“We do,” Karkonar said, respectfully. “I need to speak with Princess Arkari of Aris. Inform her it concerns the whereabouts of her brother, and she will take the call.”

“Indeed.” If his request surprised the Sibling, he didn’t show it. He took out a datapad, tapping the interface faster than I could follow. “I must inform you it may take several hours or even days to find your recipient and convey her to the Nexus—oh, I see she’s already responded.”

That did surprise him, though he hid it well. Recovering, he inclined his head and gestured with one too-long arm to the shuttle beside him. “I shall take you across.”

The trip was uneventful, except for my growing unease at my inability to look at the Nexus as we approached it. Something about it made my brain itch and my stomach churn, and I was glad when our pilot flew us into a cavernous opening. Another

airshield kept a breathable atmosphere in, so my helmet came off. If I needed to throw up, I would rather not do so inside a helmet.

“Proceed inward, and you will find your conversation partner.” With that, the Sibling sat down beside the shuttle and seemed to switch off.

The space we’d entered was a large, circular tunnel, the blue-gray stone darkening as we walked deeper. The tunnel shrank too, and soon we were in a tunnel of reflective black stone, just wide enough for us to walk side-by-side.

I pressed close to Karkonar, taking his hand. To make sure we didn’t get separated, of course. Nothing romantic about it. Not at all.

Though the heat of his hand engulfing mine ran up my arm like a current, sending tingling sensations throughout my body. It made a welcome distraction from the strange ancient artifact we walked through.

We arrived at our destination without warning. One moment, we were alone in the tunnel. The next, we weren’t. Ahead of us stood an Arisran lady, skin red as Karkonar’s, an understated dress that I guessed cost more than the Dashing Rogue was worth. She looked up from a datapad, an irritated expression on her beautiful face.

She froze mid-motion as she saw Karkonar, the pad falling from her fingers. The irritation faded, replaced with shock and wonder. “Kark?”

“Ark.” I heard the grin in his voice, the joy of the reunion. “I never thought I’d be so glad to see you. Let me introduce my rescuer, Captain Elaine Jessop of the?”

“Brother! It is you,” the princess interrupted, her burning eyes sparkling. “And at the Harry’s Moon nexus? The Stardust will take half a day to get me there. Just sit tight

and don't get yourself murdered before I get to you."

She turned to me, and the intensity in those glowing golden eyes was like a kick in the chest. Princess Arkari was magnificent, regal, and had a charming, friendly smile that somehow still reminded me of a shark. I'd seen the same smile on the faces of girls I shouldn't have called friends at school, and it made me wary of trusting Arkari now.

"Captain Jessop, you've done the Royal House of Aris a great service," she said, and despite my suspicion, my chest filled with pride. Arkari had the bearing of a princess, somehow making her opinion matter. "The animals that kidnapped my dear brother must be fuming at your change of heart! You must let me offer you a reward for your help."

"Gladly, Your Highness," I said, smiling back and hoping the expression didn't look as forced as it felt. "I'm an independent hauler, not one to turn down a fair reward."

Her laugh was like a chiming bell. "Very well, I shall make certain you get what you're due. And please, call me Arkari. Why, you're almost family."

My cheeks burned at her knowing wink, and Onyx's claws dug into my shoulder. I reached up to stroke him as the princess turned away, calling to someone out of sight. "Fyntor, get my racing yacht ready, we're?—"

Her image vanished mid-sentence, leaving us alone in the strange dark chamber. Onyx hissed at the space she'd occupied, spreading his wings wide. "I know, Onyx, I know."

"That is a relief," Karkonar said, oblivious to our reactions. "I'd feared the enemy might have attacked my sister, too."

“They still might,” I pointed out. “She’s turning up here in her racing yacht, not exactly incognito.”

His expression turned grave. “True. She may present an opportunity they cannot pass up, but we shall have to make the best of that. If we position ourselves correctly, we’ll spot anyone who moves to attack her.”

“NoNoNONoNo,” came Onyx’s opinion.

“I’m inclined to agree with my cat. Come on, if we stay out of sight, there’s a good chance no one even knows we’re here till it’s too late to do anything about it. If we get spotted hanging around watching the docks, then things might go sideways before she arrives.”

We walked as we spoke, leaving the impossibly deep chamber to be met by a different Sibling than the one who brought us in, ushering us back aboard a shuttle. We stayed quiet in her presence, not wanting to take any chances with Karkonar’s secret identity. It made for an awkward silence, even more awkward for the way Onyx insisted on taking up several seats, forcing me into the prince’s lap for the flight.

Okay, I didn’t mind that bit so much, but I didn’t plan on admitting it.

KARKONAR

We ended up taking a meal in the market rather than forcing our way back through the crowd to the Dashing Rogue and what passed for food there. Picking at random, we chose a Prytheen grill. More accurately, Onyx chose it by yowling when we tried to move past it. The cook rewarded his zealous advocacy by flicking him a strip of meat, and he flapped away, purring. Elaine was less convinced, looking dubiously at her meal: a sizzling slab of meat wrapped in leaves, fried over coals, and served in a dense bread roll. Fresh from the grill, it radiated enough heat to be painful for her to hold, let alone consume, so I held both meals.

“Are you sure it’s safe to eat?”

I laughed. “I think that, on this station, any stall that gives its customers food poisoning will face worse than bad reviews. The Prytheen is still alive, and his stall is busy, so yes, it’s safe. Let’s find somewhere to sit.”

The stall’s seating area was full, a testament to the cook’s popularity. A few empty seats waited nearby, but why no one had taken them was no mystery. They were out in the crowd, which flowed around them and sometimes over them. Better than nothing, but neither comfortable nor safe. After the attempt to rob Elaine, I had no desire to make ourselves easy targets.

“Here. Eat Here.” Onyx sounded exasperated at our bipedal stupidity, sticking his head over the lip of a walkway above us. “Good Place. Elaine And Red Come.”

Elaine's lips quirked into a half smile. "Onyx, we can't fly, remember?"

The flying cat flapped his wings dismissively, as though to say he wasn't responsible for our poor choices. Elaine put her hands on her hips and glared at him until he took pity on us poor groundlings and padded away, leaving us to follow along below.

"Do you think he knows where he's going?" I asked, and Elaine laughed.

"No idea, but I'd watch your sandwich if I were you. He might guide us into an ambush."

Not sure quite how serious my companion was being, I spent the rest of the walk watching for trouble with the vague feeling that Elaine was laughing at me. No attack came, though, and Onyx led us to a flight of maintenance stairs. We climbed up to join him on the upper layer, among the airmakers and the network relays and all the other infrastructure that made this ramshackle station habitable.

Sat between two wheezing airmakers, we looked out across the market. Elaine gasped at the sight. "It's magnificent."

I rumbled my agreement, and Onyx preened. Below us, the chaotic blend of colors and sounds swirled, and it had a beauty which I hadn't appreciated when I was in the middle of the crowd. We sat together, leaning on one of the airmakers that wasn't making too much noise to hear ourselves talk.

The walk had given our meals a chance to cool, and I was eager to try mine. Taking a large bite, my eyes widened. The juices of the meat mixed with the bitter flavor of the leaf, and it was wonderful. Unlike anything I'd eaten before, prepared in chaos and not in peaceful order.

Elaine laughed. "It's good, sure, but not that good. You look like you've taken a bite

out of heaven.”

“I never had the chance to taste anything like it,” I said.

“Oh, fuck off, don’t you dare get all ‘woe is me’ about only having the finest chefs on Aris prepare your meals.” She took a bite of her own, closed her eyes as she chewed, then swallowed. “‘Poor little rich boy’ is kind of insulting.”

I looked at her soberly. “That is fair, and I know that most would swap places with me in a moment and never regret it. That doesn’t change the fact that my food has either been something I’ve killed and cooked on a hunt, or a meal prepared by a master chef.”

“Or a Goodhut pizza,” Elaine added. I pulled a face.

“Yes, well, I thought we were discussing food. Goodhut and its ilk are barely food-like.”

That got a laugh, and Elaine gestured for me to continue.

“This ordeal has given me another new experience, one that I would never know I’d missed, and I’m grateful for it. Once I’m king, I’ll never be able to get away.”

“Ah, so this is your one adventure before they lock you up in the palace?” Elaine shook her head. “You make it sound like a prison sentence.”

“I’ve seen what my father goes through for his planet. Being king is easy, being a good king is soul-breaking work. Every sapient who lives on Aris is his responsibility and taking that seriously would drive most men mad. If it wasn’t for the support of my mother, he’d have snapped decades ago.”

I looked out over the market, watching eddies in the crowd as people came and went. A riotous confusion of colors and sounds, impossible to follow yet infinitely simpler than an entire planet. “Prison would be easier. At least a prisoner can hope for release.”

Elaine’s small, warm hand gripped mine, squeezing tight, and I let out my breath in a long sigh. Her touch grounded me, brought me back to the present, settled my soul. I took a deep breath and tried to pull myself up from those maudlin thoughts.

“What of you, though? How did a human end up so far from Earth?”

Elaine’s ready grin didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I wanted freedom, and these days, that means getting as far from Earth as possible. The Terran Hegemony isn’t a great place for women, and the colonies might be better, but getting a place on one is damned near impossible unless you have an in-demand skill or a mountain of money. Not to mention that they’re still colonies of the Hegemony, so not exactly safe.”

Her turn to look out over the market, though I was certain that wasn’t what she saw. “Anyway, after a run of bad luck, I took my fate into my own hands and stowed away on a Liil transport. That got me as far as Lii before I was spotted. That I lasted that long impressed Captain ap’Aja enough that he offered me a job.”

We sat in silence, Elaine lost in thought and me unsure what to say. Show me an enemy of hers and I’d rip his heart out and offer it to her, but the ghosts of her past were not so easily fought. The silence stretched uncomfortably as I searched for something to say.

Which was when Onyx made his move.

With a triumphant meow, Onyx pounced on my half-eaten sandwich, sitting forgotten on the wall beside me. It turned to a yowl of furious disappointment as my reflexes

kicked in and I snatched it away at the last moment.

“No Red, Bad Red. My Food Now!”

He circled me, buffeting me with flapping wings, trying to reach my sandwich. Black feathers smacked my face and neck as I struggled for both balance and control.

“Get out of my face,” I shouted, then spluttered as I got a mouthful of feathered wing.

“This is mine.”

“Starving. Onyx Starving. No One Feed Onyx for Years.”

Helpless, I turned toward Elaine, only to find her red-faced and doubled over, trying to control a laughing fit. Seeing me accosted by a feline mugger seemed to be the perfect cure for her melancholy.

“I fed you two hours ago,” she gasped out. “And you got some meat at the grill.”

“I’m glad you find this funny,” I said, waving an arm at the black cat to ward him off. No luck. He was determined, and unless I was willing to hurt him, I couldn’t win this fight.

Defeated by my mate’s pet, I thought. Arkari will never let me live this down.

“Hey, Onyx, over here.” Elaine’s shout got my attention too, and I glanced over to see her waving her own half-eaten sandwich in the cat’s direction. With a sharp meow, Onyx flipped over, feet pushing off my face to propel him in her direction.

He swooped on the sandwich, snatching the meat slab out from the bread in a smooth, easy motion, his elegance only a little spoiled when it proved too heavy for him to carry easily. I chuckled, which turned into a full-on laugh as I met Elaine’s eyes. We

sank down to sit again, and I broke off half of my remaining meal and offered it to her.

“Half the time I think he only acts up like that to make me laugh when I’m down,” she said, accepting the food and taking a bite.

“Hm. Perhaps, but I note that, either way, he’s eating your meal.”

“Okay, sure, you’re right. It’s only partly about cheering me up. He’s mostly just a sneaky little food-thief.” She grinned. “I guess I’m okay with that.”

“Where did you find that...mischievous creature, anyway?” That seemed a safe topic.

“There’s a small colony of them on Talbrek Station now. No idea where they came from, but Onyx was a tiny kitten in need of a home, and I was a captain in need of a crew. The bookseller there knows enough about their care and feeding to help me plan how to keep him, and I got the idea for the collar from her and her cat, too. Sometimes I regret that, and I think she was just spreading the misery.”

“How is he, as crew?”

“Rubbish. He does no work, lacks any kind of technical skills, and steals from his shipmates. Good thing he’s cute.”

We laughed again, and when the laughter faded, we fell into silence again. Not the awkward silence of before, though. This was the companionable silence of a couple with no need to fill the air with words just to hear their own voices. A moment of peace, despite the chaos of our lives.

Finishing our meals, we sat there a while longer, and I realized I could not let this delightful female go. I needed her beautiful, sexy body, but more than that, I needed

the mind and soul of her. And I would not risk this chance slipping through my fingers. In all the universe, there was no one else for me.

I turned to look at Elaine, finding her gazing up at me, eyes shining. My heart filled with joy at the sight, and I took a breath to steady myself. My human deserved me at my most composed. Carefully gripping her delicate hand, I smiled and watched as she swallowed, then blinked, her cheeks flushed and breath quickening.

“Fate brought us together,” I said, earnest and direct. I would not hide the truth from her. “We both know it. You are my mate?—”

“Hold on, we set rules,” Elaine objected, though she made no move to pull away. Instead, her hand tightened on mine as she continued. “We’re not doing this while I work for you.”

“You have completed the contract. You brought me here, I’ve contacted my family. Now I just need to wait for Arkari to arrive, for which I don’t need a pilot, but I shall always need and want you beside me. If you prefer, you are free to leave, and I will make sure that your reward finds you. But without you beside me, my world will be ashes. Do not go. Stay, my beloved mate. Embrace your fate and be my queen.”

ELAINE

I stared up at him, my eyes wide. It took me a moment to realize my mouth was hanging open, then I shut it with a snap.

“I—but—you can’t—” I shook my head to clear it and started over. “Be your what?”

“You heard me correctly, sweet one.”

“You’re proposing to me? Now? On a fucking maintenance gantry?” My voice sounded rough, choked with laughter or anger—or both. Even I couldn’t tell which.

“Who says romance is dead?”

“Only fools. I propose to you here and now, because this is where you are, and having made my decision, I cannot wait another second. We belong together, heart of my heart. You know what I say is true.”

Did I? I raked a hand through my hair, trying to sort through the jumble of feelings that jammed up my heart. My whole body tingled for him, craving his touch. Every nerve screamed ‘yes’ at me, and my heart raced at the thought. I tried to look away. Tried to think past the sound of my pulse, suddenly deafening in my ears.

“You just got done telling me how being royalty is a shit job,” I said, trying to explain my hesitation. “Now you want me to be your queen? That seems kind of messed up. Especially if you just want an emotional support spouse.”

“No.” The word came out hard and fast, an instant response. “It is true, you would keep me sane. But that’s because you mean so much to me, Elaine, not the reason I care. I would gladly be yours, throne or no throne. Luxuries mean little, titles mean nothing, but you are everything.”

Fuck. The raw intensity of his emotion lit me up, a wildfire of desire flashing over me. My head spun and muscles trembled. If I hadn’t already been sitting down, I might have fallen.

My hand gripped the railing tight, and the world shrank down to just the two of us. Speaking was hard, the hardest thing I’d ever done, but I had to share what I was thinking.

“I’m not queen material, Karkonar. You’re amazing, and I’m not sure if I believe in fate, but if it exists, I’ve no trouble believing we’re fated for each other.” I had to fight back tears to speak. “But living in a palace, being watched by journalists and having to, I don’t know, judge village baking competitions or whatever a queen does? Come on, you know that’s a terrible idea.”

Karkonar stared at me, uncomprehending. Under other circumstances, it would have been funny to see the thoughts and emotions cross his face. Today, it was tragic. I felt like I’d been stabbed in the heart, and I knew I was getting the better end of the experience.

“But,” he started, then paused for a deep breath. “You are my mate. We are made for each other, and I will see you safe, happy, and proud to stand beside me.”

“I know! I don’t doubt your intentions, but that doesn’t change the fact that I’ve spent my entire life fighting for independence. I can’t just drop that and resign myself to being queen, even if it’s your queen. I’ll be tearing my hair out in a week, plotting a coup in a month.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but I laid my fingers over his lips, and he fell silent. Even now, his warm breath on my skin made me shiver with desire, but that changed nothing. “If we’re fated to be together, we will be, right? Destiny will bring us back together.”

“It already has. You are here, I am here, that’s all we need.”

“I wish it were, Karkonar, I really do. We’re here, yes, but I can’t leave with you. I mean, just fucking think about how I’d look as your queen. I’m a smuggler, for fuck’s sake! Imagine what the news would do with that once it gets out. It’s not just bad for me, it’s bad for your family too.”

“I will kill anyone who tries to make something of it,” my prince growled, and I had to smile.

“That would look even worse, you realize.”

“Who’ll tell anyone when I’ve just killed all the journalists?” A sad smile played at Karkonar’s lips as he tried a joke. Not a great joke, but he tried. I had to try, too.

“Karkonar, I can’t go with you. That doesn’t mean we can’t see each other. I’ll make Aris part of my route, and I’ll visit as often as I can. I don’t want to lose you.”

It wasn’t enough. I saw it in his eyes and knew it in my heart. But I had to stand firm. I had to.

“You are wrong,” he said. Growled, really. Not angry, but hungry. “I should throw you over my shoulder, take you back to the Rogue, and fuck you into submission.”

Is that an option? If so, can I change my vote? Between his voice, his scent, blazing eyes, and his fierce grip on my hand, the pull he exerted on me was irresistible. The

only thing that let me hold back was my certainty about Karkonar's feelings for me—he would, I knew, hate himself if he made me miserable.

Our gazes locked, and I willed him to understand. Part of me hoped he wouldn't, but I knew better. If he didn't respect my independence, he wouldn't be my mate.

“You are wrong,” he repeated, “but I hope you are also right. Come to me when you can, and we will find our ways into each other's hearts. I will wait for you to come to your senses.”

He smiled, to show that was a joke. There was nothing funny about the look in his eyes, though. I smiled back, then leaned in for a kiss. He lifted me without effort and kissed me with such passion that I almost couldn't breathe. When we surfaced, I gasped for air and he kissed my neck, my shoulder, his razor-sharp teeth grazing my skin.

“Before we part ways, one last thing,” he growled into my ear, soft as a whisper. “A reminder of what you're missing while you stay away.”

With that, he bit harder, wringing a moan from me as I arched my back. I struggled for self-control, my fingers tightening on his suit, legs wrapping around his waist as he held me up.

“And something,” I said in between panted breaths, “something for you to remember me by.”

His growl grew longer, rougher, more urgent. The sound made me melt against him, and his cock, magnificent and diamond hard, pressed against me through both of our suits.

I bit my lip and slid a hand between us. Karkonar lifted me higher, his lips and teeth

and tongue trailing down my neck, across my chest, and he groaned into me as my hand found his cock through the fabric. I ached for him, ached to have his hardness inside me.

“The Rogue ,” I gasped out the words. “Get me to the Rogue .”

His rough, hungry voice sent a shiver through me, an aching pulse of need that almost drowned his reply. “No. No time. I need you now.”

I drew a breath to object, then let it out in a gasp as he popped the clasp on my suit top and peeled it away from my breasts. His other hand held me, steadied me, as he stood and carried me back into the shadows of the machinery. Out of sight of anyone passing below, I relaxed and let myself enjoy his attention, his mouth dancing on me, his hand slowly, so fucking slowly, opening my pressure suit.

With every bit of skin he revealed, his cock pulsed in my hand, hardening and growing. I squirmed, stroking him with slow, deliberate intent. If he could tease me, then it was only fair.

“If you keep that up, there will be consequences,” my devilish lover snarled, and I felt his words deep inside.

“What kind of consequences?” I asked, my voice low and husky and eager. I couldn’t have pretended to be frightened of him if I tried.

Karkonar snarled and pulled my pressure suit wide, the last fastenings popping open. The t-shirt I wore underneath lasted moments longer, torn away from my body in one smooth movement. Then he was on me, a ravening beast, frightening and exhilarating. I gasped and writhed as he kissed my body, lifting me to bite and kiss and lick.

I lost track of myself when his mouth reached my breasts and he sucked, teeth scraping across my hard nipple. He moved from one breast to the other, never stopping his desperate assault, and somewhere in there, somehow, he undressed me without putting me down.

The first I noticed was when he tore my panties off and cast them aside, baring my wet sex to the air. My face and chest flushed as his dark, primal growl filled me with longing. He bore me down to the floor, using my pressure suit as padding, and lifted my hips so only my shoulders rested on the ground. I squirmed, trying to reassert some control, but Karkonar would not allow it. My legs slipped over his shoulders, and he grinned down my body at me, glowing eyes blazing.

Sharp carnivore's teeth scraped over my inner thigh, and clawed hands roamed my body, pressing just hard enough that his claws scratched me without causing pain. My breath raced, and I reached for him, stroking his cheek, running my fingers through his hair. His burning kisses made me ache for him as he slowly and deliberately kissed his way closer and closer to my core.

At last, I could take it no longer. Grasping his horns, I pulled him against me, guiding his mouth to me. He could have fought, resisted, held back. Instead, he went with me, diving in to kiss and lick and worship at my altar.

I writhed and moaned as he held me down, pleasuring me mercilessly, his tongue parting my folds and lapping at my clit. My first orgasm came fast, hard, almost brutal, slamming into me and shaking me wildly. I bucked under him, biting back a scream of joy in case someone heard.

But he didn't care who heard me, and he didn't stop. His passionate tongue drove me back to the edge of an orgasm, and I panted for breath, knowing I couldn't control myself this time. Karkonar could, though. He paused just as I was near, lifting his face to grin up at me. I mewled, thighs clamping around his head, trying to draw him

back to me, to finish what he'd started.

"Consequences," he said, purring the word.

"Oh no, no no no," I whimpered, my pussy clenching in frustrated need. "You can't stop now."

"Oh? Why not?" With every word, his hot breath washed over me, and I shook with the sensations he woke in me.

"I need—I can't—" Words failed me, and when I tried to compose myself, he blew across my clit, the hot air almost painful. All my thoughts turned to mush, and I arched my back, desperate for more. "Please!"

His tongue darted out, whip-fast, and I bucked under him, my fingers gripping his horns and my muscles shaking. Being helpless had never felt so good, so right. I screamed as I came, and came, and came. Came until I was reduced to a whimpering, mewling puddle of joy.

But we weren't done with each other yet. My devilish alien lover lowered me to the deck, and I pulled him up over me, his hard cock thrumming as I reached for it, stroked it, guided it to my opening. His thrust drove hard into me, and I moaned as he buried himself deep.

With slow, gentle, but forceful thrusts, he pushed me back toward another orgasm. His cock grew inside me, filling me perfectly. Wordlessly, we moved together, exploring each other, loving each other. Our bodies fitted like we were made for each other, and the waves of pleasure built in both of us, lifting us together until we crashed down in a climax more powerful than anything I'd ever experienced.

It was hard to tell, in that moment, where I ended and he began. Was there even a

difference? I wasn't sure. We were, for a beautiful, ecstatic moment, one.

We laid there, shuddering and naked, entwined in each other, our bodies sticky and weak, our minds blown by the incredible heights we'd reached. I trailed a finger down his chest, the heat of his crimson skin a perfect counterpart to the cool air the airmaker beside us vented in our direction. I couldn't say how long we laid there, my mind quiet for once, but eventually, reality intruded again. Sitting up, I reached for my clothes.

"Don't," Karkonar said, catching my wrist in a gentle grip. "Stay."

"I wish I could," I told him, my heart aching. "But if I stay now, I'll never leave. We'll break each other, Karkonar, and I never want to feel sorry we met."

"Fuck." His hand dropped away as he spoke, and he sat up against the airmaker, watching as I pulled on my pressure suit. My ex-pressure suit, rather—in his haste to get at me, he'd broken two seals, and I wouldn't trust it in a vacuum anymore. I blushed at the memory of him pulling it open and feasting his eyes on me.

Yeah, if I don't go right now , I'll never leave. The effect he had on me was too strong, like I was a ship caught in the gravity well of a black hole. Once I passed the event horizon, escape would be impossible.

KARKONAR

Watching Elaine go was the hardest thing I'd ever done. I'd commanded armies, fought in duels and battles. I'd sat at state dinners, not showing my anger at the studied insults our hosts offered my father. Those had been challenges I'd struggled to meet, but none of them compared to watching the human female walk away.

She will return to me. She promised. I tried holding onto that, but it did little to help. Elaine would face the universe alone aside from her flying cat, and I wouldn't be able to help her.

As though summoned by the thought, Onyx landed on a nearby pipe with an inelegant thud and a look that said, 'I meant to do that.' He hissed at me, the box on his collar translating.

"Red Stupid." It was the first time I'd seen him angry, and I did not like it. "Stupid. Fix!"

"I wish I could, Onyx."

"Can. Will. Or Onyx Bites."

The threat brought a sad smile to my face. "All I can promise is to do my best."

This time the hiss went untranslated, and I wondered if it was a meaningless noise or

if his collar censored him. It felt like he was swearing at me, anyway.

Then he turned and launched himself into the air, leaving me alone with my thoughts. That was the last place I wanted to be, so I pulled myself to my feet and dressed. Enough time wasted brooding on my fate. I had to meet my sister.

Without Elaine by my side, the market seemed empty and hollow. Crowds moved around me, but I felt like I was light years away. The stalls and shops, the gangs, and the performers—all had fascinated me. Now they might as well not exist.

At least now I'll have an easier time with the throne, I thought. Numb like this, I'll be able to take a lot more boredom.

Not the funniest joke, but I made myself chuckle anyway as I made my way toward the dock to watch for Arkari's arrival. I found myself somewhere quiet and hard to spot and settled in to wait.

Her yacht, when it turned up, was unmistakable. It had the sleek lines of a racing ship, the swooping infrastructure, the complex decorations that hid very functional shield generators. Nothing else at the dock looked even a tenth as expensive, fast, or dangerous. I'd never seen her ship, but that yacht had Princess Arkari written all over it. Stardust, the nameplate read, though some wit had painted eat my above it.

It caused quite a stir when such a beautiful ship floated in to dock. Roughly half the dock stopped to stare at the unusual sight. Some were simply gawking, but I knew there would be pirates planning to steal the ship if they thought the odds favored them.

That seemed much less likely once the airlock opened and Arkari's entourage emerged. A pair of Drall came first, the bulky quadrupeds lumbering and snarling at the crowd to clear a space. Powerful muscles wrapped in skin thick enough to turn

most weapons aside, they made ferocious bodyguards and terrible enemies. As soon as they appeared, every pirate in sight realized they had urgent business somewhere else.

Behind the Drall came four Arisran Royal Guards, their faces hidden behind holovisors that let them see in every direction. They wore the traditional red and gold armor, though they'd exchanged their pikes for more effective pulse carbines. Still, the guards were much more for show than actual fighting, and I doubted they'd be much use in protecting my sister if something happened. The Royal Guard had a reputation as elite troops, but it had been decades since they'd done anything to earn it. They looked intimidating, though. For bodyguards, that was often the most important thing.

Following them, flanked by Chrichri mercenaries, came my sister. Princess Arkari had, for some reason, dressed for a party. In her sleek black dress, the skirt scandalously short for a princess, and black evening gloves with a silver vine design running up them, she'd have fit in among the girls dancing at Harry's Moon's impromptu clubs. Though anyone with an eye for fashion would know her dress was worth more than most of the ships docked beside hers. A strange choice. The outfit she'd worn when we spoke had looked more practical.

I'd never understand my sister's fashion sense, though, and I didn't need to. She was here, and I could go home. Or at least the closest thing to home that existed without my mate in its halls.

As I was debating how to approach, she took the initiative and messaged my comm. I'd almost forgotten about it, useless as it had been until now. No one using the right frequencies had been in range. But the Stardust had access to the royal codes, so now Arkari and I could talk. Or at least text.

Prince Karkonar, etc., etc., I hope this message finds you in one damned piece, and

you've managed to go one day without being kidnapped, killed, or confined. If you're free, meet me at the below location, I've rented a secure meeting place. If you're not, then I guess wait for me to come rescue you?

Arkari, Princess and your long-suffering sister.

I glared at the hologram message. Long-suffering? Insufferable would be closer to the truth. I shook my head to clear it of our sibling rivalry. This was unfair of me. She was riding to my rescue, so let her have her moment of smugness. I owed her considerably more than that.

The coordinates that followed led me into a warren of twisting corridors made from smaller ships crudely welded to the habitat and converted into storage space. Some of the ships were still in the process of being looted for parts, which seemed par for the course on Harry's Moon.

I did my best to stay out of sight as I passed through. Getting caught here at the finish line would be a disaster, not least because Arkari would never let me live it down.

The empty corridors were sparsely lit by flickering bulbs, which cast long, eerie shadows. Unpadded metal creaked underfoot, and the stale air tasted of oil and rot. Together, that gave the place a subtle horror touch, and I checked for ambushes as I approached my destination. I frowned and paused—it wasn't like me to get spooked.

I got kidnapped a short while ago, I reminded myself. Maybe a little paranoia is called for.

The door I sought was as isolated as you could get, and unguarded, too. It slid open at my approach, and inside lurked one of Arkari's Drall bodyguards. He didn't posture or waste my time asking questions, just nodded me through to the small cargo bay. And there, leaning against a crate and looking as smug as I'd ever seen her, was my

sister.

“Kark! There you are,” she said, her smile broadening as she straightened up. “Having a fun holiday?”

As always, I bristled at the nickname—no one else got away with calling me Kark. At least I could respond in kind. “Ark, thank you for coming to help. As holidays go, I’ve had better, and I intend to have words with the organizers. Do we have any clue who’s behind it?”

Her smile twitched as though I’d said something funny, but she didn’t let me in on the joke. “We don’t know much, and it’s been long enough that I can’t see much changing. Unless you have useful clues to add?”

“I have some information. Royal Arisran Intelligence might make something of it, though I can’t get anywhere.”

“Ah, good. That’s good.” She didn’t sound convinced, though her smile stayed, and no sign of doubt appeared on her face. “Well, let’s get you home so you can give the lazy agents at RAI the information they need to crack the case. It’s not like they’ll ever solve it on their own.”

“Hah. I shall have to fix that when I sit on the throne.”

She shook her head. “I think, darling brother, that the next king will have more pressing matters. The Dyb Canal project is drastically short of resources, the spaceport needs to be refitted for larger ships, and there are a thousand other things that we’ve let slide.”

“Wait, I thought the Dyb was on schedule?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, because the project managers cannibalized the next two decades’ funding to keep it there. That’s not sustainable!”

I frowned. That was a project I’d tried to stay on top of, but now that I thought about it, all I knew came from the project managers themselves. Give me prey to chase down, or a foe to kill in battle, but spare me the paperwork.

Of course, that wasn’t possible for a king. I winced at the thought of it.

Arkari caught my pained expression and gave me an odd look, mixing sympathy with annoyance. Then she threw her arms around me in a fierce embrace, catching me by surprise. We weren’t close, and I couldn’t remember the last time we’d hugged.

“Don’t worry, big brother. I’ll take care of everything for you.”

“What do you mean?”

Her only answer was a sad laugh, and I felt a stinging pain in my neck. The world turned strange around me, warping and twisting, colors bleeding into one another.

Oh, I thought as my knees buckled . That makes sense. Then I slumped to the floor, and darkness rolled over me like a fog.

ELAINE

I was back aboard the Dashing Rogue when the princess made her appearance. It wasn't subtle. The Stardust drifted in slowly, regally, and without making the slightest effort at hiding who was arriving. Though, to be fair, I didn't know how they'd have disguised the yacht without switching the hull.

My vision blurred, and I blinked away my tears to pay attention. It was ridiculous that I was crying, anyway. I'd gotten what I wanted. Karkonar and I would see each other regularly, and I kept my freedom. What more could I ask for?

I kicked the console in frustration. Karkonar, of course! It might have been my idea, but it sucked so much, and we'd been apart for less than an hour. Was it just stubbornness keeping me to the plan? I couldn't tell.

Princess Arkari left her ship surrounded by bodyguards, and I watched them go, hoping I'd spot my prince. They were easy to track, a colorful space in the crowd that scattered out of the way. But Karkonar didn't appear, and they left the dock into the sprawling mass of cheap storage labeled Spinward Warren. I frowned—that seemed an unlikely destination for the siblings to meet up.

“Bad Bad,” Onyx said, landing on my shoulder and gripping on tight. I yelped and jumped, coffee going everywhere as his claws bit straight through my t-shirt. “No. Bad.”

“What the fuck, Onyx? Where did that come from?”

“Danger. Red. Danger.” The little monster tightened his grip, and I hissed in pain.

“What do you mean, ‘red danger’?” I asked, before remembering his nickname for Karkonar. “You mean the prince is in danger? Tell me what’s going on.”

Hopping onto the console, Onyx turned to face me and glared. He spoke slowly, spacing out the words to make sure I understood. “Captain Is Bad. Leaves Red. Red Danger.”

“Yes,” I said, trying to rein in my impatience. “That’s why I asked you to keep an eye on him, in case of danger. So, did you see something? Or did you sneak up on me just to spill my damned coffee?”

“Go. Save Red. Kiss Kiss.”

Okay. Apparently, you’re here to make me blush brighter than I ever have. I turned away, trying to get control over my emotions, and that’s when I saw something weird. A second ship had docked beside the Stardust while the yacht’s arrival distracted everyone. Shielded from view by the Stardust’s sweeping wings, it was well hidden—pure luck on my part that it was visible from the Rogue’s bridge.

Or maybe fate?

A quick glance through the sector registry gave me the ship’s name just as its airlock opened. Emerging from the Darana’s Blade was Corbuch Vaher, surrounded by a dozen thugs marching purposefully. I recognized him from dozens of holonovellas about the galaxy’s crime syndicates—he wasn’t the most powerful crime lord around, nor the most influential, but he wasn’t shy of media attention. He was an Arisran, as were half of his crew.

It didn't surprise me that they left the dock heading the same way the princess went. It also didn't mean anything. There were enough storage spaces to go around, but since the Vaher cartel were the ones who'd hired me to transport Karkonar in the first place, it was suspicious.

"Wait a minute." I grabbed the cargo tablet from its nook and scrolled to the package listed as 'Dehydrated Industrial Fertilizer.' There, the delivery address: 1047.430.agb Spinward Warren.

Again, it might be coincidence. But was the direction both Arkari and Vaher had gone, and it just felt wrong. But what could I do about it, even if there was a problem? Sneaking in was out of the question—I didn't even know where, precisely, the coordinates led. But I didn't have any reason to turn up openly, and walking into what might be a three-way confrontation between two royals and a gang boss sounded suicidal.

I'd need to change, too, if I even wanted a chance of them taking me seriously. My damp, coffee-stained shirt wouldn't do the job. What the fuck could I wear to fit in at a meeting like that?

Then I grinned and looked at Onyx, who backed off and hissed, trying to make himself look big. "No. Bad Captain. No No No."

"I haven't even told you the plan, silly," I told him. "Your part'll be easy."

Confidence. That was the key. If I walked with enough confidence, no one would doubt me. I kept telling myself that as I made my way into the storage area, my boots clattering off the loose metal decking with each step. Thank goodness I hadn't tried to sneak through. Behind me floated the crate of 'industrial fertilizer,' suspended on four anti-grav units.

I look ridiculous. This will never work. Onyx bit my ear, just hard enough to make me yelp and lose my train of thought. He'd been a great help in keeping my brain out of a doom spiral, though I thought he took a little too much glee in how he kept my mind off it.

"Stop it, you little sadist," I hissed at him, and he cleaned his paw with studied innocence.

"Not Sadist. Helpful."

"You can be two things, you know."

He went back to ostentatiously washing himself, radiating smugness. With a shake of my head, I dropped the matter. No point in arguing now. Either we'd be able to argue about it after this, or we'd be too dead to care.

Rounding a corner, I came face to face with a couple of Royal Guards flanking a doorway. With my best smile on, I looked up at them—they might not be as tall as Karkonar, but they still towered over me.

"Hello," I said, as bright and chipper as I could. "I'm here to collect my pay."

"Get lost, human," one of them growled. "You have no business here."

"On the contrary, I have a package due to be paid for on delivery. Under the circumstances, I'm loath to let Princess Arkari out of my sight until I have my money. It's not like I can invoice her for this, is it?"

He looked me up and down, face hidden by his holovisor. I did my level best to stay still and appear unconcerned. Hopefully, he'd accept the image I presented, rather than seeing through to the real me. It wouldn't fool Karkonar for a second, but then,

he was a special case.

The guard saw a woman in heavy, stompy boots, black leather pants, a fitted suit jacket over a frilly blouse, and a wide hat. On her belt, a sword, perhaps a vibroblade or a thermal blade. Strapped to one thigh, a blaster pistol. And on her shoulder, a winged cat. The very picture of a pirate captain—if all you knew about them came from holonovellas.

The truth was less impressive. The boots were work boots I'd quickly polished up, the leather pants from an ill-conceived party outfit I was lucky I still squeezed into. I needed the jacket for negotiating loans with the bank. The frilly blouse was a bargain I couldn't pass up at a thrift shop on Talbrek.

My weapons were real. I just had to pretend I knew how to use them beyond 'point and pull the trigger' or 'stabby end goes in the other guy.'

This whole plan banked on them seeing me as more than just an independent operator. As someone to deal with, not just brush off. Elaine Jessop was a nobody they could ignore or, at worst, kill. Pirate Captain Jessop, though, she looked and sounded significant, like she might be a problem.

Hopefully, a problem above their pay grade.

The moment stretched, and I fought the urge to fidget. At last, the Guard spoke into his collar, quick and quiet and in an unfamiliar language. I couldn't hear the reply, but it turned into a quick back-and-forth before he glowered at me. "Fine. Go in. You'll leave the package here and your weapons at the security station."

I gave him my brightest smile and nodded as I stepped past him and into the converted airlock beyond. Jokes on them. I have no idea how to use either of those, I thought as I placed the sword and blaster into a clear box on the metal table with a

handwritten sign labeling it as Security. Under the watchful eye of another Arisran Guard, I sealed the box, which he put on a pile of other weapon-filled cubes. Either Vaher and his people were here, or someone else with a huge arsenal had arrived.

Once the weapons were appropriately stored, the Guard cycled the airlock. The outer door swung closed, then the inner door opened. At once, raised voices filled the air.

The two Drall mercenaries stood against the back wall, intimidating from their sheer bulk even if they hadn't had rifles slung across their backs. Between them, lying on a crate, was Karkonar. My heart soared to see him alive, but he wasn't moving at all. I itched to run to his side, to see what was wrong, to fix it. But that would have to wait.

I turned my attention to the confrontation dominating the center of the room. There, Vaher glared at the coldly aloof Princess Arkari. A dozen gangsters backed him up. She only had a single Royal Guard at her side, but he looked tough enough to maintain his regiment's reputation as elite warriors, and backup was close at hand.

I wouldn't want to bet on which side would come out on top in a fight, but I would wager the Dashing Rogue that no one would leave happy afterward. I let them talk before approaching, thinking it would be smart to know where the two sides stood before I waded in.

"We did our bit of the bargain. He's here, ain't he?" Vaher's voice was surprisingly mellow, like he should read soothing bedtime stories for a living. "So, you'll pay up now, Princess. I come out to this hole, I better get my money."

"Vaher, my brother is only here because I lured him in and captured him. I'll pay you fairly for the work you did, but I'm not paying full price and then doing the work myself."

"Nah nah nah," Vaher waved his left hand, signaling no. "You got what you wanted,

so pay what we agreed. Or I'll find out what someone will pay for two Arisran heirs."

Everyone took that as a signal to reach for their weapons. Of course, the Vaher cartel had only given up their easy to spot weapons at the door. Each of them pulled out a backup, small laser pistols or high-tech knives. One, a Prytheen warrior, produced a blaster carbine that she couldn't possibly have hidden.

Keen to avoid an exchange of laser and blaster fire hitting Karkonar or me, I chose that moment to stride closer, as though I owned the place.

"No need for violence," I said in my captain's voice. I'd used it to cut through the noise of an engine room. It was more than enough to capture everyone's attention. "Mr. Vaher is correct, the delivery's been made. Time to pay up for it."

"See, a neutral voice of reason," Vaher said calmly, though he gave no sign of lowering his pair of pearl-handled blasters. "Princess, none of us wants a fight. Too much mess, not enough pay, y'know? Me, I'm a patriot, and I'd hate to hurt the heir to the throne."

Arkari glanced at me, annoyed. Then I saw something spark in her eyes and she gave me a second look, and I cursed. Of everyone here, she was the one most likely to see through my disguise.

Not only had she seen me in more regular clothing, but one glance told her how much my clothes were worth. Or rather, how little. The gangsters wouldn't notice, but the princess knew fashion.

I'd say that derailed my plan, but there wasn't much of one beyond this point. Part one: use a disguise to bluff my way into the meeting? Check.

Part three: rescue Karkonar? Ongoing.

It was the missing part two I had trouble filling in.

I had the room's attention. I needed something to do with it.

"Captain Jessop," the princess said. "You've finished your part of this business, haven't you? Why are you still here? Surely not just to back Mr. Vaher?"

"Oh, I'm not here to back him up," I said, playing for time. In the background, my mind worked furiously, but I kept my face calm and voice confident. "No, he happens to be right, and that's exactly why he ought to pay me. Cargo delivered intact."

Arkari laughed and clapped. "Well played, Captain. Not that I'm conceding the point, but if you're going to argue it, Mr. Vaher, you'd better be prepared to pay up yourself."

Vaher sneered in my direction. Okay, now I've pissed off the dangerous crime boss. Any closer to a plan? Nope.

What I had wasn't a plan, it was a desperate move. I just didn't have anything better.

"You'll get exactly what you deserve—once her highness here has paid." He gestured toward Arkari, whose sneer proved more elegant than his.

If the confrontation switched back in that direction before turning violent, Karkonar would be in the gangsters' line of fire. There was only one way to avoid that: start the fight while their focus was still on me.

"Now," I said, and Onyx launched himself off my shoulder. As his wings caught the air, I pressed a button on my comm.

Blinding light blazed around me, and everyone looking at me flinched and threw their

arms up to shield their eyes. I might not know how to use a blaster in a fight, but I knew how to overload its batteries.

KARKONAR

Darkness claimed me, the neurotoxins coating my sister's gloves dragging me down to unconsciousness. The next thing I knew, the world exploded. Light bright enough to dazzle through closed eyelids, a noise that hit like a giant's punch, and then I hit the metal wall and bounced.

Long training made me twist, and I landed in a crouch, ready to act. If only I knew what was happening. Snaps of blaster fire sounded through the billowing clouds of acrid smoke full of the distinctive smell of burning metal.

What the fuck happened here? I had no time for questions, so I pushed that aside and pounced on the nearest moving target. A Sibri warrior, all lean muscles and long limbs covered in thick protective bark, spun to face me, swinging out a fist with enough force to break my neck. But I studied personal combat under a master and my reflexes reflected that. My left forearm came up in a block, absorbing the attack and letting it turn me, adding momentum to my right hand as I swung out a counterattack.

My claws sliced up and under his extended arm, tearing through the thinner bark and into the wood-like flesh beneath. Thick sap spurted out over my hand, and the Sibri fell back, clutching the wound.

It might kill him, it might not, but he was out of the fight. I ducked past him, trying to get my bearings in the chaotic mess.

One wall was on fire. That was the most obvious problem—the intense white flames, blinding bright, were the only light source for the room. They rendered everything either too bright to look at or too dark to see. Combined with the smoke, keeping track of the fight was impossible. If this battle had sides, no one would know friend from foe.

That’s my edge, I told myself. I don’t have any friends here, so I don’t have to worry about hitting an ally. It cheered me up, even though it wasn’t quite true—my sister wasn’t a friend, but I did not want her accidental death on my conscience.

If I killed Arkari, it would be deliberate.

A Drall warrior reared out of the shadows, silhouetted against the flames. His rifle boomed, someone screamed, and an answering stab of plasma lit him up. It punched a hole the size of my fist through the mercenary’s shoulder, but on a Drall that wasn’t a disabling wound. Roaring, he charged into the smoke, crashing into something as he vanished. The lesson was obvious—being seen was death.

Something flew at my head, and my reflexes kicked in. I ducked back and grabbed it, ready to crush it or hurl it back the way it came.

“No Hurt,” it said, in an unmistakable robotic voice. “No Hurt Onyx.”

I stopped myself just in time. “Don’t look like you’re attacking me, then!”

My mind caught up as I spoke, and I didn’t give him a chance to reply. “Wait, where is Elaine?”

He pointed with a wing. I remembered all the times I’d seen him fly into things aboard the Dashing Rogue and questioned the wisdom of relying on his sense of direction, but what choice did I have?

Staying low, moving slowly and quietly, I followed the direction he set. The chaotic battle continued around us, and twice I had to step over a corpse. One, a Royal Guard with his neck snapped. The other, a Prytheen thug, throat neatly cut. Most of the gunfire was wasted in this smoke and chaos, but when the two sides came face to face, they were still lethal fighters.

Elaine crouched behind a metal crate, peering into the smoke, and her eyes lit up when she saw me. She grabbed hold of me, hugging tight, and I felt wetness on my chest.

“Do not cry, beloved,” I said as I folded her in my arms. “All is well.”

“It’s the smoke, you ass.”

I didn’t believe that for a moment, but that conversation would have to wait until we were free. “Which way is the exit?”

Elaine pointed toward the blinding flame, and I let out a resigned curse. “I’d hoped I’d gotten turned around. No, of course, you set fire to the only exit.”

“It was—never mind,” Elaine said, shaking her head. “We’ll just have to deal.”

“Idiots. No Go Fire! Follow. Follow.” Onyx darted into the smoke, then dashed back when we didn’t follow at once. “Follow!”

Elaine and I exchanged dubious glances. Then my mate shrugged. “I never figured out how he gets into places on the Rogue. Maybe he can use that trick to lead us out?”

“I don’t have a better plan,” I admitted. “Let’s go.”

Onyx led us in a mad scramble, taking us away from the flames and the exit, up to a bulkhead with a vent in it. I almost laughed. Yes, Onyx could fit through that, but not Elaine, and certainly not me. At least one of the three of us gets out alive, I thought, trying to put together any way to get Elaine out as well.

My eyes stung, and I held Elaine's hand tight. She squeezed my hand and coughed a laugh.

"This solves one of our problems. We're going to spend the rest of our lives together."

Her black humor caught me off guard and I couldn't hold back a laugh. But I couldn't let it stand. "My mate, I'm not letting you off that easy. I will get you out of here."

"Get us out of here, you mean," she corrected. "If you're not going, neither am I."

"You will go when I tell you to, woman. Do not argue."

"Oh yeah? What are you going to do, spank me? You have to be alive for that."

I growled a warning, but before we could distract ourselves any further, Onyx's artificial voice came from knee height.

"Not Now. Stupid Red, Escape Fire Then Kiss Kiss."

I turned to snarl at him, only to stop and stare. A wall panel had come free, and he was sitting in the crawlspace beyond looking as smug as a cat could.

"Smuggler's spaces?" Elaine said, then doubled over coughing.

"No time for questions," I said, lifting her and pushing her inside. She crawled on,

and I followed, my shoulders barely fitting through the narrow tunnel. If we hit a dead end, that would be a problem—backing out would be tough. There was no point in worrying about that, so I focused on the way ahead, and the beautiful view I had of Elaine’s tight black pants clinging to her ass.

No obstacles stopped us, and Onyx’s instincts proved sound. We worked our way along, leaving the sounds of battle behind us, and he soon smacked open another hatch, letting us tumble out into what passed for fresh air on Harry’s Moon. I clung to Elaine as we both sucked in deep breaths of only mildly polluted air.

Gray-white smoke billowed from the exit hatch, getting thicker with every passing second, and Onyx meowed sternly at us, grabbing Elaine’s collar in his teeth and pulling. I caught his meaning and pulled myself up with a groan.

“You are right,” I told the cat, “and you have my thanks for your loyal service. Get your captain to safety.”

With that, I turned back to the warren, only to run into Elaine’s hand. “Where do you think you’re going, Karkonar?”

“My sister is in there.” I tried to step around her, and she moved to block my path.

“You mean the sister who was behind your kidnapping, the one who’s trying to steal your throne?” Elaine didn’t sound pleased with where this was going, and I didn’t blame her. I didn’t like it much either.

“That one, yes,” I confirmed. “She is still family, and I refuse to let her actions keep me from treating her as my sister.”

Elaine grimaced at that but didn’t answer straight away. She put a hand on my chest, holding me in place. “Don’t be an idiot, Kark.”

Shocked, I looked down at her. “I cannot?—”

“—leave your sister to die, yes, I know. But crawling back into a burning building isn’t the way to save her.”

Looking at the toxic smoke in the smuggler’s tunnel, I had to agree. If I tried to crawl back in that way, it would likely kill me. “I take it you have a better idea?”

Her grin was shaky but confident, and her eyes gleamed. “Get me back to the Dashing Rogue and I’ll show you.”

Outside the warren of tunnels, the dock was in chaos. It wouldn’t have been a surprise if I’d taken a moment to think about it. There’d been an explosion, and now toxic smoke billowed out of the storage warren. Anyone who could reach a ship was boarding, negotiating with the crew, or hammering on an airlock.

The ships currently docked would carry perhaps half the people crowding around them, and that was only a small slice of the population of the Harry’s Moon. If the evacuation proved necessary, many people would die.

We didn’t help things by pushing our way through the near-riot, but I was not about to let Elaine get caught up in the serious violence that was threatening to erupt at any second. If I had to throw others out of our way, I would.

The Dashing Rogue wasn’t immune to the rush of people desperate to leave. Three enterprising youths were partway through hacking the door when we arrived. My growl brought their attention off the circuits they’d exposed, and the data display they’d projected onto the hull.

“Oh fuck,” one said, eyes wide. She was human, lean and hungry, her hair chopped short in a way that owed nothing to style and everything to practicality. I recognized

her from the market, and the Liil behind her as the pickpocket Elaine demanded I spare.

The human carried a thermal blade too big for her hands, but she held it steady, pointed at us. I bared my teeth, my growl louder and angrier.

She swept her left arm out to keep her two companions behind her.

“Steal your own ship, big guy. This is ours.”

The thermal blade glowed white-hot, and she kept the tip pointed at me as I stalked forward. I didn’t want to hurt the child, but the weapon was dangerous, and I didn’t have time to disarm her safely.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, kid, you’re as bad as he is,” Elaine said, exasperated. “This is my ship, right? I’ll trade the three of you passage for you not picking a fight with my demon-alien boyfriend.”

“The fuck should we trust you?”

“Because it’s a good deal all-round, and because I already let your Liil friend there go once.”

The girl blinked, her knife hand dipping as she took in the offer. I breathed a sigh of relief when she straightened up. “Okay, deal, but I’ll be watching you.”

As my mate opened the airlock, I stepped up close behind her. “Your ‘demon-alien boyfriend,’ huh? I think I like the sound of that.”

The pretty pink flush that rose on her neck was ample reward, at least for the time being. The airlock swung open, and we all rushed inside. Elaine didn’t stop to talk,

running for the bridge, leaving me to catch up while leading the kids. Giving them the run of the ship would be a terrible idea.

“My name is Karkonar,” I said as we walked. The youths exchanged glances, then the knife-wielder answered.

“I’m Bex, this is Trur, and we call her Dance,” she said, gesturing first to a lanky Akedian male, and second a Liil whose gaunt face and blank stare worried me. I’d seen that expression on soldiers who’d been through too much, and no child should wear it. “She doesn’t say much, but she’s quick and nimble. Anyway, anything happens to one of them, I’ll gut you. I’ve done it before.”

“Noted.” I restrained my smile with difficulty, knowing she would take it the wrong way, and led them onto the bridge just in time to see the dock fall away. Time to see what my beloved had planned to save my sister.

ELAINE

I pushed the Rogue harder than was safe, maneuvering out of the dock and around Harry's Moon. Maybe part of me hoped for an equipment failure, something to stop us. We were on our way to rescue the woman who'd started this whole mess, after all.

Admittedly, if she hadn't, I'd have never met Karkonar. I glanced over my shoulder to see him talking with the kids in low tones. Keeping them in sight while not letting them distract me. I smiled, admiring this side of him as well as that badass warrior who'd dragged me out of the mess I'd made of rescuing him.

I looked closer, biting back a laugh when I realized what he was doing. Yep. He's showing the girl how to use her knife better. Of course he is. I shook my head, turning back to look at the warren from the outside.

"What a mess." It was a wonder anyone could find their way around in that mass of ramshackle wrecks fused into one with no plan or logic.

"Okay, everyone, here's the plan. Karkonar, we're going to patch that pressure suit. It only needs to hold for a minute. Then I'll drop you on the broken airlock, you seal monofilament wire onto the hatch, and I pull it clean off."

"And kill everyone inside." Karkonar raised an eyebrow.

"It'll put out the fire. That's our top priority. Then, you shove any survivors into

rescue bags.”

Perhaps it was the pirate outfit, perhaps the adrenaline rush, or perhaps I’m just insane—whatever the reason, this sounded like fun.

“Next problem. How do we know where Arkari’s base is?” Karkonar asked.

“Onyx Helps! Treat? Treat for Onyx?”

I laughed. “Yes, Onyx, you can have a treat for your help.”

“His collar,” Karkonar said. “It has a tracking function?”

“This was my plan to rescue you, only that went differently than I expected. The whole point of taking Onyx with me was to map the way.”

“Onyx Helpful. Treat?”

I flicked him a Meatish Treat and, while he was busy with it, plugged a cable into his collar. “There!”

Rather than point it out, I maneuvered to get the ships aligned. The Akedian boy, Trur, grabbed the thermal blade from the older girl’s hands, and to everyone’s surprise, used it to stick the torn pressure suit closed with Karkonar still in it.

“Won’t hold long,” he said. “Don’t scrape it on anything. Don’t flex too much, neither.”

My mate snapped a salute off at him before grabbing a spool of monofilament and diving into the forward airlock. As the pressure cycled, a sense of dread settled over me. Was I really gambling his life on this dumbass plan?

On a poorly patched suit, held together by hope more than repairs?

The temptation to call him back almost overwhelmed me. I might have given in, only I doubted he'd listen to me.

"I love you, Elaine Jessop," his voice crackled over the radio. "Just in case."

"Fuck you, Karkonar Arisran." I replied, catching a wobble in my voice. "I'll tell you I love you when you get back here safe."

He chuckled and then, as the doors opened, he leaped across the gulf toward the airlock I'd pointed him at.

His aim was true, and he spooled out the monofilament as he dove onto the surface of the warren. Heart pounding, I watched him force open the airlock's outer doors and bond the invisibly thin line to the inner assembly. Static filled the channel, and while I thought he said something, I couldn't make it out.

Doesn't matter. He's out and clear. Time to hit it. The Dashing Rogue's engines roared as I opened the throttle.

I expected the airlock to pop neatly out of the hull, but I hadn't taken the poor construction and maintenance into account. Instead, the hull tore open as the Rogue pulled, and I killed the engines as fast as I could. A blast of smoke and ash and fire ripped through the new opening, and inside, it looked like hell.

Oxygen lines tore open, fuel lines too, and as the artificial gravity died, chunks of debris flew everywhere. Crates, tables, bodies—it was hard to track anything in there, and the fire didn't help. Fuel mixing with oxygen burned bright and hot, and while it wouldn't last long, while it burned it was blinding.

“Get back to the ship, Karkonar,” I shouted into the radio, horrified at how badly my plan had gone. Even if he heard me, he didn’t listen. Instead, he pulled himself into the inferno, my demon lover returning to hell.

“Fucking fuck, why did I have to come up with this?” I stared at the chaos. That the alternative had been for him to crawl back into the flames didn’t comfort me much. “There must have been a better way. FUCK.”

A steadying paw on my shoulder, Onyx yeowled something. With his collar still plugged into the Rogue’s navigation, whatever insight he had went untranslated. It still helped to calm me down, though, and that was what I needed.

Deep breath. Think through your options and make a list. Dad’s advice echoed in my ears. One: Karkonar is dead and there’s nothing I can do. My heart froze at the idea. Nope. Nothing down that track was acceptable.

Two: he’s alive, and he’ll be out soon. All I have to do is wait.

Three: he’s alive, and he needs help. Okay, so how do I help?

Three was the only option worth thinking about. Fine. Where could he be? Arkari didn’t have a pressure suit, so by now she was either trapped in a pocket of air or she was dead. My prince was probably with her. Where could they... oh!

I wasn’t sure about my answer, but it was something I could act on. Hitting the cargo tracker, I grinned.

“Kids, keep an eye on the screens. Let me know if you see Karkonar.” With that, I pushed the throttle slightly, drifting forward, nudging debris aside. Collision alarms sounded, Bex muttered something too quiet to hear, and the damage control board lit up amber with touches of red. This was not what the Rogue was designed for.

I didn't care. I'd wreck the ship if need be. My prince wouldn't abandon his sister, and I wouldn't abandon him.

Explosions rocked the warren as the spreading fire reached oxygen tanks and pockets of flammables. Behind us, other ships had arrived, not for rescue missions, but to cut the whole warren free and save the habitat. Smart, reasonable, and in principle I approved. In practice, I swore a long litany of curses at them as they worked, risking my mate's life.

The teenagers stared at the screens—my backup plan, they might spot Karkonar if I was wrong. I nudged my way through fire and debris, impacts scraping the hull and damaging the sensors until I was almost flying blind. I was down to the last couple of cameras when, at last, I saw what I was looking for.

Open to the vacuum, wood charred and walls shattered, the crate I'd delivered spun through the hellscape outside. And inside, a fully operational stasis pod. I lined up the forward airlock and caught the pod, then punched the accelerator, leaving the disintegrating and exploding warren behind.

KARKONAR

A rkari opened her eyes and gave us a confused glare. My mate smiled pleasantly, putting a cup of coffee on the table while my sister watched with suspicion. I couldn't blame her. She'd awoken in the Dashing Rogue's mess, cuffed to a chair at the scratched metal table, facing the pair of us.

She didn't look well. Decompression, fire, and a knife fight with a crime boss had all taken their toll on my sister's carefully cultivated image. I doubted I looked much better, but I didn't care as much about how I looked, either.

We'd run the medbay's autodoc over both of us at Elaine's insistence. She'd be fine, aside from a few scars which she'd be able to remove soon enough, but she'd been unconscious since before I stuffed her into stasis. Trying to make sense of the situation wouldn't be easy for her, and I had no sympathy for her whatsoever.

"Hi! I guess you're wondering why you're still alive," Elaine said, bright and cheery. "I can promise you, we didn't save you to poison you with coffee! That would be stupid and melodramatic, and if I did want to be rid of you, I'd be more direct. You did nearly get my mate killed, after all."

"It had crossed my mind to ask about that," my sister allowed, picking up the cup and contemplating the strange drink inside. Her voice was cracked and rough, almost painful to hear. "You'd escaped, you were free. No need to come back for the person you blame for the whole thing. Speaking of which, how's Vaher?"

“Dead,” I told her. “One of your Drall snapped his spine. Nothing to worry about there.”

“Aside from his sibling taking over the cartel and coming for me with everything they’ve got.” Despite her snark, she managed a small smile. “If you saved me for trial and prison, you might as well throw me back outside. Vacuum death is probably a kinder end than whatever the Vaher have in mind for me. You know that, so, honestly, why am I still alive?”

I sipped my coffee, savoring the bitterness. “I have the same question for you, sister. Traditionally, killing the king is an important step in seizing the throne. Why mess with what works?”

Arkari chuckled at that, shaking her head. “My answer’s easy, numbskull: you’re my brother and I love you. That’s how stupid I am. What about you?”

“Mm, same.” We shared a laugh and Elaine rolled her eyes. “I don’t want to kill you, but you nearly killed us, and I will not tolerate a threat to my mate. So, how do we move on from this? I can’t exactly let you stay on as a duchess when you’ve tried to usurp my throne.”

“You have the upper hand, brother, so it’s really your choice. I’m surprised you’re asking my opinion.” She took my raised eyebrow as an invitation to continue. “This mercy is a weakness, a sign you’re not ready for the Black Throne.”

I laughed. She didn’t, and neither did Elaine, who frowned and looked from one of us to the other.

“You spared me, too,” I pointed out, and she sighed.

“Maybe I’m not ready either,” she said. “Our parents raised sentimental idiots.”

Elaine snorted. “You call it ‘sentimental’ to not murder each other? What the hell kind of family am I getting myself into?”

I squeezed her shoulder and smiled. “It’s a sad and messy reality of royalty. There’s only one kingdom to go around.”

That seemed to trigger something in my beloved human. She froze, and I could almost feel the thoughts rushing through her mind. Rather than try to rush her, I waited for her to speak, and my sister did the same.

“I have a proposal for dealing with Arkari,” my mate said, speaking slowly, still feeling the idea out as she expressed it. “I doubt you’ll like it, but hear me out.”

“Always,” I said. “Whatever you have to say, I will listen, beloved.”

Arkari said nothing, but she raised an eyebrow. Elaine took a deep breath.

“I think you should let your sister have the Black Throne.”

I forced myself not to snap an instant refusal. Arkari let out a burst of laughter before she could stop herself.

“You are serious? You and my brother have just defeated me, and as punishment, you want to give me the throne I wanted to usurp?”

“Nope.” Elaine shot her a glare. “No, as punishment I want to, I don’t know, kick you in the shin. The throne isn’t a punishment for you —but, Karkonar, you’d hate it. You’ve said as much.”

I opened my mouth to argue, then closed it. I had said it was a duty I didn’t look forward to taking up. “It is still my responsibility.”

“Great, so you’ll be in charge of a planet and its colonies and hating every second. I know you’ll do your best, love, but you’ll be miserable, and miserable leaders make mistakes. So what’s your responsibility here? To take a job you won’t do well? Or to give Aris a better leader, someone who actually wants to rule?”

“I think I like your mate, Kark.”

I rounded on my sister with a snarl, and she flinched back. “I’m being sincere, Karkonar, truly. She’s cut to the heart of the matter, found a solution that we’d never have thought of.”

“Because it doesn’t work!” My voice rose of its own accord, and I clenched my fists tight enough that my claws dug into my palms.

“Brother, did you ever think about why I tried to get you shipped to the other side of the galaxy?”

“You wanted to take the throne,” I said, forcing my voice to a normal volume. “What else is there?”

“You’ve got it backward. The important thing isn’t me getting the throne, it’s you staying off it. Karkonar, you don’t want to be king.”

“Damned right I don’t. What does that have to do with anything? It’s my responsibility.”

“Or you could let your dearest, closest, most beloved?—”

“Only,” I added, and she pulled a face.

“— Most beloved sister take that weight off your shoulders, while you and your mate

go off to raise a family or conquer a new planet or follow whatever dream you want to chase.”

Elaine put her hand on my arm, her cool touch soothing my immediate anger. “I wouldn’t put it exactly that way, but yes. You can be free. We can be free.”

Her face was radiant, green eyes shining, a smile as wide as a planet. The sheer delight shining from her lit up the room and paused my anger. Short-circuited my thoughts.

I tried to speak, but no words came to me. While my mouth stayed frozen, my mind raced ahead, thoughts tumbling over each other. Why should I take up a weight I do not want and lack the skill to wield? Why suffer, why sacrifice? I stared at Elaine, the woman I loved, the woman I would lose if I took the throne. How could I crush her like that? Yet the law, and my duty, was clear.

“It is impossible. I am the heir, by the laws of the kingdom I inherit.”

“Legally, you are completely correct.” Arkari shook her head. “Historically, it’s only been two generations since the last time siblings fought over the throne. You’re a good man, brother, and that’s part of the problem. A good man rarely makes a good king.”

“But you’ll make a good queen?”

“If you’ve learned anything in the past few days, brother, it’s that I’m not a good person.” My sister laughed before continuing. “So, you were kidnapped by Vaher, I tracked you down and tried a rescue, and you died a hero, killing Corbuch Vaher as you went. That leaves me as the heir, and you two lovebirds can slip off to wherever you want with a hefty purse of reward money. What do you say?”

I thought about it, turned it every which-way in my head. There were a lot of reasons to say no. Duty, honor, sibling rivalry, pride.

None of them mattered a bit in the face of my feelings for Elaine. Oh, there were other reasons to say yes—Arkari would be a better ruler, damn her. But Elaine's smile greeting me each morning? That outweighed everything else.

So I grabbed my mate and swept her into a kiss that shook my world. Arkari pulled a face and looked away, but I spotted a smile before she turned.

“Oh, get a cabin, you two.”

I had never agreed with my sister so emphatically.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:31 am

The next year was a strange one for me and my little family. Full of love and laughter, the Dashing Rogue felt alive with all five cabins in use. At least in theory: I'd assigned our three adopted kids a room each, though Trur and Dance spent a lot of time in Bex's room, to Bex's loud and performative protests. I noticed that she never tried to keep them out, though.

My new first mate, one Mr. Kar Prince, didn't spend much time in his either. It was more his storage area than his home at this point. The captain's cabin was big enough for both of us since we didn't mind being intimate.

"Your cat is being smug again," Kar said, kissing my neck and enfolding me in his powerful red arms. Karkonar's new identity was as deep and real as Royal Intelligence could make it, so the name on it had to be Arkari's idea of a joke.

"I think he's earned it." I snuggled back into his grip, looking around. Sure enough, perched on a wiring cabinet, Onyx sat looking like the cat that got the cream.

"Yes, Onyx, you're amazing," I said. "Thank you for herding us together."

He preened. I bit my lip as I felt Kar swell against me, and the blood rushed to my cheeks. "Onyx? Could you do me a favor and keep the kids busy, please? For a couple of hours?"

I'd swear Onyx's smile grew wider, and he leaped into the air, vanishing into the corridor. I squirmed around to face Kar, drew a deep breath and started on the big conversation.

“It’s been a year, and your sister is doing pretty well for herself ruling Aris.”

“Mmm.” Karkonar sounded dubious, but not worried. More confused by my change of topic. “I’m still surprised every time we see a holo of her wearing the crown.”

I elbowed him. “Better than seeing you wearing it, my love. Because then I’d be watching you on a holoscreen and we couldn’t spend time together. I’m sorry you’re missing home, though.”

He chuckled at that and squeezed me tight.

“What are you talking about, Captain? This is my home. I may have been rich, but it was an empty wealth. I may not have money now, but I have a greater treasure.” Lips pressed to my neck, teeth scraped my skin, and I shivered.

“In that case, beloved, how would you feel about giving up your cabin?”

“Captain!” A shocked gasp. “Are you, in violation of all protocol, asking me to move in with you?”

“Well, we might need the space for something else,” I said, wriggling against him, glad Onyx was herding the kids. Karkonar’s hands wandered as he made a questioning noise, and his heat spread through me. “It turns out that we might need a nursery.”

My demon lover froze with a sharp intake of breath. “You’re?—”

“We need to confirm it with an actual doctor, but the autodoc says I’m pregnant.”

With a cry of triumph, he lifted me over his head and spun around before pulling me back in for a kiss. “We must celebrate this!”

I was laughing too much to protest as he leaped down the ship towards my— our— cabin, and the start of the rest of our lives.

The End

Thank you for reading Royal Cargo! Please take a moment to leave an opinion about the book, I appreciate every review.