

The Recognition Run

by

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Sample

## CHAPTER ONE

### Olivia

I watched my older brother with pride shining in my eyes. Robert Kahn succeeded where all of our ancestors failed. No one else in the history of our family ever came close to matching Robert's victory. Centuries of futility—until Robert assumed the dukedom, that is.

*He* terrified the Wilkinson family.

*He* targeted them, driving the family heirs into hiding.

*He* killed the heirs off one-by-one until none was left.

*He* eliminated the family without once leaving evidence of his deeds.

*He* brought down our ancestral foe.

Of course, His Majesty and the heads of the other Houses *knew* Robert was behind the destruction of House Wilkinson. House Kahn wanted it no other way. What is the point of destroying political and familial enemies if no one knows you've done it? But knowing it and proving it are not the same thing.

As a result of Robert's brilliant campaign, Neert, the largest duchy in the Star Kingdom, was simply sitting there ripe for plucking by the first family willing to lay claim to the title and establish Recognition. Yes, there was still the dowager Duchess, but Lady Evelyn was a Wilkinson by marriage, not blood. She held her title only until the completion of today's Recognition ceremony.

As if on cue, Her Grace the Duchess of Neert Evelyn Wilkinson entered the Recognition chamber. Conversation stopped as all heads swiveled toward the woman. The Duchess scanned the gathered crowd, ignoring the stares turned toward her with a haughty disdain worthy of any noble present. Though I hate to admit it even to myself—she was a still a Wilkinson, even if only by marriage—I admired the woman's style and composure.

Then Lady Evelyn's eyes locked on me. Despite my hatred and all of my carefully trained court composure, my breath caught when the Duchess glided toward me. Murmurs rose from the gathered nobles, no doubt speculating what Lady Evelyn had in mind for me, a much younger woman. For my part, I forced myself to breathe evenly and kept my eyes firmly locked on the approaching woman.

"Hello, Olivia," Lady Evelyn said after stopping well inside my personal space. I knew the dowager duchess enjoyed making people uncomfortable in that way and consciously stopped myself from stepping away from her. In an even, measured tone, Lady Evelyn continued, "You're looking as beautiful as ever, I see. Your blonde hair and pale complexion provide a striking contrast to your black gown. Alas, the effect is marred by your cold blue eyes."

"Greetings, Lady Evelyn," I responded, struggling to match the older woman's tone and bearing. "I cannot begin to tell you how sorry I am at the death of your youngest son, Charles."

"You're very kind, Olivia, though not kind enough to stop your brother from killing him." Lady Evelyn maintained her even tone, but I saw the anger and anguish burning in her eyes. Good, I'd scored the first hit.

I shook my head in mock disapproval. “You surprise me, Lady Evelyn. I never thought you would be one to listen to court gossip! Surely, His Majesty would have Robert in chains, were there any evidence supporting this outlandish claim.”

“Just as surely, His Majesty has no desire to attract Robert the Butcher’s attention,” Lady Evelyn countered.

I felt anger flare at the name some uncouth members of the court gave my brother. Score a return hit for Lady Evelyn. “You mean Robert the *Smith*—the nickname given to my brother because he is strong and has a will forged from steel.”

“I meant exactly what I said, Olivia. You’re an intelligent young woman, surely you’ve noticed the line of bodies your brother leaves in his wake.” Lady Evelyn’s lips turned up in a cold and cruel smile. “After all, your own parents are among those slaughtered by Robert.”

“*That is a lie!*” My shout cut through the low conversations in the Recognition Chamber, drawing all eyes our way. Damn this woman for bypassing my defenses so easily!

“Come now, dear, even someone as remarkably biased as you simply cannot deny the similarities between your parents’ accident and the one that claimed my Lord Arthur’s life.” Lady Evelyn shook her head, dismay at my supposed naivety written plainly on her face. “Then there was the death of your last suitor. Bizarre though his death was, the similarities between his death and the others are quite remarkable—unless you consider who arranged those deaths.”

“I will not listen to such slander against my brother,” I insisted. “I know the real reason you’re so upset—you don’t want to lose your position to Robert.”

“I never even wanted my position, dear.” Lady Evelyn’s cold smile broadened. “But if I were you, I wouldn’t be so sure I was about to lose it.”

What did she mean by that? My mind whirled, searching for a proper response, but before I could think of one the royal fanfare sounded. Conversation halted abruptly as everyone turned toward the dais at the other end of the room.

A herald banged his staff on the floor three times before announcing, “His Royal Majesty Bernard the Second, king by the grace of God. All present, give obeisance due to His Majesty!”

As one, we all took a knee and bowed our heads as King Bernard entered and climbed the dais. Several seconds later, the herald called, “All may rise!”

The king’s gaze swept over the nobles present before coming to rest on a powerful man standing apart from the others. “It appears your show is very popular among Our aristocracy, my Lord Robert.”

Robert clicked his heels together and bowed to his king. “You honor me with your presence, Sire, as do my fellow members of the aristocracy.”

“Yes, quite,” Bernard said lazily. In formal tones, he continued, “For the record, please inform the Court of your intentions, Lord Robert.”

“I have come before Your Majesty and these assembled nobles to stake claim to the Duchy of Neert,” my brother proclaimed, his voice filling the large chamber. “As Lord Arthur and all of his children are dead, I shall place my hand upon the Star Stone and request Recognition as the new Lord of Neert.”

“This is in accordance with the laws and customs of Our kingdom,” Bernard stated. “The Star Stone will only grant Recognition if Lord Arthur has no other living children. You are aware of this and of the consequences should an heir still live?”

“I am, Your Majesty.”

“Does any member of Our court wish to challenge Lord Robert for the right to request Recognition?” Bernard’s gaze swept the nobles a second time. When no one stepped forward, his

eyes returned to Robert. "As none challenge your right of Recognition and as you are aware of the risks inherent in this course of action, we accede to your request."

Robert bowed once again to King Bernard and approached the Star Stone. The huge, multifaceted gem sparkled scarlet. To my eyes, the stone's color deepened as if it anticipated its role in the ceremony. Robert gave me one quick glance, his usual confident smile flashing for my benefit.

Pulling the glove off of his right hand, Robert laid his bare hand on the Star Stone. In a strong, clear voice, he declared, "I, Robert Kahn, Lord of Gaunner and loyal vassal of His Royal Majesty Bernard the Second, request Recognition as the new Lord of Neert."

The Star Stone pulsed once and then bright scarlet light enveloped Robert. He had time for one startled cry before the light blazed so brightly all were blinded for a second. When the spots faded from my eyes and I could see again, all that was left of my brother was a cloud of ashes settling to the floor next to the Star Stone.

Stunned silence filled the chamber so we all heard when Lady Evelyn, dowager Duchess of Neert clapped her hands, gave a delighted laugh, and said, "What wonderful entertainment! Lady Olivia, I believe your brother must now be called Lord *Roburnt!*"

## CHAPTER TWO

Drake

*Three years later and 102 light years away*

“Can you spare a few credits, sir?”

The voice was thin with a quaver of age and infirmity that was almost undetectable. It drew my eyes to a collection of oversized clothes and the old man wearing them. His white hair was wispy and equally white stubble covered a dark, lined face. The old man kept his deep brown eyes downcast, but I was certain those eyes missed little of what was going on around him.

Today, that meant a busy day at the open market just outside of Thinda’s largest spaceport. Locals hawked everything from fresh vegetables to crafts—supposedly hand-made authentic planetary folk culture that made perfect gifts for spouses and children back home—and from narcotics to prostitutes. I had seen dozens of these markets on dozens of different worlds and knew how they really worked. Instead of growing the vegetables themselves, the vendors usually bought them at stores far away from the port, marked the prices way up, and then sold them to spacers short on time for shopping. Most of the folk crafts were mass-produced in factories that probably weren’t even on this planet. The narcotics and prostitutes were real enough, though, as were the dangers anyone faced if they partook of the promised pleasures from either of them.

One thing that was missing was anybody willing to toss a few coins into the old man’s hat. No one besides me even gave the man a single glance. I dug a few coins out of my pocket and dropped them into the man’s hat.

The old man smiled broadly at me. “I thank you and my belly thanks you, good sir!”

“Hungry, are you?” I asked, drawn to this man for some reason I couldn’t quite identify. I squatted down next to the man and tried looking him in the eyes.

The old man's eyes darted away from mine, but he bobbed his head. "A bit, sir. Just a bit."

"Then perhaps you could do me a favor, sir. I'm newly arrived in port and am hungry for something other than shipboard rations. I'm also starved for conversation. If you would agree to help me with the conversation, I'd happily pay for the meal." I rose and extended a hand to help the old man stand up. "I realize it's an imposition and I'm taking shameless advantage of you, but I hope you'll accept."

The old man took my proffered hand, his grip surprisingly strong, and cackled, "You're a right smooth one, young man. I'll try not to bore you too much."

Prepared for boredom, I was pleasantly surprised at Jared's—for that was the name the old man gave me—breadth of knowledge and his collection of improbable stories. He kept me laughing—honest laughter, not feigned out of politeness—throughout the meal, and wondering just how this man ended up in his dire situation. I was so distracted, I didn't even notice the girl at the bar until Jared pointed her out at the end of the meal. Considering how long I'd been without the company of a woman, that's saying a lot.

"I think you've wasted enough time with an old man like me, Drake. There's a right pretty girl over at the bar who's been looking over here whenever she thinks no one is paying attention. I know it's not *me* she's interested in!"

I glanced at the bar, not sure what to expect, but once my eyes locked on the girl they stayed there drinking in the sight. The woman was quite pretty, with pale skin and flame-red hair. She was seated, but I was sure she was built tall and slender—exactly the type of woman I've always found attractive. My eyes met her bright blue ones for just a second as she glanced toward the table and then, her cheeks coloring slightly, looked away. Damn, but her combination of looks and innocence was incredibly alluring—especially for someone like me who'd spent the last few weeks alone on a spaceship. And that's when my mental alarm bells began ringing.

Turning away from the lovely woman at the bar, I glared at the old man. "I may not be as old as you, sir, but this isn't my first port of call. How much are you hoping to extort from me when this is all over?"

Jared drew himself up, indignation written on his face. "I have no extortion plans for you, young man. I am simply trying to give two rather lonely young people the pleasure of each others' company."

"And just how do you know she's lonely if you don't know her?" I challenged.

"I never said I didn't know her, Drake. I said I wasn't planning any extortion against you." All during lunch Jared never looked me in the eye. Now, his eyes suddenly captured mine. They blazed intently as he continued, "Jeanine has been known to help me out from time to time. She probably came in here to make sure I was okay, but she's mostly been looking at *you*."

I drew back slightly from Jared's intensity, then leaned in again and studied his expression. If he was lying, he was too good at it for me to catch him. After a few more seconds, I nodded. "Sorry if I offended you, but I've had lots of men try that trick on me in ports all around the kingdom and a few places outside of it."

Jared broke eye contact and waved off my apology. "Nah, you've got a good point, Drake. I shouldn't have gone off on you like that. It's just that Jeanine does a lot for me and I like to repay my debts. You're a good man and I know you and she could have a good time together. I'm sure the two of you would find more interesting stuff to talk about than you have with an old man like me!"

I grinned, “Even if part of our conversation involves me saying ‘Good morning, sleepyhead’ to her?”

The old man cackled with good humor. “It would do her good to get properly laid. Do you good, too, I’ll bet!”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “You’re one dirty old man!”

“Ain’t that the truth, lad,” Jared responded. “Now, why don’t you go talk to her. Tell Jeanine I said you were okay.”

## CHAPTER THREE

### Jeanine

Drake and I talked for an hour and a half after he introduced himself. I hate to say it, but I never even noticed when Grandfather left the tavern. We made arrangements to meet for dinner and I gave Drake a quick peck on the lips in parting. He took it for what it was and didn't try for more—definitely a good sign—and I sauntered away. Certain Drake was still watching me, I worked my hips just a bit. I wasn't sure just how far things would go after dinner, but it never hurts to let a man know what might be in store if he behaves himself.

I reached the alley from which I was certain Grandfather was watching us. Without looking, I pointed into the alley and crooked my finger in summons. Grandfather scurried right out and joined me.

I gave him my best glare, which only drew a smile in response. Then my grandfather said, "You and the dashing Drake appear to have hit it off rather well."

"Did you really tell him it would do me good to get laid?" I demanded.

"Of course not," he responded. "I said it would do you good to get *properly* laid. And if I'm any judge of character, that young man will put your pleasure ahead of his own."

"Gah!" I growled. Lowering my head, I massaged my temples as if dispelling a bad headache.

"Jeanine, dear, you're a healthy woman who is just short of her twenty-fifth birthday. Sexual desire is—"

"Natural," I interrupted. "Yes, I know. I'm not exactly a virgin, after all."

"Technically, you're correct, though I don't think fumbling around with that inexperienced boy six years ago really counts. In all definitions of 'virgin' beyond the strictly biological one, I'd say you still qualify."

"This conversation is over and we will never, *ever* resume it. Is that clear?" I said as forcefully as I could manage.



“I suppose that means you don’t want my advice on what to wear tonight?” Grandfather asked, unable to suppress a grin.

“I neither want nor need your advice!” God knows that was true. My grandfather had no fashion sense at all.

After we got back to our apartment, I spent much of the afternoon sorting through my small collection of clothes looking for just the right thing to wear. I must have tried dozens of combinations before settling on a pair of black pants and a matching black shirt. Relenting to Grandfather’s curiosity, I modeled the outfit for him.

“What do you think?”

“You’re lovely, as always, Jeanine. You’ve always looked beautiful in black. And, of course, that color makes it much easier for you to disappear into the shadows. Do your legs have sufficient range of motion in those pants?”

Rather than answer, I snapped off a kick that ended with my foot several centimeters above my head. Then I transitioned into a spin kick with my other leg before dropping into a deep crouch. Rising, she said, “Satisfied?”

Grandfather nodded and asked, “Weapons?”

“Daggers strapped to my wrists and one on my back. I’ve got my blaster in my bag.”

“That’s my girl!” Grandfather beamed.

I picked up my bag, felt the reassuring weight of the blaster inside it, and kissed Grandfather on the cheek. “Don’t wait up.”

He patted my hand fondly. “Have fun and if you find yourself tempted tonight, give into the temptation!”

Then, with a roar, the apartment’s door blew in.

With the instincts forged through two decades of training, I dropped to the floor. In my peripheral vision, I saw my grandfather do the same. The door to our little apartment tumbled over us. Despite the noise from the blast, I heard a surprised grunt come from the balcony as the door crashed into someone coming in the back way. I rolled away from the line of sight from the doorway, triggering the catch for the dagger strapped to my right wrist. It slid neatly into my hand as I rose into a crouch.

“Balcony,” I said, my right arm already in motion.

With the flick of a wrist, I released the dagger. It spun toward a man partially covered by the door. He spotted the whirling blade a split second before it buried itself in his throat. His hands rose in a futile attempt to staunch the blood spurting from his throat as a second man leapt over the railing and onto the balcony. With professional detachment, the new man did not even spare a glance at the plight of his fellow. He should have taken a quick look. The man’s right foot landed in the spreading pool of blood and the foot slid a few inches. It wasn’t much of a slip, but it distracted the man and kept him motionless for just a tick too long. The dagger from my left wrist plunged into his right eye.

There was no one else coming over the balcony railing, so I spun toward the front door. Three men sprawled on the floor, already dead, as my grandfather broke the neck of a fourth.

“Clear,” I said, amazed that my voice remained calm and even. Lord knows I was anything but calm on the inside.

From the hallway, I heard the sound of a single person walking toward the doorway, the footfalls too heavy for a woman. I found its measured pace frightening, as if an implacable and unstoppable enemy was after me.

My grandfather looked over his shoulder at me. “Argenta protocol.”

I gasped, my fear rising toward terror. Argenta protocol was simple—I ran for my life while my grandfather fought on alone. I never thought I'd hear my grandfather speak the words except as part of a training exercise.

Turning away from me, he did a second thing I never thought I'd see—he took his ceremonial sword off the wall and drew it from its scabbard. The blade I'd never before seen slid free, its brightly polished metal glowing in the late afternoon light streaming in from the balcony.

“Go!” Grandfather ordered, his eyes on the doorway. In a low voice only I could hear, he added, “Don't forget your date tonight.”

I ran for the balcony, grabbing the bag with my blaster as I went.

A strong, pleasant voice filled the room. “It's been a very long time, Jared.”

“Not nearly long enough, Phillip,” my grandfather snarled in reply.

I vaulted the railing of the balcony and dropped toward the street two stories below. Behind me, metal struck metal, ringing with the sound you only get from superbly forged steel. I fell past a third man huddled below the balcony, hit the awning for the shop on the ground floor—one reason my grandfather selected this apartment—rolled over the edge of the awning, and dropped lightly to the street below.

My sudden arrival startled everyone around the shop, all of them drawing back from me and my bared blade. When the third man rolled off the awning and dropped to the street in front of me, the pedestrians recoiled even more. So you can imagine how they reacted when I drove a dagger up under the man's ribcage and into his heart. Looks of fear turned into screams of panic as people ran from me. Their terror served my purposes. If these mysterious attackers had allies on the street, they would have to fight the stampede to reach me and that would give away their identities. Either there were no allies or, far more likely, they didn't want to make targets of themselves. Whatever the reason, I had no trouble blending into the running crowd and then slipping into the second darkened alley I came to.

As I'd known since Grandfather and I moved into this apartment, there was a fire escape in the alley two buildings down from ours. I quickly ascended several floors until I found an open window at the end of a hallway. Slipping through it, I walked quickly and quietly down the hallway toward the stairs. Most of the residents no doubt used the drop chute, but those things can be death traps. You're a sitting duck if pursuers shoot at you, or a dead one if they simply turn off the grav unit. Besides, I needed a minute to brush dust from my clothes and straighten my hair.

Five minutes later, I walked boldly out of the building's main entrance. I smiled and held the door for an elderly woman carrying a package, completing the illusion I was simply a resident on my way out.

The woman smiled her thanks and said, “I hope your young man appreciates just how lucky he is.”

“Pardon?” I asked, my mind still on the events at the apartment.

“A pretty girl like you all dressed up like that?” the woman replied. “It'd be a downright shame if there wasn't a young man waiting for you.”

I forced a smile, hoping it didn't look ghoulish. “That's so kind of you to say, ma'am. Yes, there is a young man waiting for me.”

The woman nodded sagely. “First date jitters, dear?”

I guess my smile wasn't as genuine as I'd hoped. “Yes, ma'am.”

“Just be yourself, dear, and try to have fun. That always worked for me.” She waggled a couple of fingers at me in farewell and I released the door.

I forced myself to walk casually down the sidewalk, just a girl heading out on the town. I kept my eyes sweeping the area, watching for anyone paying too much attention to me. I caught a few men eying me, but their eyes focused on my breasts and butt instead of my face. I'm used to that reaction and sometimes even appreciate the glances. Killers aren't so easily distracted, so I knew the men checking me out were just men being men.

When I reached a shopping district, I ducked into a clothing store, selected a far more daring outfit than I usually wear from the catalog, and slipped into a fitting and fabrication unit. A few minutes later, I emerged wearing a skirt barely long enough to cover my backside and a midriff-baring top that showed a lot of cleavage. I didn't have time to change my hair color, but I'd put my hair up and covered it with a hat. Anyone looking for a redhead in black pants and shirt would look right over me—I hoped.

Twenty minutes later, I rounded a street corner and saw the tavern where Drake and I were meeting. Drake was standing outside, just as he said he'd be. He caught sight of me and his smile of greeting quickly widened as he took in my outfit. Still working hard to look casual, I sauntered up and gave him a kiss on the lips. It wasn't a long kiss, but it lingered just enough to build his hopes for an interesting evening.

"Hello, there," Drake said, his arm snaking around my waist. "Are you hungry?"

"Mmm hmm," I purred, "but why don't we pick something up and take it back to your ship?"

"Just like that?" he asked.

"Just like that," I replied. "After all, you heard what my grandfather said I needed."

"He's your *grandfather*? And he suggested I, um, you know?"

"Yes, he is." I desperately hoped that was still a true statement. "And yes, he did. Are you going to take his advice or not?"

We grabbed take-out from a food vendor on the corner. Then Drake flagged down a passing cab and we were on our way to the spaceport. I was one step closer to getting off this planet, just as my grandfather ordered me to do.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Drake

Jeanine leaned against me during the ride to the spaceport, squirming up under my arm and putting her head on my shoulder. Her warm breath tickled my throat and she was trembling ever so slightly.

The trembling gave me pause. Maybe she was just anticipating what was to come when we got to my ship, but somehow I didn't think so. In our short time together, Jeanine struck me as the kind of girl who committed herself with reluctance but didn't suffer from second thoughts once she was committed. I found myself wondering just how much Jeanine wanted to get 'properly laid.' As much as I enjoy a good romp in the sheets—or in the shower or against the nearest bulkhead—I want a willing and interested partner. I definitely did *not* want a girl who was only doing it because her grandfather said she should.

I was still trying to figure out what was running through the girl's head when I paid off the cab. Holding our take-out dinner with one hand and Jeanine with the other, I led her the final few hundred meters through the maze of docking bays until we reached mine. I keyed us through the door, wondering for the umpteenth time why something without a roof had a locked door, and motioned Jeanine inside. The lights came on automatically, illuminating my pride and joy.

"This is my ship, the *Rising Star*," I said, my tone formal.

"You've got a Helldiver blockade runner!" Jeanine gasped. She ran down to the *Star's* tail section. "And she even has the Class III star drive!" In an undertone, she added, "This is perfect."

Jeanine bent over and stuck her head between the three main thrusters and it was my turn to gasp. Seeing this girl from behind when she bent over would have been a real treat for any man, but seeing her bent over while wearing that incredibly short skirt was... Let's just say I was so distracted, I missed her next question. When I didn't respond, she pulled her head out of the engine. Only after she straightened, did I suddenly discover the ability to think and talk again.

"I'm sorry, what did you ask?" I said.

She turned to face me, apparently unaware of the effect she'd had on me. "I asked if you modified the engine yourself. What do you get, an extra five percent thrust from the mods?"

"About that, yeah. A friend of mine made the changes for me," I responded. "You sure know a lot about starships and space drives."

"For a girl, you mean?" she asked, arching an eyebrow.

"No, for anybody. Most people learn everything they know about starships watching adventure vids." As Jeanine's eyebrow came down, mine rose. "What did you mean when you said 'this is perfect'?"

"Hm? Oh, that was nothing." She might have fooled a lot of people, but I realized Jeanine was temporizing while she came up with an answer. "My grandfather flew one of these back in the Siruul Uprising. He was one of the pilots who helped defeat the blockade of the Chychie home world."

Jeanine flashed a wide smile that didn't quite make it to her eyes, then she bounced on her feet as if in excitement. I knew she was using her bouncing breasts to distract me from further questions, but I'm still a man and it had been far too long since I enjoyed the company of a woman. In other words, her distraction worked. Taking my arm, she led me to the *Star's* main hatch. I held still while the biometric scanner verified my identity and then identified Jeanine as a guest. That designation told the *Star's* security systems that I wasn't under duress and restricted Jeanine's access to the living area.

I immediately started setting our dinner out on the small dining table and shortly we were tucking into the food. Jeanine was everything a perfect date should be—attentive, playful, happily offering bites of her dish and accepting bites of mine, and she gave just the right amount of coquettish flirting. And she asked me about the *Rising Star*.

"Did you inherit the *Star*, Drake?" Having a mouthful of food, I shook my head. She cocked her head and asked, "You bought her?"

Jeanine scored major points with me by referring to the *Star* by name and in feminine terms. Most people refer to my baby as 'the ship' or 'it' or something similar. Jeanine never did that even once. Despite all the flirting, it was this trait I found the most appealing.

"I found her abandoned and neglected in the back corner of a sales lot. The salesman wasn't too thrilled I ignored the nicer—and much more expensive—ships in the front to waste time with an old war relic he'd almost forgotten was even on the lot. I basically got her for the cost of moving her off the lot."

"How long did it take you to fix her up? It must have been a while since she looks practically brand new now."

"Less than a year. I wasn't working a regular job and had...come into some money...but she needed a lot of work on her outer hull. On the inside, she mostly just needed some regular maintenance. I had some friends who helped a lot, all in exchange for food and alcohol. They didn't ask for anything else, but I told each of them that I owed them a big favor sometime in the future."

"Did any of them call in your favor?" When I nodded, Jeanine asked, "Were any of the favors interesting?"

"I took one friend and his new wife on their honeymoon. They had enough money to afford a week in a pleasure station, but couldn't afford the space flight to the station. On their wedding night, they asked me to cut the gravity so they could try sex in zero-G." I grinned at the memory. "Their stomachs didn't react well and within ten minutes they were begging for me to turn the gravity on again. It took me an hour to clean up after them."

Jeanine laughed at the story though it sounded a bit forced—sort of like this entire evening with the sole exception of her enthusiasm over the *Star*. “What about the friend who modified your engines—what was his favor? Ooooh, wait, let me guess. He wanted you to smuggle something for him?”

I gave the girl a long, careful look before nodding once. Her eyebrows shot up and something I couldn’t quite figure out flashed in her eyes. She looked down and said, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

I waved away her apology. “No, I’m willing to talk about it—at least just between you and me. My engine-fixing friend had a cousin who was about to come of military age on Voskiri.” From Jeanine’s expression, she obviously didn’t recognize the name. “It’s a planet in the Duchy of Gaunner. Anyway, this was a few years ago when House Kahn was still waging its non-war against House Wilkinson. My friend and I flew in with a load of normal trade goods and flew out with her uncle, aunt, and all of their children. We got away cleanly, but as a precaution I’ve stayed clear of Gaunner space ever since.”

With a nod, Jeanine’s expression turned thoughtful. She nibbled at the food, too, but obviously wasn’t really hungry anymore.

I leaned back, openly giving the girl an appraising stare. Her eyes darted up to meet mine a couple of times. Then, with her eyes on the plate in front of her, she asked, “So, would you like to...you know?”

“No.”

Jeanine’s eyes widened and her head shot up. She met and held my gaze. “Oh... Do you want me to leave?”

“I want you to be honest with me.” I sighed and tried for a friendly smile. “Something has been bothering you since you showed up at the tavern this evening.”

“I’ve been looking forward to our night together,” Jeanine said.

“If you’d told me that earlier, when your grandfather sent me over to talk to you, I might have believed you. Something has happened since then, but I don’t know what it is.”

Before Jeanine could respond, the ship’s comm system buzzed. The signal indicated someone was at the docking bay entrance. I wasn’t expecting any deliveries and I hadn’t done anything illegal—not on this run, anyway. Also, Jeanine just about jumped out of her skin when the comm sounded.

Acting on instinct, I motioned Jeanine away from the comm’s vid pickup. Once she was clear, I keyed the comm on. Two men stood outside the docking bay, one wore a customs uniform while the other wore the uniform of Thinda Planetary Security.

I gave the men my best smile. “Isn’t it a bit late for inspections?”

“You are Drake Haral, owner of the *Rising Star*?” the customs official asked.

“I am.”

The security officer said, “We’re searching for a young woman and we believe she’s onboard your ship.”

Across from me, Jeanine’s eyes widened in surprise and fear. Then her eyes began darting around the small room as if searching for something—a hiding place, I assumed.

“You’re mistaken, officers,” I replied, settling into the slightly-bored tone of voice I always use with government officials. “I’m the only one on the ship.”

Most freight haulers in the galaxy fall into exactly the same tone when they find themselves dealing with bureaucrats. It’s what bureaucrats expect to hear, too, so it tends to put

them at ease. That's especially useful on those occasions when I actually do have something to hide—like now.

The security officer said, "So you haven't had a woman with you tonight?"

"I didn't say that," I replied, trying to inject a little puzzlement into my voice. "I had a very attractive woman in here not that long ago."

"Describe her," the security officer demanded.

Assuming they had access to security vids, I gave a superficially accurate description of Jeanine, putting emphasis on her long legs, barely-covered butt, and pushed-up breasts. The officers exchanged a glance as I wrapped up the description, both giving a fractional nod.

"And why did this young woman leave?" the security officer asked.

"I assume her, ah, business manager had another customer lined up."

"You're saying the woman is a prostitute?"

"Yeah, and a good one." Jeanine's eyes narrowed in what I hoped was amusement at that, but I couldn't risk looking directly at her to make sure. "I paid her, she relieved my...tensions...most admirably, and then she left."

A third voice spoke from off screen. It was pitched too low for me to understand the words, but there was no doubt the owner of that voice was issuing orders to the officers. Jeanine heard the voice, too, and she went very still and deathly pale at the sound of it.

The customs officer spoke next. "I'm afraid we're going to have to search your ship, Captain Haral."

"Oh, hell, did you guys outlaw prostitution since I was here last?"

"No, Captain Haral, we did not," the security officer said. "But we still must search your ship."

"Have you got a warrant?" I asked, aiming for confused belligerence in my voice. "I don't have to let you in unless you have a legal warrant."

A hand came in from off-screen holding a ducal badge. The third voice, now perfectly clear, said, "Yes, Captain Haral, you *do* have to let us in. Now stop wasting my time and do as you're told."

There was only one possible answer to such a demand and I gave it. "Of course, sir. I'll be right out."

The vid winked out and I tossed the screen on the table in disgust. Jeanine spoke for the first time since the comm buzzed. In a trembling voice, she said, "You can't give me to them. That man will kill me."

"Not if I can help it," I growled, standing. "Come on, we don't have much time."

I led Jeanine into my sleeping cabin. Dropping to one knee, I ran my hand over the deck beneath my desk. I found a minor depression most people wouldn't even notice, fitted my thumb into it, and then lined the rest of my fingers up next to my thumb. Sensors hidden in the deck read the prints from all five fingers. A soft whoosh sounded from the middle of the room as one of the deck plates slid aside, revealing a small compartment.

"It'll be a tight fit and I really hope you don't suffer from claustrophobia, but you'll be safe in here," I said, guiding Jeanine toward the compartment.

She eyed the hole with understandable trepidation. "What if they have hand scanners?"

"The compartment is shielded. They shouldn't find this unless they get really serious and start tearing up deck plates." I helped her down into the compartment and pointed to a recessed button. "If something happens to me, this button will open the deck plate."

Nodding and shivering, Jeanine sank into the compartment. She brought her knees up under her chin, gave me one last look, and said, "Close it."

Seconds later, I dashed out of the *Star* and across the docking bay to the door. I took just a second to compose myself, then keyed the door open. A team of customs inspectors streamed past me, led by the security officer. Then the customs officer entered, followed by a solidly built man who simply exuded power and competence. He could be none other than the owner of the third voice.

The customs officer said, "Captain Haral, may I present Sir Phillip of Reimund, Knight of the Realm and Royal Enforcer of His Majesty's Law."

My heels snapped together with an audible click and I bowed deeply to the knight. "It is an honor, Sir Phillip."

"Rise," Sir Phillip said. "I must say you're rather well-mannered for a tramp freighter captain. Did you serve in your lord's military?"

"I did not have that honor, sir," I replied, skirting around the truth only slightly. "Instead, I had parents who were—and still are—sticklers for proper manners."

"When next you see your parents, convey my approval of their parenting." The knight said, striding past me and toward the *Star*. "Commoners who truly understand their place in the galaxy are far too rare."

Fixing a smile on my face, I trailed after Sir Phillip. "They will be honored, sir, as am I in their stead."

The three of us entered the *Star*. Shock stopped me just inside the hatch. One member of the customs team was running a hand scanner meticulously over every square centimeter of the deck while a second did the same with the bulkheads. I'd sort of expected something like that, but the rest of the team was methodically destroying everything in the ship. Three of my cushions had already been slashed open and the woman responsible was about to slice open a fourth. A man dumped drawers from my desk, smashed the drawers, and then sifted through the pieces. The rest of the team was out of sight, but from the sounds echoing through my ship, they weren't treating my possessions with any more care than these two.

Surging toward the woman with the cushions, I yelled, "What are you doing? There's no way a woman could hide inside a cushion!"

Sir Phillip's left hand caught my arm in a vise-like grip. "They act under *my* orders, Captain Haral."

Since I don't have a death wish I didn't struggle against the knight's grip. Bitterness evident in my tone, I asked, "When you don't find anything, Sir Phillip, may I assume the crown will reimburse me for these damages?"

"Of course, Captain Haral." Sir Phillip might have been discussing the weather for all the feeling his voice held. "Simply present an itemized list to the proper agency on Xapreathea. In person."

"In other words, all I have to do is fly one hundred light years to the capital planet of the Star Kingdom—"

"One hundred and two light years, to be precise, Captain," Sir Phillip said.

"Okay. And once there, present an itemized list to the proper agency. I don't suppose you could tell me the name of this agency?"

"Alas, Captain, I do not bother with such details. Oh, and you must remain available to answer any questions the agency may have. I'm told it only takes a few weeks."



“Of course...” I turned and looked the knight in the eyes. “If I may be so bold, Sir Phillip, why didn’t you simply say ‘no’ in response to my question?”

The man barked a hearty laugh. To my surprise, the humor reached the knight’s eyes. “Well said, Captain. Your directness is refreshing for a man who spends far too much time among courtiers and politicians.” Then the humor drained from Sir Phillip’s eyes. “Do not be so bold again.”

I nodded and returned to watching the destruction of my ship’s interior. An hour and a half later, the team gathered before the knight and the security officer said, “There’s no sign of the woman, Sir Phillip. Scans are negative and we found no evidence of wrong-doing against Captain Haral. However, the scans were also negative for indications of sexual intercourse in Captain Haral’s bed.”

The knight turned to me, his face impassive. “Would you explain that, Captain?”

“We began with dinner—the remains of which you can see scattered all over the floor. As I told the officers, I’ve been in space for a long time and I decided I couldn’t wait until we finished eating.” I looked down, feigning embarrassment. “She bent over the table and, well...you know.”

“Yes,” the knight replied dryly. “It appears the inspectors should scan you, now.”

I shrugged, “They won’t find anything. Any spacer who’s not an idiot knows you thoroughly clean yourself after spending time with a prostitute. Disease, you know.”

Since this had the advantage of being the absolute truth and was one of the first things taught to new spacers, I was on solid ground here. The knight simply raised an eyebrow. “That’s a lot to pack into one hour, Captain Haral.”

“I spent a month alone in space,” I said. “It doesn’t take very long to release that much pent-up tension, Sir Phillip.”

The knight stared at me for a few seconds as the inspection team struggled to keep from laughing at my response. Without another word to me, the knight turned and left my ship. The inspectors and two officers trailed after him.

Before he turned away, the security officer said, “Don’t leave the planet, Captain Haral. Sir Phillip may have more questions for you.”

Looking at the ruined interior of the *Rising Star*, two questions dominated my thoughts. Who was Jeanine and what had she dragged me into?